Gossip Spyder

by MagicMyth83

Summary

High School AU/ Teen-Drama. The Stark Sisters are rich, beautiful, and have just enrolled at King’s Landing Prep after relocating South. Soon they will be the headliners of a mysterious blog, and their interactions with handsome heirs and hot older boys will be the talk of the town…whether they like it or not!

*Will include sexy times in later chapters, so if you're after quick gratification, this isn't the place!* 

Notes

Hi, this is my first ever fanfic so please review and let me know what you think! My inspiration came from a certain other, similarly titled teen-drama, and the high-school ASOIAF AU's I've come across. I thought it would be fun to have my fave couples, Sansa & Sandor, Arya & Gendry interact in a teen-drama setting, written from their POV's as well as other guest POVs as the story may require. Character's ages have been increased/decreased as required.

All characters belong to GRRM/ HBO
Gossip Spyder

Greetings, peeps! It's me again, your friendly neighborhood Spyder. Love me or hate me, you know you can't resist the pull of the tastiest gossip that only I can give you!

I hope you've all had a fantastic summer, but now that it's coming to an end it's time to get ready for another year at Kings Landing Prep! Start of term is only a few days away!

I have big news for you – I have it on good authority that Sansa and Arya Stark have enrolled at Kings Landing! Yes, *those* Starks! All of you trust fund babies would know that the Starks are one of the oldest and wealthiest families in the country. They're set to become even wealthier now that *Stark Industries* are rumored to be merging with *Baratheon Incorporated*. Respective CEO's Eddard 'Ned' Stark and Robert Baratheon are supposedly old friends that go waaaay back!

I wonder if our very own unofficial Prince of the playground, Joffrey Baratheon, will be personally welcoming the Stark princesses on their first day?

My sources tell me that the Stark girls were previously attending The Mordane School For Girls, and neither have ever been to a co-ed school - girls, let me just put this out there...BOYS, BOYS, BOYS! This whole school is full of them! Let the fun begin!

That's all for now boys and girls...and remember, my eyes and ears are everywhere!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder!

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Sansa

"I hate it here," Arya said, "I want to go back to Winterfell Manor."

Sansa turned from her mirror in the new bedroom she now occupied at their new house 'Chateau Meagor', and gave her sister an exasperated sigh.

"Just give this place a chance, Arya, we've only been here *three days.*"

"Still, I hate it already." Arya flopped down on Sansa's bed. "We don't know anyone here, and Robb, Theon and Jon are at college up North so we'll hardly get to see them."

"Bran's excited about going to his new middle school," Sansa pointed out. "Even Rickon's happy about going to a new school."

"Yeah, but Bran thinks this whole thing is an adventure and Rickon's too young to know any better."

Sansa wasn't in the mood to listen to her younger sister's whining, especially when she'd been looking forward to moving ever since she'd overheard her parents talking one summer night some weeks ago. She was going to ask her mother for money to buy a new handbag, but something in the
tone of her parents' voices made her hesitate outside her father's study.

"Jon Arryn's just died, surely this can't be such a surprise to you?" Catelyn had asked Ned.

"His death means that the deal with Vale Corporations has all but fallen through, but Robert still needs a strong financial backer," Ned replied. "You're right, I should have expected this."

"You've already decided, haven't you?"

"I have."

"You don't sound all that convinced."

"I can't find any arguments against it." There was a rustling, and then the muffled sound of footfalls on carpet. Sansa pictured her father pacing the floor. "I've looked at this from every angle, Cat. Financially, the investment would be sound and I'm predicting impressive returns."

"Couldn't Robert have partnered up with the Lannisters? After all, Cersei's family are hardly paupers."

"No, no. Robert was adamant he didn't want any more Lannisters involved if he could help it. Apparently he's got Lannister nieces and nephews interning all over the place, and his debt to Tywin is in excess of a quarter of a billion dollars."

"So much?" Catelyn gasped.

"That's what's reported in the financials Baelish provided me," Ned muttered. "What I don't know is how much he isn't reporting."

"But you're still going to go through with this?"

There was a small pause. "Yes."

Sansa heard her mother sigh in a way that meant Catelyn had reservations, but wasn't going to argue with her husband's decision.

"It'll mean we'll have to move South, Ned."

"Yes, we'll have to."

"...the girls will have to be taken out of Mordane's and enrolled at King's Landing Prep in time for the new school year. Arya will be starting high school and neither of them have ever been to a co-ed school...Oh no!"

"What?" Ned responded to the alarm in her voice.

"Sansa...boys!"

"Jesus!" Ned exclaimed. "Cat, have you had that talk with her yet?"

Sansa had been forced to cover her mouth so that they wouldn't hear her gasp. She'd run back to her room, new handbag forgotten, and grinned stupidly at her reflection.

She was doing the same thing now, grinning stupidly at the idea of going to a school that had real live boys in it! She was almost fifteen, and she knew that she was ready to start dating, but Mordane's lack of boys kind of made that difficult to do. There were the occasional mixers with the all-boys
schools in the North, but they were few and strictly supervised.

Her mother also tended to be quite over-protective, and as a result they'd had a very sheltered upbringing.

She was so ready for Kings Landing Prep!

"What are you grinning about?" Arya demanded, "You look like a demented, cross-eyed hyena."

"Shut, up." Sansa snapped. "I'm just excited about going to school with boys."

Arya snorted loudly. "You've been reading too much *Seventeen* and *Teen Vogue*."

"You read them too," Sansa pointed out, "when you think I'm not looking, I know you peak at them."

Arya blushed, even as she denied it. "I do not! Shut the fuck up, Sansa!"

And she got up off the bed and stormed out.

"And, you'd better start getting ready!" Sansa called out after her. "The party starts at six!"

Sansa turned back to her mirror and picked up her GHD hair iron and began working the appliance over her auburn waves, trying to tame the fiery mass into a sleek and obedient curtain. She flicked her eyes towards the dress hanging on her closet door and sighed happily.

The Baratheon's were throwing a party for their official welcome in the South, and it was being held at The Red Keep, as the Baratheon mansion was called. It would be Sansa's first grown-up party, and she couldn't wait.

She would finally be meeting Joffrey Baratheon, Robert's eldest son. He was a year older and would be a junior at KL Prep. The pictures she'd seen of him had her veritably swooning. He was gorgeous, tall with wavy golden blonde hair and a golden tan to match.

As she dressed, she tried to keep in check the butterflies that had suddenly appeared in her tummy, but nothing was going to wipe the smile off her face.

When her hair had finally been tamed and was swinging straight and shiny down her back, she slipped into the light blue, floor length silk halter-neck style dress and fastened the buttons behind her neck. Her mother had had it custom made for her by an exclusive couturier, so the dress clung to her in the right places yet remained modest around the neckline and exposed back. Her mother had been unmoving on those instructions, regardless that Sansa had tried to bring the neckline down another inch.

She kept her make-up minimal, but made sure her eyelashes were curled and plumped up with mascara so that her blue eyes stood out. At her ears she wore pearl studs, and a gold Y-drop chain that ended in a pearl that nestled at the top of the valley between her breasts. That was calculated, she'd read somewhere that it would draw attention to her assets.

Sansa stared at the mounds on her chest in the mirror, and was pleased with what she saw. She'd grown a cup size over the summer, as well as about two inches in height. She was now five-eight, and the proud owner of C-cup breasts.

When she deemed herself ready, she wrapped a shawl about her shoulder and she went downstairs to wait for her family.
Arya came down not long after, and the first thing Sansa noticed was that Arya too had grown breasts, which were just noticeable in the black spaghetti strap mini dress she had on. She'd pulled her hair up into a high ponytail...and wore combat boots on her feet.

"Arya!" Sansa said in dismay.

"What?" she said defensively. "It's bad enough that I have to wear a dress, I'm not prancing around in fucking heels, too!"

"Arya, watch your mouth!" Catelyn Stark walked into the room with Bran and Rickon close behind her. "All four of you, I want you all to be on your best behavior...especially you, Arya."

Sansa hid a smirk.

Arya fought the urge to backhand her sister as they rode in the limo towards The Red Keep. Father and mother were quietly discussing business, while Bran was engrossed in his Ninetendo DS and Rickon was occupied by the cartoon playing on the screen above him.

Beside her, Sansa kept sighing and grinning like the demented cross-eyed hyena she'd called her earlier. It was so damned annoying.

She just wanted to be back at Winterfell Manor, where she'd be close to Robb and Jon. Especially Jon. He was her half-brother (father never talked about Jon's mother), and also the only one of her siblings that understood her completely.

Jon played guitar, and he'd been teaching her to play some simple chords over the past few months. He'd been surprised by how quickly she'd learned, and had promised to keep giving her lessons. He'd just begun showing her how to play Neil Young's *The Needle And The Damage Done*, one of his favorite songs, when Arya had learned they would be moving.

Jon never finished showing her how to play the song.

She really missed her older brothers. She wouldn't have minded seeing her foster-brother Theon either, though they hadn't been especially close.

"Stop picking at your dress, Arya." Catelyn admonished her, before turning back to speak to her father.

Arya quit picking at the loose thread on the hem of her dress and observed her parents. Catelyn was wearing a dark blue strapless dress with an empire waist, and her auburn hair was swept up elegantly. She wore a diamond pendant at her neck, and diamonds at her ears. Eddard was wearing a dinner suit, and a grim expression on his face.

Arya surmised that her father did not want to be going to this fancy party either.

When they approached the gates of the Baratheon estates, Arya heard Sansa gasp when she first caught site of The Red Keep. The place was huge and imposing, and whoever had built it had designed it to impress.

The whole structure and accompanying buildings was made of some red-colored stone, with covered walkways connecting the buildings, dark glass and ornate iron-railed balconies.
The long cobblestone driveway was illuminated by old-fashioned lampposts, and curved in a wide semi-circle. It seemed to take ages to reach the front door, where a footman waited to open the limo doors.

Father got out first, who then helped mother, Sansa and Arya alight from the limo. Bran and Rickon minded their manners as they were led into the foyer where the Baratheons were waiting, having been informed of their arrival.

Mother and Father were greeted warmly, and there were hugs and air-kisses all around. There were quiet a lot of people in the room, most were adults.

Arya groaned inside her head. *This party is so going to suck!*

Robert Baratheon was a tall, fat man with a black beard and a loud laugh. His wife Cersei was an icy golden-blonde whose smile never quite reached her eyes. Behind her was a handsome golden-blonde man who was identified as Jaime Lannister, Cersei's twin brother.

Introductions were being made, and she noted with disgust that Sansa was batting her eyelashes at Joffrey Baratheon.

"This is Sansa, our oldest daughter."

There were murmurs around the room, as people all turned to look at Sansa.

Tall, beautiful, auburn-haired and Tully-blue eyed Sansa.

Sansa who could do no wrong.

Perfect Sansa.

Arya refused to allow herself to be envious of how gorgeous her sister looked in her blue silk dress. *No one is ever going to call you pretty, or beautiful, so just build a bridge and get over it.*

"...and this is our youngest daughter, Arya."

"My goodness!" Robert Baratheon exclaimed loudly, causing Arya to jump. "She's the spitting image of Lyanna!"

"Aunt Lyanna was pretty," she heard herself say before she could stop herself.

Robert laughed. "You're right, little girl. That indeed she was!"

Arya frowned, not pleased.

They were then introduced to Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen. Myrcella was the same age as Arya, and Tommen was the same age as Bran and would be going to the same school together.

Arya didn't like the look of Joffrey at all, and not because the older boy wasn't handsome – Joffrey was very goodlooking. Arya just had a feeling that the guy knew it as well, and she didn't like cockiness as a trait. There was also something *mean* about the expression in his eyes, and that set her on edge more than anything else.

Myrcella was shy and kept trying to hide her face in her golden curls, while Tommen was immediately distracted by the game Bran was playing on his Ninetendo DS. A nanny was produced from somewhere, and Bran, Rickon and Tommen were left in the woman's care for the evening.
"Joff," Cersei said to her son, "Sansa and Arya will be starting at King's Landing Prep when the term begins on Monday. I'm sure you'll be a gentleman and make them welcome, won't you?"

"Of course mother," he'd replied, and turned to eye Sansa.

Arya rolled her eyes.

They were led through the house, which was just as impressive on the inside as it was on the outside, and into the garden where a marquee had been erected. There were even more people out here, and she forced herself to keep smiling as more introductions were made.

Sansa seemed to take it all in her stride, her smile never faltering even as more eyes flocked to observe her.

"Joffrey, please introduce Sansa and Arya to your friends while we wait for the first course," Robert instructed him. "I must take Mr and Mrs Stark to meet some important people."

"Of course father." Joffrey turned to them as the adults walked away. "Ladies, please follow me."

Arya followed behind Sansa, Myrcella and Joffrey as he led them towards a rose covered gazebo at the other end of the garden.

"How are you liking it here in the South, so far?" Joffrey asked them. "I'll bet you're happy to be a lot warmer?"

"Oh, yes...the weather here is fantastic!" Sansa replied.

"I don't know how you stand the cold in the North," Joffrey continued.

They reached the gazebo, and Arya saw three people already there. Two teenage boys, and one very tall and broad man whose back was to them. She took a few steps closer, and she blinked when the tall man turned around.

Sansa gasped nearby, but quickly recovered.

The tall man was still a young man, but one side of his face – his left side – was terribly burned and disfigured. He looked down at them coldly, and something like a sneer curled his lip when he heard Sansa's gasp.

Joffrey stopped at the steps and introduced them.

"Sansa and Arya, I want you to meet Sandor Clegane, also known as The Hound, as well as Boros Blount and Meryn Trant. They're all on the football team, like me."

Arya said something appropriate in response, and Sansa engaged them in small talk like only she could. Pointless chatter was another thing Arya had no talent for.

Instead she found herself staring at the ugly burned brute, wondering how his face got so fucked up. He was ridiculously tall, about six-five, or six-six of solid muscle. He was probably a linebacker. She must have been watching him too long, as he looked up when he sensed her staring and glared at her just as he'd done to Sansa when she'd gasped.

_You don't scare me_, she thought as he scowled. He only broke the stare when Joff asked him a question.

"Hound, who are we playing for the first game?"
"Braavos Academy," he replied, his voice a deep rasp.

"You'll be coming to watch us." Joff stated to Sansa as though it was a given. "It's always nice to have a pretty girl cheering for me!"

Sansa's smile became saccharine at his words, and again Arya wanted to hit her.

"Coach Selmy's been making us do two-a-days over the summer to get us ready for the season..." Joff continued.

Myrcella made several attempts to speak to her, but she wasn't really in the mood for conversation and her responses were clipped. Myrcella soon gave up trying.

Arya half listened to the stupid babble between her sister, Joffrey and his friends – except the big ugly one, he didn't say much either.

"Sansa's a sophomore this year and Arya's a freshmen," Joffrey said. "Trant and I are juniors, while Hound and Blount are seniors."

"I'm so glad we got to meet you all before we start at Kings Landing Prep," Sansa commented, "starting at a new school can be quite scary."

"Don't worry, I'll look after you." Joffrey's eyes travelled down Sansa's body, and she remained oblivious to the intent behind his eyes.

_Ugh..._

She was all too happy when they were called for the start of the meal. She had to stop herself from bolting towards the marquee.

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**Sandor**

"The redhead's got a nice set of tits on her," Joff said as the girls walked ahead of them towards the marquee. "What do you think, dog? Do you think the carpet will match the drapes?"

"Don't care. Not into redheads," Sandor replied.

Although, he was definitely into tits and he was careful to keep his eyes lowered so no-one could see him checking out the girl's rack. _Gotta be C cups, no bigger_, he thought.

He also liked taller girls, and a pretty face was always a bonus. Sansa Stark was blessed with both height and looks, and he could appreciate that about the spoilt, little rich girl.

"You're going to ask her out, aren't you?" Trant asked Joff.

"Hell, yeah!" Joff grinned. "I can't have someone else getting a piece of _that_ before me."

"Assuming she puts out, of course." Blount added.

"What do you mean by _assuming_?" Joff made a noise of disbelief. "She'll put out for me. They all do...in the end."

Sandor's fingers unconsciously tightened into a fist at Joff's words. He looked at the redhead again, and immediately knew that the girl wouldn't stand a chance against Joffrey's advances. The guy could be extremely...persuasive... when he had a mind to be.
He tugged at the collar of the black dress shirt he wore, inwardly cursing the fact he was wearing a tailored jacket and trousers when he would much rather be in jeans and a hoodie. The guys had tried to make him wear a dinner suit like they were wearing, but he'd threatened to separate their limbs from their bodies and they'd compromised and let him wear a plain black jacket with a black shirt and no tie.

He was so fucking uncomfortable, and couldn't wait for the night to be over.

Joff annoyed the shit out of him, most days, but the guy was the only one who seemed to want him around – he wouldn't call him a friend, he had no respect for him or trust in him – but there was a mutual understanding between them, he supposed.

Joff needed bigger, tougher thugs to do his dirty work. Robert Baratheon’s son was too much of a wuss to get his own hands bloody, and as a result Sandor never lacked for human punching bags to take out his aggression on. Everyone already thought him a monster anyway, so who was he to disappoint them?

Sandor's father also happened to work for Joff's grandfather, Tywin Lannister at *Casterly Rock Drilling & Excavation*. Old man Clegane was always overseas working, and almost never called to check on him. His dad hired a housekeeper to come in and keep the house tidy and make sure there was a meal in the fridge. Emails were only ever sent if he needed something signed for school. He came home once a year, if at all. Sandor didn't care, so long as his dad continued to deposit money into his account every month so he could pay bills.

Other than that, the old man may as well be dead to him.

With his brother Gregor now in college and living in dorms, he had the house to himself, and that was how he preferred it.

Sandor, Trant and Blount were seated at a different table to the side of where the Baratheons and Starks were placed. However, Sandor found that he had a clear view of the redhead Stark girl from his seat and found himself watching her every so often as the meal progressed.

As he had done earlier when the younger Stark sister had been watching him, Sansa must have sensed his stares as she did occasionally glance at him, only to look away quickly. He didn't blame her, but it still rankled.

He was ugly as sin, and it grated him when girls couldn't look at him properly, let alone pretty girls like Sansa. The feeling quickly turned to anger, and the scowl returned to his face.

He also heard bits and pieces of the conversations she was having with the people around her, and he quickly concluded that the girl was utterly clueless.

Or she was damn good at pretending to be dumb. Joff was feeding her the stupidest lines, and the girl was falling for every one of them. He remembered hearing something about the Stark girls going to an all-girls school up North.

*Makes fucking sense, it explains why she's so easy to fool.* He shook his head at the train of his thought. *Why do you fucking care? You don't even know this girl.*

Suddenly not hungry, he got up from his seat and told Trant and Blount he was going to take a leak, but instead he went in search of a gullible waiter who he could trick into giving him alcohol.

It didn't take him long to find one, and soon he'd finished two glasses of red wine and was on this third when he spotted a flash of blue silk gliding past him where he stood in a darkened alcove, and...
He waited just long enough to finish his drink, before he went into the house to investigate. He saw her down a dimly lit hallway, outside what he knew to be the downstairs powder room, but instead of coming back out the way she had come, she took a detour towards a flight of stairs at the end of the hall.

Where are you going?

Sandor quietly followed. He'd been a regular visitor of The Red Keep since being introduced to Joffrey three years before, and he knew the layout of the main house well enough to be able to navigate in the dark.

Reaching the landing at the second storey, he saw her entering a room he knew to be one of the many sitting rooms in the house. He followed her, and when he entered the room he found her facing a grim looking man in a dark suit.

"...Sorry, I didn't mean to barge in," she was saying to the man in front of her, who didn't say a word.

Sandor quietly came up behind her, just as she began to back away from the grim unspeaking man. He placed his hands on her shoulders to stop her colliding into him, noting the warmth and smoothness of her skin under his palms, and silkiness of her fiery hair that caught in his fingers. She startled at his touch and turned around, out of his hands, eyes widening when she saw him.

Blue eyes.

"You're shaking," he rasped, "do I scare you that much?"

She didn't answer him.

"Or is it him that scares you?" he gave a nod to the man in front of them. "He scares me too, sometimes!"

Sansa looked from him, to the grim man, then back to him, her expression uncertain.

"She's with me, Mr. Payne," Sandor finally said to the grim man.

The expression on the grim man's face became even more unfriendly, but he eventually moved to leave the room, without saying a word.

"Who was that?" Sansa asked, again turning to him but not looking at his face.

"That's Mr. Payne, he's part of Mr. Baratheon's security team."

"Why wouldn't he speak to me?"

"He doesn't have a tongue," he replied, "lost it in some freak accident he was in years ago."

"Oh, that's horrible." Sansa shuddered quietly. "I thought no one was in here...Mr. Payne just came out of nowhere."

"What are you doing in here?" he asked.

She moved towards the open doorway that led to one of the The Red Keep's many iron-railed balconies and stepped out into the night air. Below them, the garden was buzzing with elegantly
dressed people and the sound of violins from a quartet playing somewhere they couldn't see. There were lights strung up in some of the trees, and lanterns hanging from branches that lit up the place like some kind of magical fairy-land.

Further down, past the line of carefully manicured hedges and rosebushes, they could make out the ocean where moonlight glimmered over the water.

"I…I wanted to see what the view would be like from up here," she replied, and gave him a shaky smile.

His presence was unnerving her, that much he could definitely tell, and he didn't want to stay where he wasn't wanted.

"View's better from the next floor," he said gruffly.

"Clegane?" a loud voice called from behind him.

Sandor and Sansa both looked towards the sitting room entrance and found a tall, very handsome dark-haired young man standing in the doorway. "Who have you got there with you?"

"Sansa Stark," Sandor said, nodding towards her.

The young man strode over and claimed one of Sansa's hands between his own.

"Miss Stark, allow me to introduce myself. I'm Renly Baratheon, the much younger and undoubtedly better looking brother of your host this evening." Renly smiled at the girl, who smiled right back, her discomfort in Sandor's presence quickly displaced by the arrival of the other man.

"You're Robert Baratheon's brother?" Sansa wondered, and Sandor could see her trying to work out how old Renly was in her head. "But, why didn't we meet you earlier?"

"Because, I wasn't sure I was coming." Renly shrugged. "It's quite a drive from college, but now I'm glad I made the trip!"

Predictably, the girl blushed at the compliment.

Sandor cleared his throat, feeling like a third wheel, acutely aware of the difference between himself and the youngest Baratheon.

"I'll leave her with you, Baratheon. She was admiring the view from the balcony."

"Certainly." Renly didn't even look at him.

Without another word or glance, Sandor left the room and went hunting for the same stupid waiter and another glass of alcohol, wondering why the hell he'd followed her in the first place.

Gendry

Gendry parked his new car in the student lot, switched off the engine and took a breath, readying himself. Then he grabbed his backpack and locked his car, before staring up at the impressive facade of Kings Landing Prep.

He wondered where he should go. It was first day of term, and his first day at a new school. He studied the kids walking past him, and the other cars being parked in the lot. Expensive cars, driven by rich kids in expensive designer clothes, he noted.
I shouldn't be here.

It was a thought that had crossed his mind several times over the last two months. The first time had been when his foster parents had received a notice from some lawyer, telling them to take Gendry to see them. So the Mott's had taken him to the city and Gendry had sat in a posh office as a stranger talked, and turned his fucking life upside down.

"You've been left quite a substantial sum of money, Mr. Waters," the lawyer had said, "I'm not at liberty to say who your benefactor is, but what I will say is that you're being handed a chance to start over, and to make something of yourself."

Gendry had stared at the skinny man, not really comprehending what he was being told.

"It also means the Mott's will benefit from your change of fortune," the lawyer had continued. "I understand you've been living with the Mott's for the last six years, and from what you've told me they've been exceptional foster parents."

It was true, they'd treated him well enough, but still they weren't his real family. Yet, of the many foster-families he'd been charged to, he guessed he liked them the best.

"How will they benefit?" he'd asked.

"Your benefactor has left some pretty specific conditions, and unless followed, you won't be entitled to a single dollar. However, if you accept, the Mott's are also entitled to receive a separate sum of money so that they can continue being your foster parents until the time you are legally emancipated."

"How much are we talking about?"

"For the Motts?" The lawyer named a sum of money that made Gendry's mouth go dry. "As for your entitlement..."

Gendry's head had spun when he finally processed how many digits were in the number the lawyer told him.

"Name the conditions," he'd finally said.

He'd gritted his teeth as he was told, but it hadn't taken him long to agree to them. The Mott's had been good to him, and the money would allow them to pay off their debts, and put their two kids into good schools.

I shouldn't be here.

The second time he'd thought that was the day Mr. Mott had taken him to a car dealership to buy his first car, outright in cash. Most seventeen year olds he knew drove second-hand Hondas and Toyotas.

But, no. His first car was a brand new white BMW 120i Coupe.

He'd balked at the price, and the cost of insurance, but Mr. Mott had said it was okay. Gendry had money now, and if he was going to fit in then he'd need a car like this.

I really shouldn't be here.

King's Landing Prep was one of the conditions the lawyer had mentioned. He was to get a good
Mr. Mott had also insisted he get a haircut, and Mrs. Mott had made him buy some new clothes before the term started. So now he stood, in brand new jeans and his black hair spiked with gel, wondering which way the administration office was.

Seeing as it was the first day, he figured he couldn't possibly be the only new kid in the school. He made his way up the stairs that led from the student lot, and followed two girls that had just entered through the front gate.

One was a tall, pretty redhead and the other was younger, pixie-like and diminutive, dark-haired and looked about thirteen. Both wore similarly lost expressions on their faces.

"...Do you even know where you're going?" the small one asked the tall one.

They were following a winding path that led up a hill towards what looked like the main building. King's Landing Prep had been founded some four hundred years before, with Gothic style architecture dominant in the high arches, gargoyles and flying buttresses. There were about a dozen buildings that Gendry could see, with interconnecting covered pathways.

To his right, past the student lot was the football field and bleachers. To his left were gardens, interspersed with benches and tables that were occupied by students.

One of them was occupied by a group of four boys, all of them wearing letterman jackets. White wool, with two bands of yellow-gold along the cuffs and hem. Three of them had their backs turned, and Gendry was able to read their names across their backs, written in yellow thread three inches high. BARATHEON, BLOUNT, and TRANT.

The tallest and biggest one – and Gendry did a double-take when he saw his face – spotted someone, and the other three turned around. The letters KLP were embroidered on the left breast of their jackets.

"Oh, look!" the tall redhead giggled, "there's Joffrey."

The cocky looking blonde with BARATHEON on his jacket raised his arm in a greeting.

**Jocks. Why do they always get the pretty girls?**

The hulking one with the mangled face turned his back, and across it was the name CLEGANE. He had straight black hair that he wore long to his shoulders, and swept over in an attempt to cover his scars and the apparent patch on the left side of his head where no hair grew.

"Motherfucker..." the little dark-haired girl whistled in front of him, "he's even uglier in daylight!"

"Arya!" the redhead exclaimed, "that's not polite."

"No, but it's true! Sansa."

"Keep your voice down!" the redhead named Sansa shushed, "he might hear you."

Arya snorted, and Gendry bit down on his tongue to keep from smiling.

"I don't care if he hears," Arya said, "I know, I'll tell him to his face!"

"Don't you dare!"
Arya made as though to run towards the group, and Sansa began to threaten her in a panic.

"...I'll tell mother!"

"Go ahead. What's she going to do?"

"I'll tell father, too."

"He listens to mother, so what's he going to do?"

Gendry found himself calling out. "Excuse me."

Both girls turned around at the sound of his voice.

"Can we help you?" Arya looked up at him, and Gendry noted she had grey eyes, slightly too big for her face. Like a doe.

"Yeah." He caught up with them, and now both girls had to look up at him. "I was hoping you could tell me where the administration office is?"

"You're new?" Arya asked him.

"Yep, first day."

"Then we can go and find it together." Arya stepped to his side. "My sister here will be fine with Prince Joffrey."

"Arya..."

"No way, Sansa. I'm not hanging around with that bunch of brainless jocks." Arya made to keep walking. "Enjoy your first day, and don't wait for me. I'll find my own way home this afternoon."

"Fine, suit yourself."

The redhead veered to the left and made her way towards the table where the jocks were waiting.

"Where is she going? Who's that with her?" Gendry heard them ask, but he didn't hear her reply.

Amused and slightly bewildered, Gendry followed Arya up the path.

"I'm Arya, by the way. Arya Stark." She glanced up at him, pushing her hair away from her face.

"Gendry Waters," he replied, "pleased to meet you."

"You too," Arya said, remembering her manners.

Where had he heard the name Stark before?

"What grade are you in?" she asked, "I'm a freshman."

"I'm a junior."

"Oh...do you know anyone else here?"

"No, I don't know anyone. Just you now, I guess."

"In that case, do you mind if I sit with you at lunch?" she asked, looking hopeful.
"Not keen to sit with your...sister, did you say?"

Gendry struggled to see any familial resemblance between the taller redhead and the tiny girl beside him who couldn't have been more than five-two.

"She's not so bad. It's that Joffrey Baratheon that she's mooning over that I can't stand! I mean, she only just met him two days ago!"

"Shit." Gendry just made a realization.

"I know!"

"Not about your sister, I meant about something else." He'd stopped walking, and gazed down at his apparent new friend. "Stark and Baratheon."

"Yeah...?" Arya raised as skinny shoulder. "What?"

"Your father's Eddard Stark."

"I know that."

"And that guy was Joffrey Baratheon...my foster-dad works for Baratheon Incorporated."

"I bet many of the parents of the kids who go here do. What about it?"

Gendry pulled himself together, knowing how stupid he must have sounded to Arya.

"Nothing, never mind," he finally said.

*I definitely shouldn't be here.*

What the hell was a kid from the wrong side of the tracks doing in this posh school, befriending the daughter of one of the richest men in the country?

Arya shrugged and mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like 'stupid' as they climbed the steps of the first building they reached, where she asked directions from the first person they came across. They finally made it to the administration desk, and each were given schedules and allocated a locker.

They helped each other find their respective lockers, before Arya made to go to her homeroom.

"Wait for me in the quad at lunch, okay?" she asked...or was that ordered? Gendry had a feeling she was telling him, not asking him.

He found that he didn't mind.

Gendry went to his homeroom, and there he met another new kid who introduced himself as Hot Pie. What his actual name was, Gendry couldn't even pronounce, let alone spell it. He had a class with Hot Pie, and one with Joffrey Baratheon, and after listening to the guy mouth-off at everyone and everything it was easy to see why Arya disliked him.

At lunch time, Arya was waiting for him in the quad with a freckled ginger-haired boy who introduced himself as Mycah Butcher. With Hot Pie joining them, the newly made foursome found an unoccupied table and shared their first meal together.
Episode 2 "Making Friends"

Gossip Spyder

Good morning, girls and boys of King's Landing Prep! It looks like there could definitely be a new romance blossoming between Joffrey Baratheon and Sansa Stark, if the snaps my anonymous source has taken is anything to go by! Doesn't she look absolutely fab in ice-blue silk? I think so!

The 'Battle Of The Bands' competition has just been announced, with the first heats set to be in six weeks time. Will our home-grown rock band 'Brotherhood Without Banners' be entering the competition? Lead singer, Beric Dondarrion, has been very tight-lipped about the topic. How are you going finding a replacement guitarist, Beric? The hunt is on!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

---

Sansa

Sansa shrieked loudly as she saw the first photo on the website. Arya ran into her room seconds later.

"What is it?" Arya asked, hair still unbrushed.

"Look at this!" Sansa pointed to her laptop. "Just, take a look!"

Arya frowned as she walked over and peered at the website her sister was shrieking about.

"...Oh my God! I can't believe there are pictures on the net!"

"Who the hell is The Gossip Spyder?" Arya asked, even as she began clicking on links.

"It's someone at school...or someone who knows people at the school, spreading gossip and school chatter, and...photos!"

"Where the hell did they get these shots?" Arya asked as she saw pictures of Sansa and Joffrey taken at the party at The Red Keep.

"There were so many people there, it could've been anyone. It could've been this Gossip Spyder herself, or himself..." Sansa replied.

"Fuck! There's stuff here about everyone!" Arya exclaimed, impressed. "You can trace Joff's entire dating history on here...You've already read it, haven't you?"

Sansa didn't deny it, she had. She'd heard about the website from girls talking in the girl's bathroom at school the day before, so she'd Googled it, and had been intrigued at first...then horrified at finding her own name mentioned, and her picture as well, linked to Joffrey's. Even their enrolment at King's Landing Prep had been announced on the site.

"I don't like this, Arya." She bit into her lip. "I feel so, exposed."
"Then don't read the postings," her little sister snapped. "Regardless, people gossip, at least this way you get a chance to correct the stuff being said about you."

"What do you mean?"

"If this Gossip Spyder reports the wrong thing, you can always send a message anonymously and correct what was said about you. It looks like the Gossip Spyder reports everything that everyone says...look."

Sansa read the entry Arya was pointing to –

*Hello peeps, just an update on a post from last week where I reported that Highgarden Prep's star cheerleader Margaery Tyrell was rumoured to be moving South with her football hero older brother Loras – turns out this isn't the case, for now...Loras is already here on his own, residing at King's Landing College dorms. My sources admit they were mistaken on the initial info...* 

"I still don't like it." Sansa pouted, but Arya had had enough.

"Doesn't matter what you like, you're going to be gossiped about." Arya pushed away from Sansa's table.

"What if it's you, next time? What if this Spyder says stuff about you?"

"Then I'll go and find this Spyder and fucking kill him." Arya left the room, leaving Sansa to fret about the photos on the internet.

She sat back down and scrolled through the photos, seeing Joff’s smile and herself, indeed looking fab as the Gossip Spyder had said. She wasn't vain, not really, but she knew that people found her pretty.

She sighed when she read the post again. *What romance could there possibly be? He hasn't asked me out.* 

Then she saw another photo of Joff, but it wasn't his face that made her stop scrolling down the screen. It was the person standing behind him, the big, scary looking guy with the scarred face. Sandor Clegane.

He really was frightening to look at. She remembered her reaction the first time she'd seen him, and she cringed. It hadn't been polite of her to gasp loudly, but he'd stepped out of the shadow all menacing in black, and she hadn't been able to stop herself. He'd scowled at her, and she'd felt awful.

Then he'd stared at her through most of dinner, until he'd disappeared before the final course. She'd been so uncomfortable knowing that he was looking at her, and though she'd tried to meet his eyes, she couldn't.

The photo of him had been taken front-on, showing both sides of his face. He was supposed to be a senior, eighteen years old at the most, but he looked older. Harder. Tougher.

The normal side of his face couldn't exactly be called handsome, Sansa decided. Yet there was something...arresting about the gauntness of his cheek, sharp cheekbone, slightly hooked nose and black brows.

The other side, however, was difficult to look at even in a photograph. He kept the left side of his face covered with his long black hair, but it couldn't completely hide the shiny, black and red scar tissue that remained of his cheek and brow. The corner of his lips was scarred, but it was just a
slightly darker shade than the rest of his mouth. Part of his neck and throat were also scarred.

*What happened to you?* She wondered.

He had his eyes lowered, and she realized she didn't know what color they were. Even when he'd found her in the sitting room and rescued her from Mr. Payne, she still hadn't managed to look him in the eyes. She didn't know how she could be so unnerved by a teenage guy she'd just met.

She'd have to be more polite to him next time, she thought. He was Joffrey's friend, after all.

Sansa went downstairs to join her family for breakfast, resolved to try and be friendlier to Sandor Clegane.

Her father looked up from his newspaper when she sat down at the table. "Good morning, Sansa."

"Good morning father, will you be taking us to school today?" Sansa asked, reaching for a plate of croissants.

"I will, if you can finish your breakfast in the next fifteen minutes," Ned replied. "By the way, how are you both finding your new school."

"Fine," Arya replied, "there's a football game this Friday, can we go?"

"Oh, yes father, can we? The school varsity team will be playing the university team. It's supposed to be a friendly match," Sansa added.

Catelyn and Ned shared a look. "We'll have to see, you won't be going on your own."

"My friends are going," Arya said, "I'm sure they'll give me a ride."

"Oh, you've made friends already?" Catelyn sounded surprised.

"Not everyone thinks I'm an annoying pest." Arya gave Sansa a telling glare. "So, can we?"

"I suppose." Ned shrugged. "I can have the driver pick you up after the game."

"No thanks, father," Sansa replied, "Joffrey said he'll make sure I get home safely."

"And what about you, Arya?" Ned asked.

"Gendry will drive me home," she shrugged.

"How old is this Gendry? He can't be a freshman if he's got a car," Catelyn observed.

"That's because he's not a freshman. He's seventeen and he's a junior I met the first day of term." Arya finished her breakfast and got up from the table. "Let me know when you're ready to leave, father."

As Arya disappeared down the hall, Sansa noted that her father was giving her mother a worried look.

"Maybe you should have *that* talk with her, too," he said to Catelyn.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Catelyn replied gravely, "she'll be fourteen in a few weeks."

Sansa had a good idea of what *that* talk entailed, but just thinking about it made her squirm, so she
pretended ignorance and ate in silence.

When their father dropped them off at King's Landing Prep's gates, Arya quickly disappeared towards the student lot, and Sansa saw her waving to a fat boy, a skinny ginger-haired boy, and the muscular junior who was leaning against the hood of his car. Arya herself was dressed much like a boy, wearing jeans and a blue sweatshirt that disguised the curves she was developing. If she didn't have a long ponytail, she could have been mistaken for a boy.

Sansa looked around, hoping to see Joffrey waiting for her, but there was no one to meet her so she walked to her locker by herself. There was a group of girls crowded around the notice board, blocking her way.

"What's going on?" Sansa asked the nearest girl beside her, recognizing her from her homeroom class.

The girl turned towards and she smiled at Sansa. "They're having auditions for the choir."

"Choir?" Sansa parroted. "I didn't know King's Landing Prep had a choir."

"KL Prep's football team isn't the only team around here that wins trophies!" the girl laughed. She was very pretty, with brown eyes and dark hair. "I'm Jeyne Poole, by the way."

"Sansa Stark."

"I know who you are…everyone kinda does."

"Oh."

"Not that it's a bad thing," Jeyne continued, "everyone here wishes they were more popular."

"But I haven't done anything, why would I be popular?" Sansa wondered.

"You're popular because of who you are," Jeyne was giving her a funny look, as though she'd said something weird. "And, also because you're dating Joffrey Baratheon."

"What?" Sansa felt her cheeks color.

"That's what I read on Gossip Spyder's page this morning," Jeyne grinned.

"But, I'm not dating him," Sansa rushed to say, "he hasn't even asked me out."

"But he will," Jeyne said matter-of-factly.

Sansa didn't want to get her hopes up, but she smiled anyway. "So, can anyone audition for this choir?"

"If you can sing, yeah." Jeyne fished a pen out of her bag and wrote her name on the sign-up sheet on the board.

"Let me borrow your pen," Sansa said, and wrote her own name under Jeyne's.

At lunch that day, Sansa joined a surprised Jeyne at her table.

"You want to eat with me?" Jeyne asked, incredulous.

"And why not?"
"Because, you're Sansa Stark."

"Yeah, but that doesn't make me a snob." Sansa rolled her eyes. Her mother as well as Miss Mordane herself had taught her better than that. "Besides, there's no sense in both of us eating alone."

"You're not what I expected," Jeyne eventually said, "you didn't even know me until a few hours ago, and now you're sharing a bench with me."

"It's called making friends." Sansa frowned. "Unless, you'd rather I didn't…?"

"No, no! That's not what I meant." Jeyne laughed, before she grew serious. "I'm only at this school because I won an academic scholarship."

Sansa didn't comprehend exactly what Jeyne was trying to tell her.

Jeyne sighed. "Look around you, Sansa. All the kids here are from wealthy families. They all drive around in expensive cars or get chauffeured around. All their parents belong to some exclusive country club, and everyone wears expensive clothes and have expensive pastimes like riding horses or going skiing in Aspen in the winter."

Sansa bit her bottom lip. She did ride horses, and she did enjoying skiing, though she wasn't good at either. Her parents were members of the same club as Robert Baratheon, and she was currently wearing a Miu Miu blouse, Stella Mccartney skirt and toting a Tory Burch bag.

"…I don't quite fit in, not really," Jeyne was saying, "my father's just a manager at a local hotel, not the owner. There's no way he can afford to send me here. Other kids know that."

"That doesn't matter to me," Sansa said honestly.

Jeyne gave her another curious look, but she smiled again, "Okay, I believe you!"

Sansa grinned back, and soon they were discussing what song they each would be choosing as their audition piece. The notice on the board had said only that they needed to choose a song that would showcase their vocal abilities in full.

"I was thinking of doing a song from a Broadway musical…Defying Gravity, maybe." Jeyne shrugged. "But, I can't help thinking everyone will be choosing something from Wicked."

Sansa agreed.

She had no idea what she was going to sing, let alone whether she'd actually be good enough to land a spot in the choir, but she'd always loved singing and she played the piano. I may as well have a go.

---

Arya

"Sansa! Stop that goddamn noise you're making!" Arya yelled down the hallway later that night.

"I'm auditioning for the choir, I have to practice!" her sister yelled back.

"It's no good, don't bother!"

Arya shut her bedroom door with slam, and turned on the speakers beside her computer before drowning out the sound of Sansa's voice entirely with the sound of The Smiths. Then she logged onto her Facebook account. Almost immediately, a message popped up from Mycah Butcher.
"Hey, check this out!"

He sent her a YouTube link, and Arya clicked on it. She stopped her music so she could watch the clip, which was grainy and wobbly, as though someone had recorded it on their phone.

It was some band, teenage boys, playing at what looked like a basement or warehouse somewhere. They were good, and reminded her of The Kooks in sound. Their guitarist though, was seriously awesome.

Not for the first time did she wish she could've continued her guitar lessons with Jon. Her fingers suddenly itched, remembering the feel of a guitar's frets. She sighed, then turned back to the video on her screen.

"Who are they?" she asked Mycah.

"A garage band called The Apprentices...recognize the guitarist?"

Arya played the clip again, this time she maximized the screen and watched only the guitarist. He was tall, muscular, had shaggy black hair and was kinda cute.

"Oh, my God!" she shouted, and quickly dragged her mouse over to rewind and freeze the frame.

Forgetting the blinking message box, she grabbed her phone and dialed Mycah.

"Is that Gendry?" she demanded as soon as he'd answered.

"You bet," Mycah replied, "except, he's known as 'The Bull' on stage."

"How did you find this?" Arya laughed. "How come he didn't tell us he was in a band?"

"That's because he's not in the band anymore, apparently they broke up when the older guys moved away for college. I found this purely by chance while I was looking up the likely bands that would compete in this year's Battle of The Bands comp."

"Oh, it's too bad he's not in a band anymore, he's really good."

"I was trying to talk him into auditioning for Beric Dondarrion's band. They're looking for a new guitarist." Mycah said.

"Who?"

"This senior at school," Mycah explained, "I saw flyers up in the performing arts building, and their advertising on their Facebook page, too."

"Under what name? I want to have a look." Arya sat in front of her computer again.

"The band is called Brotherhood Without Banners."

Arya found the page, and saw the post. Auditions were afterschool the following day, at some place called The Hollow. They were asking people to send in videos, and only those who got call backs would get asked to the audition.

"What did Gendry say when you asked him?"

"He looked interested, but he kinda hesitated."
"Did he say why?"

"He didn't say, and I didn't push it."

Arya was silent for a moment, thinking, weighing her options but not really dwelling on the consequences. *It's not too late.*

"Fuck it," she decided. "Mycah, can you download this clip of Gendry and then edit it to just Gendry's solo?"

"Why?"

"Just do it."

"Fine. Give me an hour. What are you planning to do?"

"Either I'll be doing Gendry a favor, or just making him mad."

A little over an hour later, Arya had submitted the video, along with Gendry's cell phone number. She watched the clip several times over before she went to bed, amazed at his talent, wishing she were half as gifted.

She was almost asleep when her phone buzzed on the nightstand beside her. It was a text message from Gendry.

*You are soooo dead, Arya.*

She'd smiled after reading it, then went to sleep.

Of course, Gendry was waiting for her at the school gate the next morning, with an amused looking Hot Pie and a sheepish Mycah behind him.

He looked furious, with his brows drawn together, and his blue eyes dark and stormy.

"Well?" Gendry demanded, using his six-two frame to tower over her.

"Well what?" Arya refused to let him intimidate her.

"What do you think you're playing at?" he asked. "What right did you have to submit that video?"

"So, you got a call?"

"Late last night, yes – but don't go changing the subject. You haven't even known me a week, and you go and do this!" he snapped.

"Did Beric ask you to audition today?"

"Yes – why did you go behind my back?"

"Because I think you're an awesome guitarist and because I knew you wouldn't do it yourself." she pointed out.

"I would have done it myself, if I'd wanted to."

"No, you wouldn't have. Stupid."

"You know, you shouldn't insult people that are bigger than you."
"Then I wouldn't get to insult anyone!"

"No good's going to come outta this." Gendry shook his head.

"No good? Are you crazy?" She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "I wouldn't have done it if I didn't think you had any talent. You don't think you'll get it?"

"How can someone so small be such a huge pain in my ass?"

Hot Pie and Mycah laughed.

Gendry shook his head again, but the fight had left him.

"So, you're going to that audition?" Arya pushed.

He gave her an embarrassed sort of smile and nodded. "Hammer's in the back of my car."

"Hammer?"

"My Les Paul…electric guitar." He added the last part when Hot Pie looked at them blankly.

"Can I come with you?" Arya asked brightly.

"Yeah, can we?" Hot Pie piped in.

Gendry shrugged. "Guess it'll be okay."

"Alright!" Hot Pie whooped, "I'll bake you a pie to celebrate!"

"I'm not in the band yet," Gendry laughed.

"Why do they call you, The Bull?" Arya wondered.

"Oh…uh." Gendry scratched his head "I'll have to show you. Here, hold this."

Gendry shrugged out of his long-sleeve shirt and handed it to Arya, before he pushed up the right sleeve of the t-shirt he wore underneath, revealing a bronzed and muscular forearm as well as an impressive bicep.

Arya's mouth opened slightly as she noticed how the fabric of his shirt pulled across his chest and shoulders, realizing how big he was for the first time.

"Whoa, cool!" Mycah exclaimed.

Arya saw the large bull's head tattoo on Gendry's bicep. It was done in silhouette, stylized and almost tribal. It looked fierce on his bronzed skin.

"That's awesome!" Before she knew what she was doing, she'd reached out and stroked Gendry's tattooed bicep with her fingers.

A second later she pulled her hand back, and tried to seem like she hadn't done anything untoward. She flicked her eyes to his face, he was watching her, but he didn't look like he'd minded.

"Did it hurt? When did you get it?" Hot Pie asked, breaking the silence, and Gendry turned to answer the question.

Arya gave him back his shirt and clenched her fingers together, and gave herself a mental shake.
Drooling at a boy's muscles was something Sansa did, not her.

Yet, that's exactly what she'd been doing.

---

**Sansa**

"Sansa!"

She looked up at the sound of her name, and found Joffrey making his way towards the table she shared with Jeyne. Sandor Clegane, Trant and Blount were behind him, all wearing their letterman jackets.

"We've been looking everywhere for you."

"Hi, Joff." She smiled brightly at him, then turned to his friends and nodded at them. "Hi, guys."

She made a point of smiling at Sandor as well, but couldn't look at him for long.

Joff's friends each muttered a polite 'hi', except Sandor who just scowled.

"You're still coming to watch the warm-up game tomorrow night?" Joffrey asked.

"Yes, father's given me and Arya permission."

"What about your friend here?" Joff looked enquiringly at Jeyne.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I've forgotten my manners…this is Jeyne Poole." Sansa introduced an astonished Jeyne to the guys.

"Are you coming to watch us play too, Jeyne?" Joffrey asked her again.

"Oh, yes of course."

"And you'll both be coming to my party afterwards?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," Sansa replied.

"Excellent!" Joff looked pleased. "If you're not busy this afternoon, I'd love to see you down at the bleachers watching me train."

"Okay, I'll try and be there."

"We'll see you later then." Joff gave her another smile before he walked away, with the Hound and the others close behind him.

When they'd left, Sansa turned to Jeyne with a barely contained giggle. "Oh, my God!"

"See, didn't I tell you he'd ask you out?"

"But he hasn't, not really," Sansa thought.

"Trust me, by the weekend you'll have a date with Joffrey Baratheon!"

After classes that afternoon, Sansa met Jeyne again at the quad where they then began to make their way towards the football field. She'd never actually enjoyed football, and couldn't understand why her sister seemed obsessed by the game, but the thought of watching Joffrey suddenly made it
exciting for her.

KL Prep was built around natural hillsides and slopes, and the sporting fields were found at the foot of a hill that had been leveled and laid with new turf. The rise of the slopes provided the perfect place for bleachers to be installed.

Sansa noted that the cheerleading squad was also on the field today, practicing their routine. Some of the girls were working individually, others in groups, while a small group just sat on the bleachers and talked amongst themselves. They looked cute in their short white pleated skirts and midriff tops that bore a white knight's helmet on the back, and the KLP insignia in yellow-gold thread.

She was almost envious. She wouldn't have minded being a cheerleader herself, were it not for the fact she didn't have an athletic bone in her body. Handsprings, splits and cartwheels were out of the question. She could barely run in a straight line without tripping, and gym class was akin to torture, in her opinion.

She and Jeyne found seats along the bleachers, some distance from the cheerleaders, but their voices carried and they weren't really being quiet, so they heard some of their conversation.

"Renly's on the team, too…I can't wait to see him in the flesh, he's so hot in his photos," said a girl with curly hair.

"I thought you were into Loras?"

"He's hot yes, but I heard a rumor that he might be into guys…"

Sansa exchanged glances with Jeyne.

"They're talking about Renly Baratheon, that's Joff's uncle." Jeyne chose to go with the first girl's comment.

"Yes, I met him the other night," Sansa said, "so he's on the college team, and he and Joff will have to play against each other?"

"Should be an interesting game," Jeyne agreed, "the Hound's big brother is on the team as well."

"The Hound has a brother?"

"Yep, he's even bigger than the Hound. They call Gregor Clegane, The Mountain. It's also no secret that they hate each other so that's another reason not to miss tomorrow's warm-up game!"

"It's all meant to be friendly, right?"

"Yeah, that's the idea. It's a tradition KL Prep and KL College have upheld for the past fifty years."

The boys had yet to start doing their drills and most were sitting on the bench below or on the grass, while others tossed the ball between them.

Sansa spotted the Hound first, just because he was so big, before she saw Joffrey beside him. The Hound had seen her too, and he gave Joff's arm a nudge.

"Sansa!" Joff yelled out across the field, and everyone within hearing turned to look at her.

Including the cheerleaders on the lower bleachers beneath them.

Sansa raised her arm and waved back at him, but didn't dare open her mouth.
“Everyone’s staring,” Jeyne whispered.

“I know.” Sansa fought to keep her expression neutral. “Pretend we haven’t noticed them.”

It was hard to ignore the cheerleaders though, especially when one of them spoke to her.

“So, you’re Sansa Stark,” said a short girl with brown curls and brown eyes, who eyed her up and down. “I’m Myranda, but you can call me Randa.”

“Hi.” Sansa offered her a smile, as sincere as she could make it. “I am Sansa Stark, and this is my friend Jeyne Poole.”

Randa smiled at Jeyne, before turning to a black-haired girl beside her, “This is my girl, Mya. The busty red-head is Ros, and the little one is Alayaya, or Yaya for short.”

Ros was a curvy girl with glossy dark red hair, and Yaya was petite with exotic dark looks. Sansa and Jeyne exchanged pleasantries with the girls for some minutes, finding out that Randa and Mya were seniors, while Ros and Yaya were juniors.

“The Spyder says you’re Joffrey’s new lady,” Randa stated, surprising Sansa with her directness. “Is that true?”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t asked me out, yet.” Sansa wondered why everyone just assumed that what this Spyder had written had to be true.

“But, you’re here watching him train,” Mya pointed out, “that’s got to mean something.”

“He asked me to come and watch him,” Sansa pointed out, then realized just what she’d said, “Oh.”

The cheerleaders and Jeyne laughed at her expression.

“He’s all but named you as his Princess. All you need now is the crown!” Randa had come to sit on the bleacher below her, “You’re so pretty, Sansa. It’s no wonder you caught his eye!”

“Joff’s also very good-looking! You guys will make the perfect couple.” Ros wiggled her brows.

“He is, isn’t he?” Sansa agreed, choosing only to acknowledge the first of Ros’ observations.

All the girls turned to look to the field again, where Coach Selmy, a burly man with silver hair, started barking orders at the varsity team.

“You lot, skins! The rest of you in shirts!” Coach Selmy yelled, and suddenly the cheerleaders started squealing.

“Oh, wait…wait! Which team is he on?” Randa was asking.

“What’s going on?” Sansa turned to Jeyne.

“Coach Selmy’s making them play against each other, and one side has to play without shirts on.”

“…Joff and the Hound are skins!”

“Oh, my God! Here it comes…”

Bemused, Sansa kept her eyes on the guys crowding around the bleachers and watched as they started taking off their shirts. She’d seen shirtless boys before, of course. But, her mouth went dry all
the same.

It grew drier still, when she realized it wasn't Joffrey she was watching.

To be sure, she'd glanced at him, and he was predictably tall and broad shouldered and muscular. But nothing she hadn't seen before. She had brothers, and both Robb and Jon were taller and broader in comparison. Older as well, and she assumed Joffrey would be the same in a few years.

At that moment though, the one who gripped her attention stood an ugly head and ridiculously broad shoulders above the other boys on the team.

And that's exactly how Sandor Clegane made his teammates look. Like boys.

Sandor was six-foot-six of hard, rippling muscle and sinew encased in tanned skin. His shoulders were a hand-span broader than the rest. His pectoral muscles were developed and defined like that of a grown man, while further down he boasted a gloriously delineated set of abdominal muscles.

His torso was free of hair, and Sansa preferred it that way.

She was a sucker for a guy with perfect pecs and abs.

Sandor's arms looked lethal, with biceps and triceps that bunched and bulged as he moved, and forearms that were double the size of her own. He has to work out to maintain that cut, she thought. Turning around, it appeared his back and upper shoulders were just as defined, while his waist narrowed into a V shape that ended at the waistband of his shorts. Her eyes kept travelling downwards, down his nicely shaped backside, powerful thighs and muscular calves.

The guy had no excess flesh on him whatsoever.

She needed water, her throat had gone parched from having her mouth open so long.

"Oh, Hound…you make my legs turn to jelly!" Ros gushed.

"He puts Ryan Gosling and Channing Tatum to shame with guns like those, and that torso…yum!" Yaya added.

Sansa's eyes widened at the two girls' comments. She hadn't considered other girls might have been observing him just as intently as she'd been.

"I know!" Mya agreed. "It's a pity he's so damn…"

"Scary?" Randa suggested, "unapproachable?"

"Dangerous," Ros supplied, licking her lips and smiling.

"You don't find his face, intimidating?" Sansa heard herself ask.

All the girls looked at her, and each one had a different answer. Jeyne replied that she found everything about Sandor Clegane scary. Mya and Randa both replied that they'd known him since grade school and that they'd never known him without his scars. Mya added that it was his reputation that made her wary, while Randa said it was his 'don't give a shit about anything' attitude that annoyed her. Yaya said she appreciated his body, but she didn't care at all for his face. Ros simply said that yes, he intimidated her with the glares he gave to everyone, but it was the 'can't be tamed' air and bad boy appeal that made her want to jump his bones.

"Ros!" the other cheerleaders exclaimed when she made her proclamation about jumping his bones.
"Well, it's true." Ros turned to Sansa. "You'll be Joff's girlfriend soon, and he's always with the Hound, so put in a good word for me?"

Sansa must have said something appropriate, for the older girl smiled and thanked her before the cheerleading coach called them down for practice.

"Jeyne, why do they call him the Hound?"

"Because he follows Joffrey around all the time, like a guard dog or something."

"And what kind of rep does he have?"

"To be honest, I don't know how much of it is true... but outside the football field, people are inclined to believe he's a thug. He gets into fights all the time, he beats people up just for looking at him the wrong way, and he's always in a foul mood. The teachers just look the other way because he's an awesome football player. I think if he wasn't such an important team member, he'd have been expelled long ago."

"And he's Joffrey's friend?"

"I know it looks bad, but maybe Joff's nothing like him?" Jeyne offered, sensing Sansa's unease.

"One last question, how did he get those scars?"

Jeyne shrugged. "Nobody seems to know the real story, but I've heard one story about his bedding catching fire when a heater in his room malfunctioned when he was young. Another story tells about him being in the car accident that killed his mom, and another story tells about a pot of boiling water being tipped on him."

"That's awful!"

She didn't want to think about the Hound anymore, and so for the rest of the afternoon, she made a determined effort to keep her eyes focused solely on Joffrey's golden head as he ran around the field, tempted though she was to look at the big, burned dog with the perfect pecs and abs.

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**Arya**

The Hollow turned out to be a popular hangout, frequented by students from all the schools in the South. It was a burger joint. That was much clear. The rustic looking building was split into two rooms. One side was predominantly decked out like a restaurant, with groupings of wooden tables and chairs and a front counter with cash registers. Arya could see the bustling kitchen beyond the counter.

The other room was more of a lounge, with a few random tables and chairs scattered around the edges. There was a small podium set up at the back of the room, and spotlights hanging on the beams above it. The walls of the room were decorated with original artwork and flyers for upcoming shows, gallery openings and concerts. Currently, the podium was occupied by instruments, and two of the four current members of *Brotherhood Without Banners*.

"What is this place?" she asked no one in particular, looking around and trying to take it all in.

"It's the place King's Landing's artistic and creative types come to congregate and talk about how artistic and creative they are," Gendry replied in a mildly scathing tone.
"While they eat greasy burgers and fries, and listen to a live band," Hot Pie added.

Arya ignored Hot Pie's comment, intrigued by what she'd heard in Gendry's voice. "Why do you say it like that?"

He shrugged. "Because most of the people in here are pretenders."

She was going to ask him what he meant, but at that moment, a good-looking guy with red-gold hair approached them.

"Hi, you must be Gendry," he said, and shook hands with Gendry. "I'm Beric. Thanks for showing up."

"Yeah, well... thanks for calling me, considering my entry was so last minute." Gendry shot Arya a brief look.

"It was pure luck I was still online when your vid hit my email." Beric smiled. "You're up against three other guys today, so good luck!"

Gendry shrugged, then looked around at the tables that were filling up. "Are we going to have an audience?"

"Sure will." Beric grinned unapologetically. "The audience's reaction is as important as mine and the other guys."

"Right. So, no pressure then?" Gendry's tone was light and sarcastic.

"None at all," deadpanned Beric. "Your friends can make themselves comfortable, and if you'll come with me I'll show you where you can get ready."

"Good luck, Gendry!" Hot Pie and Mycah clapped him on the back as he made to follow Beric.

"Knock 'em dead." Arya punched his arm lightly and grinned at him.

Gendry disappeared with Beric into a backroom carrying 'Hammer' with him. Arya, Hot Pie and Mycah went to find somewhere to sit and watch, eventually settling to stand against a wall when all the seats proved taken. The room had filled up quickly, and Arya noted that the crowd was made up of artsy-musician-alternative types. She smiled to herself. There wasn't a single cheerleader, brainless jock or simpering-Sansa type in the place. Regardless of Gendry's comment about pretenders, she liked the place already.

"I had no idea it was going to turn into American Idol in here," Mycah observed.

Arya agreed, and wondered exactly what she'd got Gendry into. It seemed over the top, just to find a guitarist for a high-school garage band.

"I bet there are other bands in here, scoping out the competition," Mycah continued.

"Is this Battle of the Bands really that big a deal?" Hot Pie asked.

"Yeah!" Mycah's eyes went big. "There's a meeting with a record label, and radio air time and cash involved if you win!"

Arya turned back to the podium where Beric and another blonde boy had joined the two already onstage. If Mycah was right, then this Brotherhood Without Banners were a serious band. She suddenly wished she'd remembered to Google them the night before, and wondered if Gendry had
done his research. She didn't even know what style they played.

Beric approached the mic.

"Hi everyone!" Cheers went up in the crowd. "Thanks for coming, we're all excited about what's about to happen here today!"

More cheers went up.

"…For those of you new here today, I'm Beric Dondarrion. I sing a bit, and write some songs…” Laughter from the crowd. "Our drummer-boy here is Edric Dayne…we have Thoros Myr on the bass, and Tom Sevenstreams on the keyboard."

Again, more cheers.

"All right, so before we start, we thought we'd give you a song first! I'll be picking up my guitar this once, and I hope you'll be kind!"

Beric took the said guitar and strapped it around his neck. The drummer, Edric, counted them in and Beric began to sing as his fingers strummed his guitar. He had a magnificent voice, Arya decided, and they were good. Their sound reminded her of The Killers.

While Beric was decent on a guitar, it was apparent he was playing safe. The song they were playing seemed like it was built around four chords, repeated over and over, with only one key change. That was the extent of Arya's musical knowledge, and she wasn't going to pretend to be an expert, but Beric knew he wasn't a guitarist – hence their need to find a real guitar player.

The song finished. There were more cheers, and Arya clapped along with the crowd.

"Thanks, guys!" Beric and the rest of his band mates downed their instruments and moved off-stage. "Okay, down to business!"

Beric explained the rules; two rounds and a third tie-breaker if needed. First round involved all four guys playing their guts out, one at a time. Two would be knocked out. Second round was the same, with one more knocked out, and hopefully a winner at the end. If they still couldn't decide, then they'd move to a tie-breaker, and Beric said he'd only reveal the rules of the tie-breaker if it came to that.

"One more rule," Beric said, again smiling. "You must play off-the-cuff. We mustn't hear anything readily identifiable…"

Ooooooh…..went the crowd.

"Oh, fuck…can Gendry do this?" Hot Pie worried.

"Of course he can. He will," Arya replied.

Gendry could, and he did. He had the unfortunate task of going first, however, but he killed his first solo. Arya's mouth had dropped and hung open the entire time, watching his fingers sail over the frets and as his right hand picked at the strings with determined precision. The crowd went bananas, and the remaining three guys were even more unfortunate to have to be compared to him.

Gendry moved onto the second round, and Arya grew nervous for him anew.

The guy he opposed realized just what a threat Gendry was, and he played like his life depended on
Gendry didn't back down, or look remotely worried. In fact, he smiled the entire time he was up on that stage. With Hammer in his hands, he was in his element.

"They're both awesome!" was the comment Arya heard most repeated among the crowd.

That also seemed to be the sentiment shared by Beric and his band members.

"Okay everyone, I guess it's fair to say we're going into a tie-breaker!" Beric scratched his head. "I'd hoped it wouldn't come to this, but you two are going to have to sing...as well as play your guitars."

Ooooooh.....went the crowd, again. This time, Arya did notice that Gendry's smile lost some of its confidence, but something steely shone in his blue eyes.

"...you can choose any song you like, this time it doesn't have to be off-the-cuff," Beric was saying, "our new guitarist may also have to provide backing vocals, so a decent set of pipes don't hurt."

"Can he sing?" Arya asked, now worried. She didn't want Gendry to be embarrassed in front of all these strangers.

"How should we know?" Mycah replied, just as worried.

The first guy went onstage and sang a song by Nickelback. He had a good voice, and he was entertaining, but there was something lacking.

Arya found herself pushing through the crowd, trying to get close enough to speak to Gendry to tell him he didn't have to go through with it if he didn't want to. But, when she got there, she found he'd swapped his electric guitar for an acoustic he'd borrowed from Beric.

"Gendry!" she caught his attention, and he must have noticed the expression on her face because he walked over to her.

"How am I doing?" He smiled at her.

"You're awesome!" she cried. "But, can you sing? You know you don't have to keep going."

He tapped her lightly on the nose with the tip of his finger unexpectedly, and she blinked. "Don't worry, Arya. I've got this."

Beric called him up to the stage again, and Gendry gave Arya another grin before taking a seat on the stool on the stage.

"Hi everyone, my name's Gendry Waters, and I'll be singing Unsaid by The Fray."

There was a round of clapping, then the room was silent. Gendry's fingers plucked the opening bars on the acoustic. It was a beautiful song...and then he opened his mouth and sang.

Arya's breath stuck in her throat, and goosepimples stole across her arms at the sound of his voice. It was more raw than The Fray's Isaac Slade, not as smooth, but there was something in his tones that still drew you in, and made you want to stay and listen.

He can sing...Oh, my God he can SING!

When he finished, Arya was the first one to start clapping and cheering.
"Gendry! Go, Gendry!"

He heard her, and flashed her another smile before he walked to the side of the stage.

Arya took a step back, intending to make her way back to Hot Pie and Mycah, but someone bumped into her and she lost her balance. As she fell, a strong pair of hands caught her by the waist and she landed into what was unmistakably someone's lap.

"A girl should be more careful, or she may hurt herself," a smooth and accented voice observed above her head.

Male laughter followed this comment. Her fall hadn't gone unnoticed.

A guy's lap, it turned out to be. Arya's nose caught a whiff of something spicy, like ginger and cloves. She turned her head and looked up. Hazel eyes, set in a face too handsome to be possible, peered down at her in amusement. She clutched at the hands that were still on her waist and made to get up while trying to pry his fingers loose, but the young man's grip tightened.

"Not so fast," he said, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "A girl must give me her name, before I let her go."

She noted that he was older than her, and that he had unusual hair. It was long and straight, reddish but one side was streaked with shocks of platinum, and the other streaked blood red. Seated as they were, she couldn't tell exactly how tall he was, but the length of his arms and the fact her feet didn't touch the ground told her he had to be over six feet tall. He was muscular, too. And, still smiling at her.

"Let go," she said.

He laughed. "What? A girl won't say thank you for catching her?"

"Thank you," she said, "now, let me go."

"All right." He sighed. "It's not every day a lovely girl falls into a guy's lap."

He loosened his grip on her waist, and Arya slid from his lap ungracefully before facing him when she was back on her feet.

"Thanks" she muttered again, actually glad he'd stopped her from falling and hurting herself, but embarrassed at the attention she was getting from the two other guys that sat with her rescuer.

"You're welcome." The smile was back on his face. "Jaqen H'ghar at your service…Arya Stark."

"You already know my name," she stated. "Why did you ask if you already knew?"

"To have you tell it to me." Jaqen shrugged broad shoulders. "Rather than listen to people whispering and speculating about your identity."

"Oh." She didn't have a response for that. "I'd better get back to my friends."

Jaqen H'ghar inclined his head as she started to move away.

"I'll be seeing you again…lovely girl," she heard him say.

A little bit shaken by the encounter, she squared her shoulders and found her way back to Hot Pie and Mycah. They didn't have to wait long for the verdict.
Gendry was now a member of *Brotherhood Without Banners.*
Episode 3 "Of Dogs & Birds"

Gossip Spyder

Football season is almost upon us, with the first game scheduled for next week...But, before that is the traditional exhibition game between King's Landing Prep and King's Landing College this Friday afternoon. This year's exhibition game will be on home turf, with the College Stags paying us a visit. Rumor has it that Joffrey Baratheon will be throwing a party after the game! I'll see you all there… but you won't see me!

Just an update on the 'Battle Of The Bands' – it looks like Beric Dondarrion's band, the Brotherhood Without Banners, will definitely be entering this year's competition! He's found a new guitarist with a killer voice in newly transferred junior, Gendry Waters...aka, 'The Bull'...thank you to my anonymous source who sent the video of his audition!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

Sansa

This isn't a friendly game, Sansa thought as she watched the Hound brutally take down the Stags' Quarterback yet again. The second quarter was almost over, and the White Knights were leading. Sansa barely understood the basics of football, but she heard enough people talking around her to understand that Sandor Clegane was an exceptional Middle Linebacker.

"He's not a hound...he's a freaking bulldozer!" someone said behind her.

"That brother of his is a menace though," someone else said.

Sansa agreed. She'd taken one look at Gregor Clegane and instinctively knew that he was infinitely more frightening than his younger brother, and not just because of his grotesque size. If she'd thought the Hound big, his brother was even larger.

The King's College coach had had to remind Gregor Clegane several times that the game was an exhibition match, and to keep himself in check. He was an Offensive Lineman, and was getting angrier with each sack Sandor managed against Loras Tyrell, their unfortunate Quarterback. Gregor was supposed to be protecting Loras, but Sandor made it look like Gregor wasn't doing his job properly.

"Tyrell, get your fucking ass moving!" he'd yelled at Loras.

Sansa wondered how anyone could look at Gregor Clegane and not want to run in the opposite direction. She did not envy any of the White Knights' Defensive Linemen.

Both teams re-positioned on the field, waiting for the snap. Loras called out the play, and somehow he managed to pass the ball before the Hound took him down. The Stags went on to finally score a touchdown just as the whistle blew, signaling the end of the quarter.

The players on both teams went to their respective benches at the sidelines. Sansa spotted Renly Baratheon next to Loras Tyrell. Renly was a Tackle. He'd spoken to her earlier before the game had started, and was pleased to find out she'd be going to the party afterwards at The Red Keep.
"Do you find it strange playing against Joffrey? He is your nephew, after all," she'd asked him.

He'd laughed. "There's only four years separating us, and I'm not that much bigger than he is. I feel no guilt whatsoever in tackling the little shit!"

Half-time was fifteen minutes, and currently the KL Prep cheerleaders were on the field, demonstrating their newest routine to the substantial crowd that had turned up to watch the exhibition game.

Sansa was seated next to Jeyne, and some distance below her, she could see Arya with the junior called Gendry, and two other boys she couldn't recall. She stared at Gendry for a moment, wondering why he suddenly reminded her of someone, but gave up when she couldn't place who she'd been reminded of.

"I can't believe I'm going to a party at Joffrey Baratheon's!" Jeyne said excitedly. "I've never been invited before."

"I've never been to any party, anywhere," Sansa muttered, "not a party with just teenagers, anyway."

"I can't believe that,"

"It's true," Sansa said, sadly. "Mordane's wasn't famous for hosting dances, and if my brothers had parties, I wasn't allowed to be there."

"Well, you'll soon be making up for that!"

"I wonder if Joffrey will ask me out at all?" Sansa sighed. "I haven't really spoken to him this week, but everyone seems to think something will happen between us."

Jeyne laughed. "You know he's going to ask you out. Haven't you ever been on a date before?"

"I've never been to a party. A date seems highly unlikely."

"So, you've never been kissed before, either?" Jeyne asked her.

Sansa squirmed and flushed as a memory she would rather forget surfaced to her mind. Not that she had found her first kiss unpleasant, in fact she imagined she might have liked it, if she could only ignore who had been kissing her.

"You have!" Jeyne exclaimed. "Spill!"

Still flushing, Sansa told her about the graduation party her brothers Robb, Jon and foster-brother Theon Greyjoy had held at the beginning of summer to mark the end of their high-school years.

"Theon?" Jeyne wanted details.

Sansa relented. "Theon's father owns a big shipping company, but he doesn't have a good relationship with him. His mother doesn't want him either, so my father offered to take him in. He's been with my family for the past eight years, and now he's going to college with my brothers."

"Is he cute?"

"I've never really thought about it...I guess he is."

Sansa pictured Theon's lean, darkly handsome looks.

"So, what happened?" Jeyne prompted when Sansa had been silent over-long.
"Well, father had let them use the pool house, and there were kids everywhere but mother had banned me from going anywhere near the party, and Robb hadn't even tried to convince her..."

Sansa remembered being so mad at the time, and she'd sulkily sat on the top of the stairs overlooking the rear garden and the pool house beyond, listening to the loud music that drifted up toward the main house.

"Sansa? What are you doing out here?" Theon had materialised out of the night, and he sat down beside her on the step.

"Not being at the party," she'd replied, sounding so very disappointed.

"That's right, I'd heard you'd been forbidden." He'd taken a drink from the glass he held in his hand.

"Why aren't you over there?"

He tugged at his shirt. "Someone dropped dip on me earlier and I had to change my shirt."

"What are you drinking?"

"Bourbon and cola."

"Can I try some?" she'd asked, thinking that if anyone would let her, it would be him.

"Sure." He didn't disappoint her, and handed her the glass.

He'd watched her as she'd taken a sip and as she made a face when the alcohol hit her throat.

"Not to your liking?" Theon laughed as she coughed into her hand.

"It's bitter, and sweet but not...nice," she'd admitted.

"Come with me." He stood up and held out his other hand. "Let me get you something that's more to your taste."

She'd stared at his hand. "I can't, Robb will see me."

Theon had laughed. "No, he won't, he's too pre-occupied."

"But..."

"Just come down to the garden, you don't have to come into the pool house."

Sansa had taken his hand and let him lead her down to a bench under tree. It was dark, and though Sansa could see out from the shadows, people wouldn't have been able to see her unless they knew she was there.

"Don't move, I'll be back," Theon said.

When he returned, he was holding a bottle with a colorful label on the front.

"Here, try this," he said after he'd removed the bottle-top for her. "It's a vodka mix, you'll like it."

She'd taken a tentative sip. "It's like lemonade!"

They'd talked about his plans for the rest of the summer, and how he was looking forward to college and sharing an apartment close to campus with Robb and Jon.
"I wish you guys weren't moving out," Sansa had said, the bottle of vodka-lemonade almost finished.  
"Will you miss us?"

"Of course I will."

"Even me?" Theon had sounded dubious.

"Yeah. You, too." She'd giggled, and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Theon was quiet for a bit, and stared at her. "How old are you again?"

"I'm fourteen, Theon, going on fifteen in October."

"Right...and you'll be a sophomore in September."

"Sure will be!" She'd swallowed the last of the vodka-lemonade, and Theon took the empty bottle from her.

"Are you dating now, Sansa?"

She'd laughed. "Every weekend, and with a different boy each week!"

"Kissed a boy before?"

"Theon!"

"Of course you have...pretty girl like you."

"You think I'm pretty?" Sansa's head felt funny from the vodka, but she beamed at his words.

"Very pretty, Sansa." He'd reached out and pulled her to him. "I think you're a very beautiful girl."

Then he'd dropped his head and kissed her. Shocked, Sansa sat unmoving in Theon's embrace as he'd pushed his tongue into her mouth. She tasted the sweetness of the bourbon and cola he'd been drinking, and registered that his lips were warm and that his cheeks were stubbled. The sensation of the kiss itself had been nice, but kissing Theon felt a hundred different kinds of wrong and she'd pushed him away forcefully.

"No, Theon." She'd pulled out of his arms. "You shouldn't be kissing me."

He's like a brother!

"Yeah, you're right." He'd grinned ruefully, but didn't try to do it again. "Robb would probably kill me, so don't tell him, okay?"

"I won't." She'd shaken her head. "I promise."

"Good. Now, you'd better go back to the house before I change my mind. It's a pity though...You've such a sweet mouth."

Sansa now looked at Jeyne who was sitting with her mouth agape.

"Sansa!"

"What?"
"I'm jealous…that sounds so hot!"

"It wasn't!" Sansa grimaced.

Jeyne laughed again. "Well, after you kiss Joffrey, you can make that comparison and tell me all about it."

The third quarter of the game went much like the first two, with both teams eventually moving into the final quarter with 16-16 on the board. It was a difficult final quarter for both sides, with neither team managing to score anything, and Sansa could sense that something was up when Gregor Clegane's cursing became fouler. She couldn't hear everything he said, but she was sure there was a death threat in there somewhere.

He began yelling at Loras Tyrell again when Stags took possession of the ball. Their center had just snapped the ball to Loras, and he started running, trying to set up a pass. Gregor Clegane was pulverizing members of the White Knights' defense, but somehow, somehow, the Hound got through their lines and smashed into Loras.

It was then that hell broke loose.

Sandor had gotten back to his feet and was moving back to his side, when Gregor came running up and threw a punch…at Loras Tyrell.

The crowd erupted in shouts, and Sansa found herself on her feet with her hand over her mouth. Loras was on the ground again, and Gregor was about to come in for another attack when Sandor suddenly appeared between them, putting himself in front of Loras, and deflected his brother's blow.

"Back off!" Sandor shouted.

"Get the fuck out of my face!" Gregor yelled back furiously, face red with anger.

Then the brothers were fighting each other, shoving, grabbing jerseys, striking. It was ugly and brutal and Sansa couldn't look away, unable to help the sudden fear she felt for Sandor.

"STOP THIS MADNESS AT ONCE!"

The shout came from Coach Selmy who stormed onto the field alongside the college team's coach. Sandor pulled back immediately, with Gregor's fist missing his face by an inch. Sandor took off his helmet as both coaches started yelling and reprimanding the brothers. Sansa could see the tension in Sandor's body. Gregor had to be held back by three brave teammates. Both brothers were benched the remainder of the game. She learned later that Gregor received a suspension for the next two games for attacking a member of his own team, and Sandor got off with just a warning.

The White Knights won, but Sansa no longer cared. Arya came up to her and told her that she was going somewhere with her friends before disappearing towards the student car park.

Joffrey found her on his way to the showers with the rest of his teammates.

"Good game, Joff," she said to him, throwing the Hound a nervous glance.

"Maybe, but it doesn't count," he shrugged.

"Joff, get a move on!" Renly shouted at him from some feet away, also on his way to change out of his jersey.
"Wait for us here," Joffrey instructed her. "Renly and I will take you and your friend with us to my house."

They came back soon enough, but Sandor headed straight past them with some of the other guys on the team. Sansa noted that he'd composed himself again, but the corner of his burned mouth twitched. His hair was damp, and still pushed over the burned side of his face. He'd also changed into jeans and a red t-shirt with the name of a rock band on it.

"We'll meet you there," he'd said to Joff, and walked towards the carpark.

"This way, ladies." Renly offered his arm to Jeyne, who giggled as she accepted it.

"Come on, Sansa." Joff didn't bother with offering his arm. He simply grabbed Sansa's hand as though he had every right to it.

She blushed.

Joffrey's parents had allowed him to have the party in one of the guest houses on the property, away from the main house where their music and noise wouldn't disturb the rest of the family. Alcohol flowed freely, though just about everyone was underage.

Some members of the King's Landing Stags had come as well, including Loras Tyrell whose jaw was starting to go purple.

"Sandor, the fucking Hound, Clegane saved my life!" he said to anyone who'd listen.

Gregor Clegane was thankfully, absent.

So many kids from school had turned up that the party spilled out into the garden. Sansa noted that it was very different from the first party she'd attended at The Red Keep just a week before. There were speakers set up under the gazebo, and kids were dancing to the pop music being pumped out.

Randa, Mya and the other cheerleaders were already there dancing up a storm. They'd changed from their cheerleading uniforms, into a different uniform of miniskirts, low cut tops, skin-tight jeans and high heels.

Sansa knew she dressed well. She had money, and she loved fashion. Currently, she was wearing a pair of Siwy skinny-jeans and a lilac colored blouse that had a sweetheart neckline, and clung to her curves, but she wondered if she wore her clothes with the same confidence the other girls did. These girls were hot, they knew it, and so did the boys watching them.

Chairs, stools and benches had been scattered around near the gazebo-dancefloor, and they found Sandor already there with Trant and Blount. People made room, and Joffrey took a seat, pulling Sansa down and sitting her on his lap.

"There, you can sit on my lap." He grinned at her, looking pleased with himself. "Let your friend take the chair."

Jeyne shot her a look as she took the said chair. Sansa was aware of every single pair of eyes that had witnessed what had just happened and continued to look on. She was surprised at his action, pleased and yet dismayed at the same time. She could have done without their audience, but Joffrey didn't seem to mind it.

"What are you doing tomorrow, Sansa?" he asked loudly, running his palm over the curve of her hip.
"Oh, nothing…I hadn't made plans." Sansa's cheeks heated up, noticing the way Trant and Blount were smirking and that everyone was listening.

"Come out with me," he said, "there's a new movie that I want to see."

She couldn't be certain he was asking her, it had sounded like a command, but she didn't dwell on why her brain had wanted to make that distinction.

"Okay, I'd like that." She smiled a pretty smile at him.

"Good." He ran a finger down her arm. "I'll pick you up tomorrow evening, and I'd like it if you wore something pretty."

Again, that sounded like he was telling her what to do, but she didn't think about it, focusing instead on the fact she was going on her first date!

He then ignored her for a good few minutes while he and his friends talked about the game they'd just played and won. From her seat on Joffrey's lap, Sansa turned her head to look at Jeyne, and they talked quietly before they were distracted by the sound of their names being called.

"Sansa! Jeyne! Come dance with us!" It was Randa and Mya calling out to them, Ros and Yaya were not far behind, moving in time to the music.

Joffrey had stopped talking at the interruption, and now he looked at Sansa for a second, before all but pushing her towards the dance floor.

"Go on, let's see you dance!"

Sandor

"Go on, let's see you dance!" Joffrey called out after Sansa as she and Jeyne skipped over towards the gazebo to join the cheerleaders. "Let's see you shake that ass!"

Sandor and the guys around Joffrey were the only ones to hear that last bit, and sure enough there were rude snickers all around. Sandor didn't even crack a smile. In fact, his expression hadn't changed from the scowl he'd been wearing the whole evening. His run-in with Gregor had put him in a black mood. His shoulder ached from where Gregor's anvil-like fist had struck him. Not to mention the pummeling he himself had dished out. His knuckles hurt. He wasn't as big as his grotesque brother, but he could hold his own now…he wasn't a helpless little boy anymore. If Coach Selmy hadn't put a stop to their fight, he knew he could've done serious damage on his brother.

But how much worse would he have done to you? He bared his teeth at the thought, feeling his mood getting blacker. He needed a drink, but he was driving, so he couldn't. Fuck. His mood slipped further. He had to get a grip, or he'd soon need to find some unlucky victim to take his anger out on.

There was laughter from a group nearby, and he spotted some of the college jocks flirting with some senior girls. Renly Baratheon and Loras Tyrell were there, and that did make him snort. Loras Tyrell was gay, and Sandor was certain that Renly Baratheon was, too. Not that either guy had come out or anything. Sandor was at The Red Keep more than most as Joffrey seemed to prefer his company. There were always people visiting, and Loras Tyrell had been a recent guest whenever Renly came to see his family. Sandor had always been observant, and whether he wanted to or not, he saw and heard things that were enough to convince him that the two Stags wanted only to rut with each other.

Which now made them liars, he noted. Both were flirting with girls, and none of the girls knew any
better. One of them was sitting on Renly's lap, and another was stroking Loras' bruised face.

Sandor hated liars.

He needed a distraction.

He looked towards the dance floor, hoping to catch sight of a decent set of tits that would do the trick. There was a girl, a cheerleader. He couldn't recall her name – a busty, curvaceous one with dark red hair staring at him. She was shimmying and gyrating next to a petite cheerleader, and when she realized he was looking, she did some move with her hips and ass that had the guys near him whistling.

"Ros! Do that again!" one of the guys called out.

She obliged, but Sandor wasn't looking at her anymore.

He was looking at another red-haired girl, with a slightly smaller but perkier rack, a pert little ass and long legs that were encased in denim so tight it looked like it had been sprayed on. Some R&B song with a lot of bass was playing, and she was moving her hips in time to the beat. Her movements were more restrained, like she was unsure or self-conscious even though she was an awesome dancer.

She looked amazing, swaying her hips and lifting her arms above her head causing the blouse she wore to ride up and expose the creamy skin of her midriff.

Too fucking bad she's not dancing for you, you ugly mutt!

"I don't think I can wait till tomorrow to get my hands on that!" Joff's voice broke into his ever darkening thoughts.

Sandor watched in silence as Joff made his way to the dance floor, and as the blonde jerk came up and pulled Sansa into his arms. She laughed, but her laugh became a gasp when Joff's hand slipped to grab one pert butt-cheek.

People laughed, but Sandor didn't. He found himself clenching his fists so tight his fingernails bit into his palm.

"Joff, please…!" he heard Sansa say.

"It's okay, babe." Joffrey's arm tightened around her waist, drawing her in closer. "You're with me, now."

Joffrey bent to kiss her, and for a second Sandor imagined that Sansa's hands had gone to Joff's chest to push him away.

 Except she didn't.

Sansa Stark stood there and let Joffrey Baratheon kiss her in full public view of everyone who was anyone at King's Landing Prep.

Sandor stood up and walked away, unable to watch, unable to explain why the sight of Joff kissing Sansa, a stupid little girl he hardly knew, bothered him so much.

Sansa

Sansa glanced at her watch and sighed. The party was over for her. She'd been trying to stifle her
yawns for the past hour, and her feet hurt from too much dancing. Jeyne had gone home an hour before, having caught a ride with Randa.

"Joff, it's getting late and I should be getting home."

"I suppose you're right...but I'm too fuckin' drunk to take you anywhere," he snorted. "Hound!" he called out to the big guy when he spotted him walking past them.

Sandor paused and looked at him. "Yeah?"

"Are you leaving now?" Joff asked. "If you are, take her with you. She's on your way."

Sansa's stomach plummeted. She didn't want to go anywhere with Sandor Clegane. She'd hoped Joffrey would drive her home. Sandor's face was impassive, but he gave a terse nod.

"There's a good dog." Joff smiled, then he grabbed Sansa and dropped a wet kiss on her mouth while he palmed her ass.

Sansa made a little noise of protest at being felt up in public yet again. She was beet-red when he let her go and found the Hound staring.

"Go with him now, Sansa," Joff said, "I'll see you tomorrow. Make sure she gets home safely, Hound."

Without another word, he walked away.

Sansa peeked at the Hound.

"Did you think Joff was going to take you himself?" he snorted.

She didn't reply.

"Come on." He took her arm and started to pull her unresisting away from the party. "You're not the only one who needs sleep."

His hand was warm and dry on her skin, and his long fingers wrapped completely around her wrist which suddenly looked ridiculously fragile in his grasp. He led her through the darkened gardens, careful to avoid accidentally running into couples making out in the unlit places under trees and alcoves. Once they were on the lawn, he let her go. It was a long walk from the gardens to where the cars had been parked, and Sansa kept her head down, still unable to look at him directly.

Where are your manners? Don't focus on his scars. She made herself speak to him.

"You...you played well this afternoon," she offered, "you're a talented athlete."

"Spare me. I'm no fucking athlete," he scoffed, "do you ever actually say anything meaningful?"

"I don't know what you mean," she said quietly, not understanding his mood, but sensing his anger nonetheless.

"You're like a little bird that's constantly chirping nonsense," he elaborated, scathingly. "I've seen you...heard you talk useless gossip all week, hiding what you're really thinking behind politeness."

Sansa was taken aback, insulted. 'I'm...I'm not--"

"Yes, you are!" he snapped. "You didn't like what I just said about you, but you're too polite to tell
"I'd never..!" She was aghast

"No, you wouldn't. That's my point. You're too damned polite to tell the truth," he said, "is that what they taught you at that girls' school?"

"That's unkind."

"Did you see my brother today? He's an athlete…what did you think of him?"

She winced, remembering what had happened on the football field. "Yes…he was…"

"Talented?" he laughed mirthlessly.

"No one had a chance against him," Sansa finally said.

He suddenly stopped in his tracks, and she had no choice but to stop beside him. They were near one of the lampposts that lined the long driveway, and in the light it cast Sansa could see that Sandor was clenching his fists.

"So fucking polite," he rasped.

She was already wary of him, but now she was growing frightened.

"No one had a chance against him," he rasped, "you're right there…no one ever did stand a chance with Gregor. Tyrell hadn't stood a chance either. He's going to have a pretty bruise on that face of his you girls like so much. Want to see how fucking talented my brother is? Look at me. Look at me!"

He took hold of her shoulders and spun her around to face him, then he put a huge hand under her chin and forced her face up, "Not polite to stare? Well, fuck that. Here's your chance. Take a long look. You know you want to."

His fingers bit into her cheeks where they held her. She had to look.

Grey eyes, he has grey eyes. She noted too that they were turbulent, and sullen with anger. Watching her.

She'd known what to expect, of course, from the photo of him she'd seen on the website, but having his face only inches away from hers was entirely intimidating. Yet, she made herself study him again, seeking to satisfy her curiosity.

The left side of his face was a scarred ruin, and she saw that most of his left ear was missing too. She hadn't seen that in the photo. His straight black hair was thicker and covered more of his head than she'd first thought, hanging to the top of his shoulders.

The unburned side drew her in. She couldn't help it. This side wasn't ugly at all. Far from it, in fact. She couldn't find anything to say about the conflicting emotions going on inside her.

She was both repelled, and attracted.

She drew a shaky breath, which he mistakenly took as a sound of fright. He let her go.

"Nothing polite to say?" He wasn't expecting an answer, and he continued. "People think it was an electrical fire or that I'd been in a car accident. Other people think I was scalded by hot water." He gave another laugh, softer this time but just as bitter. "I'll tell you what it really was." He was leaning so close now that she could smell a faint hint of cologne, and sweat and something male. "I was six,
and it was Christmas. One of my dad's acquaintances had sent gifts for us. Handmade toys from some famous European toy-maker. I don't remember what I got, but I wanted Gregor's gift instead so I took it. It was a wooden knight in armor, with arms and legs you could move to make him fight. Gregor was eleven and already six-feet tall, too old for that kind of stuff, but that made no difference. It was his, and I shouldn't have been touching it. When he found me, he didn't say a word, he just picked me up and shoved the side of my face into the coals that were still burning in the fireplace.

Dad told everyone at the hospital that it was a faulty heater and that my bedding had caught fire. He hushed up what really happened. Didn't want his boss, Tywin Lannister, finding out. Doctors fixed me up, and told dad I could have plastic surgery to make me look normal, but the bastard's too fucking tight to fork out the money. I was alive. It didn't matter if I looked like a freak.

Gregor got away with it. He got bigger, and turns out he's a fucking natural athlete. He won athletic scholarships. Football coaches like that he's a brutal fucker, but no one knows…”

His rasping voice trailed off and there was nothing but silence for a while, broken only by the sound of his ragged breathing.

She was sad for him, she realized, and somehow she stopped being afraid of him.

She didn't know why he'd told her these things. She didn't even know him, but she understood that it was something important. The encounter with his brother had triggered something latent and dangerous inside him. She was afraid for him.

She reached up and found his massive shoulder with her hand. His muscles bunched under her touch.

"He…he's not a good person," she whispered to him.

He threw back his head and roared, and Sansa stumbled away from him, but he caught her arm.

"No," he growled at her, "no, little bird, he's not a good person at all."

In silence, he led her to his car.

He drove a black Mustang. She didn't know what model it was. Just that it was an older model, restored and looked almost as dangerous as its owner. It was fitting, she mused, strapping herself into the passenger seat as Sandor slipped behind the wheel beside her.

In silence, he drove to Chateau Maegor, and she didn't dare do anything to break into his thoughts. Still in silence, he pulled into her driveway and slowed down as they reached the front door.

Sansa made to let herself out.

"Thank you," she said meekly.

Sandor grasped her arm before she could open the door, and he leaned close. "The things I told you tonight," he said, his voice rougher than it had been earlier, "if you ever tell Joffrey…your sister…anyone…”

"I won't," Sansa whispered, "I promise."

He shook his head, it wasn't enough. "If you ever tell anyone, I'll make sure you regret it."
Ned Stark heard the rumble of an engine, and he glanced at the clock on the wall before he got up and went to the window. There was an unfamiliar white BMW on his driveway, and his youngest daughter was stepping out of the passenger side. He watched Arya lean into the window to say something to the driver...he recalled a conversation from earlier in the week and mention of a boy whose name now escaped him.

It was half-past ten, and his not-quite-fourteen year old daughter was just coming home.

"Hmm." Ned grabbed his phone and sent a text message to his head of security, Jory Cassel.

"Jory. I need details on this license plate number."

Cat had told him that both girls were out for the evening, but she'd failed to mention anything about a curfew. He left the day to day disciplining to her, and only stepped in when she needed him to, or when he felt compelled to do so.

He damn well felt compelled to do so at that moment.

It was another hour before he heard a second vehicle coming up the driveway. He was already waiting at the window when the black Mustang came to a stop below.

*Joffrey Baratheon does not drive a Mustang.*

As he watched his not-quite-fifteen year old hop out of the vehicle, he texted Jory once again.

"This one, too," he wrote.

For the most part, he kept his nose out of his daughters' business, relying on Cat to tell him about the things the girls didn't want to, or felt they couldn't tell him. Not that he didn't encourage them to open up to him, but he accepted that there were just some things girls would *never* discuss with their father, and even more things a father did not *want* to discuss with his daughters.

It was easier to understand them when they'd been younger, but as they got older, Ned realized fairly quickly that he was out of his depth.

Arya and Sansa were so completely different, appearance wise and in personalities, that even he found it hard to fathom sometimes that he'd sired them both. He worried about them differently, as well. Knowing his daughters were now safely back in their bedrooms, he abandoned his study and went to bed.

Catelyn was in bed reading a book, and she glanced up when he slid into the bed beside her.

"Girls are in," he stated.

"You really were waiting for them, weren't you?"

"I'm their father. I'm supposed to," he replied, "don't you want to know how they got home?"

"I was going to wait and let them tell me themselves, but you may as well tell me now that you've got my interest piqued." Catelyn put her book down.

Ned settled into his pillow and sighed. "Arya came in a white BMW, and Sansa was delivered in a black Mustang."

"Really?" Cat frowned. "Sure you didn't get them mixed up?"
"What?"

"You know your daughters, Ned. I'm probably falling into a stereotypical trap here, but I always pictured Arya would be the one with a Mustang driving bad-boy, while Sansa would have the typical handsome knight in shining BMW."

"Well, we're in for a couple of interesting tales in the morning." Ned hoped Jory would come through with the information he requested by then. "Cat, what curfews did you give the girls?"

"Home by seven p.m on weekdays, unless otherwise agreed, and midnight on weekends. Sleepovers are conditional to us meeting their friend's parents first."

*And to your conducting a background check.* Ned didn't need to have Cat say it out aloud.

"Those are generous curfews," he said instead.

"Yes, I thought so too," Cat agreed. "Sansa had a similar one back when we were still in the North, though there was no reason for her to ever need break it…but things are different here."

"You're expecting them to break it," Ned stated.

"Undoubtedly," Cat replied. "They're good girls, but they won't stay young and innocent indefinitely."

"They'll be fourteen and fifteen, come October." Ned rolled over and fixed his wife with a look. "Sooner or later they'll start dating, if they haven't already…and teenage boys are…untrustworthy."

Those were not the words he really wanted to use, but he could hardly say *teenage boys are only after sex* to her. "I just want to make certain they know how to take care of themselves. You know what I mean, Catelyn."

"I know." She rubbed her temple. "I'm still in two minds about it. I don't want them to see it as a green light, but I also don't want to fool myself into thinking they'll never…get curious."

"You're not going to put it off, are you?" Ned found it amusing to watch his wife squirm.

It wasn't a funny situation, and he certainly wasn't taking it lightly. However, he couldn't help recalling that a few years earlier when they'd decided it was time Ned brought up the safe-sex issue with Robb, Jon and Theon, Catelyn at the time, hadn't been all that sympathetic to his own discomfort and embarrassment. In fact, she'd teased him about it.

He didn't think it was a good idea to remind her of that right at that moment though.

"No," she sighed, "I've made separate appointments for them to see a doctor. Sansa won't be a problem. Arya will have to be dragged kicking and screaming though."

Ned smiled. "Yes, I expect she will."

In the morning, Ned found an email waiting for him from Jory Cassel.

"Info on those two license plates, as requested," read the message.

Ned hesitated when his cursor hovered over the little attachment icon on the screen. He disliked having to go behind his daughters' backs, but he had to remind himself that he was Eddard Stark, and he was worth a ridiculous amount of money. His children would also be worth a lot of money, if anyone ever wanted to use them to get to him. He meant to keep them safe, although keeping them...
safe while letting them have their freedom was no easy feat to manage. He would do what he felt he needed to do.

Ned clicked on the attachment, and it took him two minutes to read the contents.

The black Mustang was registered to Sandor Clegane, who lived in the next suburb of Little Keep. Father, Theodor Clegane, employed by Tywin Lannister…friend of Joffrey Baratheon, Jory had noted.

Ned exhaled. Sansa had been dropped off by Joffrey's friend who lived nearby. He didn't see anything that was of immediate concern.

The white BMW belonged to a seventeen year old boy by the name of Gendry Waters, who currently resided with a foster family in The Forge Estates, an upper-middle-class suburb not too far away. Formerly the Mott family had resided in the suburb of River's Edge, also referred to as Flea Bottom.

Ned frowned. Something didn't add up. How did a family from one of the poorest suburbs suddenly find the means to relocate to one of the more affluent addresses in King's Landing? How did a foster kid afford a BMW sports car?

"Jory, need more info on the Waters boy," he wrote, and sent the email.

Sighing, Ned switched off his computer and went downstairs to join his family for breakfast. With a little coaxing, his children were soon talking.

Bran, twelve years old and gifted, talked about an advanced math class. Rickon, seven, talked about a soccer match. Sansa confirmed the ride home with the Clegane boy, and she had a date with Joffrey Baratheon that night. Great. Ned schooled his features, even as he shot Catelyn a look.

Arya talked about the football game from the previous day, and seeing an action film with a freshman classmate later that afternoon. The only other thing Ned learned about Gendry Waters was that he played a mean electric guitar and that he was in a rock band.

He shot Catelyn another meaningful look.
**Episode 4 "The She-Wolf Emerges"**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**Gossip Spyder**

It's official! If you weren't there to see it for yourself, fellow peeps, I can guarantee that Joffrey Baratheon is dating Sansa Stark. They were spotted kissing at Joffrey's party last Friday night after the warm-up game. They were seen again at Dragon's Gate Mall coming out of the movie theatre on Saturday night on what appeared to be their first date together…awww…

It's a pity about what happened later that evening…check out the pic one of you observant peeps sent in! Joffrey, what the hell did you say to Arya Stark? Ha ha ha!...I believe she had you in a 'rear-naked-choke'! Poor Sansa looked terribly upset…

On a more serious note, a freshman boy was seen leaving the boy's locker room bloodied and bruised yesterday afternoon. No one's really sure who he is, but everyone seems to believe his injuries came courtesy of The Hound…he's one scary guy…freshman dude, consider yourself lucky to still be walking!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

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**Arya**

Arya had never felt so furious, and so helpless at the same time.

Mycah was gone.

His father had taken him out of school, and other than a cryptic message he'd sent in reply to her desperate calls, no one had seen or heard from him since Monday afternoon.

"It's better this way," Mycah had written, and she hadn't a clue what he meant.

She wanted to murder Joffrey, for she had no doubt that it was Joffrey who'd told the Hound to beat up Mycah. Poor Mycah. He hadn't done anything to Joffrey. All he'd done was stick up for her. It was Arya who had hit Joffrey, but because he couldn't retaliate against her directly, he'd gone after the next best target. Arya's friend.

The Hound. She wanted him *maimed* for life. Actually, dead would be preferable, but she'd settle for having the parts of him that made him a man cut off with a pair of blunt, rusty scissors. Did the brainless oaf do everything Joff told him to do?

And Sansa…she'd never felt so much anger, so much antipathy and so much bitter, bitter disappointment in her sister in her whole life.

There were many times that she'd told Sansa how ashamed she was at having her for a sister, but she'd never really meant it, until last Saturday night.

Arya had heard that Sansa had a date with Joffrey, but she didn't much care for the details and so
hadn't bothered to ask. It never occurred to her that she and Mycah would run into them that night.

It had just been Arya and Mycah seeing as Gendry had band practice, and Hot Pie had a family thing to go to.

After the movie, Mycah had told her about a popular dessert café he’d wanted to go to, but that they might have to wait to get a table because of how popular it was. Sure enough, when they’d got there the queue had spilled out of the café and around the block, but Mycah convinced her that it was worth the wait. So they waited for an hour just to get to the head of the queue.

That was when Arya had spotted Joffrey and Sansa walking towards the café.

"Ugh," Arya had said when she saw Joffrey kiss her sister. "What the hell does she see in him?"

"It's actually pretty funny," Mycah had said, "they're like a male and female version of that 90's Jim Carey movie…Dumb & Dumber."

Arya had laughed, and was still laughing when Joff and Sansa reached the front of the café and saw them.

"What do we have here?" Joff smirked, staring down at ginger-haired Mycah. "Are you two lovebirds on your first date, too?"

"Shut up, Joffrey." Arya's laughter died on her lips at the tone of Joffrey's voice. "Just leave us the fuck alone."

"What did you say?" Joffrey suddenly took a step forward, and Sansa gave his arm a hesitant tug.

"Come on, Joff. They're not worth it," Sansa said, trying to get him to keep moving.

"No! I want her to repeat what she just said," he said, eyes glinting with his rising temper.

"I said," Arya replied, her voice cold. "Leave us. The fuck. Alone."

Joffrey had sneered. "You sure talk tough for such a little girl."

"I'm not a little girl!" she hissed.

"You are what I say you are," he hissed back, "now, you'd better get it into your head that no one talks to me like that...if you weren't Sansa's sister..."

"Joffrey, let's go," Sansa pleaded, her face clearly unhappy. "We can go somewhere else."

"No, I like it here."

Joffrey then made to push past the people in front of the queue, and there were shouts from everyone behind Arya.

"Hey! We were here first!" Arya shouted at him.

"So, run along and tell your mommy, little girl." He smirked again. "Try and stop me."

Arya found herself grabbing Joffrey's sleeve. "Get to the back and wait like everyone else!"

"Get your hands off me!" Joffrey shoved her hard, and she stumbled.
"Watch it!" Mycah cried, catching Arya and stepping in front of her.

Joffrey was bigger than Mycah, and he shoved the younger boy aside easily. Arya saw Mycah on the ground, and then she lost it.

Suddenly, she'd thrown herself at him, and punched him.

"Arya, no!" Sansa wailed. "You're spoiling everything!"

Joffrey grabbed her arms – he was so much stronger – and tried shaking her off. Arya didn't let go. He took her to the ground. Arya was winded, and Joffrey's knee on her abdomen hurt. She wriggled, trying to get out from under him.

People moved away in shock and surprise.

"Joffrey! Stop!" Sansa wailed once again. "Let him go, Arya!"

Arya remembered a move that Jon had shown her, and she bucked her hips with all her might, catching Joffrey off-guard, creating just enough room for her to slip out from under him. That was when she noticed that Joffrey still had his hands and knees on the ground. She latched onto his back and slipped a skinny arm under his chin, locked it with her other arm…and squeezed, cutting off his carotid artery. That was when people had started laughing and pointing. Phones had started coming out, and that blasted photo had been taken and sent to the Gossip Spyder.

"Tap out, Joff!" someone yelled. "She's got you in deep!"

Joffrey didn't 'tap out', but he did fall to the ground, his fingers trying to loosen her strangle on him as his face grew as red as a tomato. Arya wasn't sure how long they were on the ground, and then there were adults yelling and the crowd was dispersing.

The café's proprietor had come out, along with her burly husband who had pulled Arya away from Joffrey.

"That was a cheap shot!" Joffrey had screamed at her once he'd regained his feet. "You'll pay for this!"

"Joffrey, please!" Sansa had reached for his arm, but he'd shrugged her off.

"Don't touch me!"

The proprietor had told them to go away, and Arya had been led away by Mycah. Joffrey and Sansa disappeared in the other direction, with Sansa still trying to calm him down. Arya had avoided Sansa at home, and all of the next day, but Monday morning saw the photo that had been taken outside the café go up on the Gossip Spyder's site. Everyone at school talked about it. Everyone had seen the photo of Arya Stark, who was a foot shorter than Joffrey Baratheon and couldn't have been more than 110lbs, as she'd choked out the blonde pretty-boy. People sniggered behind hastily cupped hands has Joffrey walked by, or openly behind his back, but no one laughed at him directly. It was impossible that Joffrey hadn't seen the photo, or at least knew of its existence.

By Monday afternoon, Mycah had been seen stumbling into the nurse's office bloodied and bruised, where presumably, his father had been called. It had been Gendry who'd called her up that evening and told her what had happened to Mycah. He'd even offered to come over when she'd howled and ranted over the phone, but she'd refused him. Instead, she'd beaten down Sansa's bedroom door, and promptly flew at her sister with fists and fingernails. Sansa had screamed, and Bran had come running in to see his two sisters rolling on the floor pulling at each other's hair. Not being able to put
a stop to it, he'd ended up calling their father to intervene.

When Ned had successfully separated them, both Arya and Sansa sported scratched arms and faces, and both were crying.

"It's her stupid boyfriend's fault!" Arya had shouted. "Him and his fucking Dog!"

"Watch your language, Arya!" her father's rebuke had been stern.

"You hit him first!" Sansa cried.

"Joffrey's a bully, but you're too stupid to see it!"

"You humiliated him in front of everyone!"

"That's enough!" their father had roared, stunning them into silence.

Ned Stark almost never shouted at them.

He'd gotten both sides of the story eventually, but Sansa had lied.

Sansa's version mentioned nothing of Joffrey pushing ahead of the queue, or shoving Mycah to the ground, or wrestling Arya. However, their father must have sensed the lack of sincerity in her voice. Sansa had never been a good liar.

"Arya, apologize for hitting her," he ordered, "you're sisters. You do not harm each other."

Arya had grumbled an apology, but they all knew she didn't mean it.

"Now, both of you go back to your rooms. I don't want to hear another sound from either of you for the rest of the night."

"What about Mycah? The Hound beat him up!"

"The Hound?" Ned queried.

"Sandor Clegane," Arya replied, "Joffrey's henchman."

"Clegane?" Ned frowned, and Arya knew he'd recognized the name. "Did Mycah say it was him?"

"No, but…"

"Do you have any kind of proof?"

"No, but…"

"You don't know for certain that he was responsible for your friend's injuries."

"But everyone says so!"

"That's hearsay, Arya," Ned bit out. "It's very unfortunate what happened to your friend, but without proof, and unless your friend will name him, there is nothing that can be done about it."

Arya hated feeling helpless. She couldn't do anything to help Mycah. She couldn't believe that her own sister had allowed an innocent boy to be hurt. She couldn't believe that Sansa had lied to protect her piece-of-shit boyfriend.
That night, still sobbing and desperately missing Jon and wanting to hear his voice, she'd called him.

"Arya? What's wrong?" Jon had asked the moment he'd heard her sniff.

"Are you near your computer?"

"Yeah…why?"

"I'm going to send you something. Don't laugh, okay?" Arya sent him the link to Gossip Spyder's page showing the unfortunate photo that was the cause of her current strife.

"Got it…Oh, shit!" Jon swore, and Arya heard rustling and crackling as though he'd tried to cover the mouthpiece. "Arya? What's going on? You've got this guy in a rear naked choke!"

There'd been laughter in his voice, and in the background Arya could hear Robb and Theon as they investigated what Jon had been laughing about. Then they had started laughing, too.

"That's Joffrey Baratheon!" she heard Robb call out.

"This is partly your fault, Jon," she'd snapped, "if you hadn't shown me all those UFC and MMA videos…"

"My fault? What?"

"You showed me some mixed martial arts moves over the summer, remember? It's your fault I knew how to do that choke hold."

Her beloved brother had sighed. "All right, tell me what this is about."

So she told him everything, and as she talked she started to feel a little better. Jon never judged her, and for that she loved him. Not that he approved of her attacking people, or pulling Sansa's hair, but he understood that impulsiveness and her fiery temper were part of who she was.

"But, your friend is okay?" Jon had asked.

"As far as I know,"

"Then you should be thankful for that," Jon had said, "you've tried to reach out to him, but if he decides he'd rather not keep in contact with you, then you need to respect his choice."

"When did you get so wise?"

"Getting older tends to do that to you, in most cases…although I'm still questioning the wisdom behind my decision to share an apartment with Robb and Theon!"

Arya had chuckled, feeling another pang at the sound of his laugh. "Will you come down for my birthday?"

She purposely didn't mention that Sansa also had a birthday coming up. Their birthdays were days apart, as it turned out. Something that Arya had always resented.

"Birthday? Is that coming up?"

"Jon!"

"I'm kidding! Of course I'll come down."
After she'd hung up, she went to bed thinking of seeing Jon again.

It was still the thought of seeing Jon that kept her motivated to get through school the next few days, while Gendry and Hot Pie found themselves unsure how to handle this brooding, not-shouting version of Arya Stark.

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**Gendry**

Gendry walked through the hall where he knew Arya's locker was located, searching for her. She wasn't at her locker, so he turned around and made his way to the quad. He was worried about her. She hadn't been waiting for him that morning, and she hadn't replied to the text message he'd sent her earlier.

She was still very upset about what had happened to Mycah. They all were. It had been so sudden, and so unexpected that he was still coming to grips with it. However, he was used to losing friends and people he cared about. Unlike Arya, he was better able to deal with his anger. Although, Gendry found it harder to shake the guilt he was feeling. He had been the last person to see Mycah before he'd been attacked.

"If I'd stuck around a minute longer…I might have been able to do something," he'd said.

"No, you wouldn't have." Hot Pie had shaken his head. "If it was really the Hound that did it, you being there wouldn't have made a difference. He'd have just beaten you up, too."

Gendry's ego hadn't liked that. He was six-two, he worked out…and he'd grown up in the neighborhood people referred to as Flea Bottom. He'd been in his share of fights, though Arya and Hot Pie did not know that. The Hound was a large motherfucker, but Gendry didn't fear him the way other people seemed to. Of course, given the choice, he'd rather not fight anyone, but he wouldn't run away from one either if a friend needed him.

Arya didn't seem to be in the quad, but Gendry had spotted her sister, Sansa, just coming out of the cafeteria. He didn't particularly want to speak to her, but his concern overruled his distaste.

"Sansa, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Sansa looked up at his voice, and seemed surprised to see him. "Gendry, right?"

He nodded, and indicated that she follow him to a table under a tree.

"You're going to ask about Arya," she stated as she sat down along the bench, and a little frown creased her brow.

"Do you know where she is? I haven't seen her all day."

"If she's not here, maybe she's skipped class," Sansa replied.

"Is that something she does often?"

Sansa shrugged. "She's Arya. I don't know how her mind works."

"That's because you're stupid!" a little voice rang out over their heads.

Gendry and Sansa both looked up. And there sitting in the branches of the tree above them was Arya. Gendry's stomach almost dropped when he realized how high up she was.
"Arya! What the hell are you doing up there? Get down before you hurt yourself." He stood up.

"He's right, Arya," Sansa said nervously, "get down before you fall."

"Why do you care?" Arya snapped at her. "Just go away, Sansa. Run to that vile, wormy-lipped asshole you call a boyfriend."

"Fine." Sansa's expression went from hurt, to cold indifference in a split second.

"Fine!" Arya parroted.

Sansa walked away quickly, not looking back.

Gendry looked back up at Arya. "She's gone."

"Why'd you want to talk to her for?"

He shrugged. "You didn't reply to me, and I was worried about you."

"You were worried about me?"

"Yeah." He gave her an impatient look. "That's what friends do. Now, would you please come down?"

She's such a pain in the ass, he thought, but she amused him and there was something about her that he found both annoying, and endearing.

"Okay, but you'll need to move away from the table so I can jump down," Arya replied.

Gendry watched as she nimbly maneuvered her tiny frame between the branches. Her long ponytail snagged amongst the twigs and leaves, and her descent was punctuated with the occasional swear word as strands of her hair snapped and pulled.

"Wait, wait," he said as she reached the lowest limb, "you can't make that jump. I'll catch you."

She snorted. "I got up on my own, I'll get down on my own."

It was at least eight feet from where she hovered on the branch and the ground, but she leapt without second thought, landing first onto the pressed metal table, then to the ground in front of him.

"Nice." He smiled at her, in relief mostly. "Very cat-like. How did you get up there, anyway?"

"Didn't you ever climb trees when you were a kid?"

"There were no trees to climb in Flea Bottom," he said, not thinking.

"Flea Bottom?"

Ah, shit.

"Nothing. I never climbed trees." He cleared his throat. "Come on, I haven't had lunch yet and I'm starved."

"Stupid," she muttered, "you could've eaten while you were looking for me."

"…Such a pain…" he muttered under his breath.
"What?"

"Nothing!" he repeated. "Why were you up in the tree?"

"I skipped last period, and I didn't know where else to go."

"And the obvious thing to do is climb a tree."

She punched him. He laughed. She poked her tongue out at him.

"There are no idiots up in that tree," she said eventually, "and, I wanted some place quiet."

Gendry joined the queue at the cafeteria and began loading his tray. "Have you eaten?"

She shook her head, and Gendry grabbed an extra sandwich and soda for her and paid for the food. It was a nice feeling, he thought, being able to do something as simple as shout someone else lunch. He led her to an empty table and placed the sandwich and soda in front of her, watching as she started eating without seeming to taste what she'd put in her mouth.

He didn't ask her why she'd wanted someplace quiet to think.

"I have band practice today, but I can take you home first if you want a ride," he offered instead.

"Can I come with you?" she asked. "I can wander around Trident's Bend and check out the shops if I get bored."

Gendry shrugged. "I guess it'll be okay."

"I just have to be home by seven. My mom likes us all to be home for dinner."

"Band practice finishes at six. I'll have you home before seven."

"What time do your folks like you to be home?"

"The Motts don't really keep tabs on me anymore. I'm seventeen." And I have a ludicrous amount of money.

In fact, the lawyer had told him he'd receive an allowance of some ridiculous amount every month until he turned twenty-one, upon which he'd receive the sum of his mysterious inheritance. In the meantime, the money was being invested for him, as per the instructions of his unknown benefactor, and his very own accountant would inform him every month of how his wealth was accumulating.

Fuuuuuuucckk! Had been his thought at the time. He had an accountant, now. He didn't have a bank account until a few months before.

"The Motts?"

"My foster parents."

"Oh." Arya looked at him quizzically. "Where are your real parents?"

"My mom died when I was six." Gendry kept his voice emotionless. "I don't know who my father was...or is, if he's still even alive."

"Oh."
"And before you ask, I'll tell you that I've been in foster care since I was six, but I've been with the Motts since I was eleven. They're good people."

"I have a foster brother," she said, "his name's Theon, and he's been with our family since I was five."

"Really?" Gendry wasn't expecting this.

"Yep. He lives with my brothers Robb and Jon up North. They go to the same college."

His curiosity about the Starks grew. All he knew about them was what the Motts had told him, and what he picked up in the news. He'd thought it unusual that Arya Stark had chosen to befriend him to begin with, but the more he learned about them, the less and less they fit the stereotype he'd slotted them into.

Arya was not what he'd expected at all. She wasn't the spoilt little princess he had assumed she would be. She didn't whine, or talk about girly things like make-up and shopping or *Twilight*. She preferred talking about sports, movies and music and unusually, current affairs as well. She was bossy, however, and he was quickly learning that she usually got her way.

Appearance wise, there was nothing princess-like about her. She usually wore denim jeans that looked a size too big, and the vintage tees that she layered over tank tops. Gendry had to admit that he found her pretty. Her face was long and her large, grey doe-like eyes were beautiful. Her slightly lopsided smile revealed perfect little white teeth, and it seemed she'd been blessed with a clear, creamy complexion. She didn't have a zit on her pretty little pixie-face.

Her long dark brown hair was glossy and thick, and he imagined that if she ever dragged a brush through it and let it down, it would fall in a straight, dark curtain down her back. Put her in a dress, slap some lipstick on her and he could see her giving Sansa a run for her money. The thought made him smile.

"What are you smiling at?"

"Nothing," he replied.

"You think about 'nothing' a lot then," she said, "that's stupid."

"Yeah, you said that already." He pretended to yawn. "You're a clever little girl, I'm sure you can come up with something else to call me."

"I'm not a little girl!" she hissed at him, violently.

He blinked, surprised at her reaction to those two words. "Uh…"

"I'll be fourteen in three weeks. I've hit puberty! I have…I have *[breasts]*…" Arya went bright red at the last word.

Gendry's eyes of course went straight to her chest, and in case he hadn't noticed them before, he certainly did now.

"Gendry!" she snapped at him.

*Fuck!* He raised his eyes to hers and noted she was even redder, having caught *him* looking!

"Sorry, Arya!" he laughed nervously, trying to make light of this very embarrassing situation that
was of her doing. "You don't bring attention to your breasts and not expect a guy to look."

"You're such a...such a boy!" she huffed, then she picked up her backpack and stood up, not bothering to wait for him. "I'll see you in the student lot after school."

He was laughing as he watched her walk away, and he was still chuckling when he bumped into Hot Pie later in class.

"Where were you?" Gendry asked him.

"Talking to Mrs. Gage, the Home Ec teacher," he replied, "she wanted to know what I put in my cherry pie filling."

Gendry rolled his eyes.

"What about you? Did you find Arya?"

"Yeah, I did...she was sitting in a tree..."

As Gendry told him about it, he couldn't help thinking about Arya's blushing face. He'd had every intention of trying to cheer her up when he'd first set out to find her, or at least try and get her mind off of Mycah, Joffrey and the Hound. He could confidently say he'd achieved his goal, though not quite the way he'd planned it.

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**Arya**

Arya was waiting for Gendry at the steps that led to the student car park after school, and when he turned up she made a point of pretending nothing weird had happened earlier, though it appeared he'd already forgotten about that embarrassing little incident.

"Ready to go?" he asked, expression completely normal.

"Yeah, let's go." She'd relaxed then.

She'd felt uncomfortably warm when she'd found Gendry staring at her chest. It was the first time she'd ever been aware of a guy checking her out.

*I wonder if he liked what he saw?* Arya gasped at her thought, and when Gendry shot her a look, she turned it to a cough.

"Tell me about your brothers, and your foster-brother," he said, turning his eyes to the road.

She was more than happy to talk about Robb, Jon and Theon. Robb was studying business in preparation to join their father at Stark Industries one day, Jon was studying to be an architect, and Theon was taking classes in political science.

"Jon's coming to visit me for my birthday. Maybe you could meet him," she told him, "you both play guitar, actually he was trying to teach me to play before we moved down here."

"For real? You play?"

"I said he was *trying to teach me.*" Arya gave him a look. "I know a few chords, and I can sort of read tablature, that's about it."

"That's great! Is it something you want to take up again?"
"Maybe, but I'd have to get a guitar first."

"Hey, there's a music store close to The Hollow. They sell guitars there. You could check it out if you want," he suggested.

"Maybe I will."

The Hollow was located in the waterfront district of Trident's Bend, so named for the Trident River, upon the shores of which the bustling esplanade lined with boutique shops and restaurants had been built. The area's most famous landmark was The Inn of the Kneeling Man, a grey stone, whitewashed wood and slate roofed establishment. It was a boutique hotel, but boasted a bistro during the day, as well as a popular bar and lounge at night. It was referred to simply as The Inn by the locals.

"Hey, we'll have to check that place out," Gendry said as they drove by it, "I heard the food was good."

"Sure…" Arya said absently, distracted instead by the shop next to The Inn.

*Forel's Music Store*, read the sign at the front. Arya figured this was the music store Gendry had mentioned.

Gendry parked his BMW in a secure garage near The Hollow, and took Hammer down from the backseat. Together they walked inside the burger-joint-musichall-gallery. Gendry was greeted by name, and he smiled back at everyone.

"Do you know all these people?" Arya asked him.

"Nope." He grinned, leading her into the second room, and down a hallway she hadn't seen the first time she'd been there. "I think my audition being broadcast on that Spyder's site has something to do with it."

"Where are you taking me?" Arya noted now the bare cement walls and fluorescent lighting as they descended a flight of stairs.

"The basement. That's where band practices."

"Really?"

"Yep. Beric's parents own this place, and they've let him use the basement as the band's headquarters. It's pretty cool actually, it's air-conditioned and the room is soundproofed so we can make as much noise as we want and the diners upstairs won't hear a thing."

They reached the bottom of the stairs, and Arya saw a sliding door to one side. Gendry slid the door open and stepped back to let Arya through.

"It's a man cave." Arya laughed when she saw the basement for the first time.

Beric's man cave was equipped with two black suede covered couches that lined one wall, a fridge, a 55" Plasma TV and sound system and an assortment of games consoles tucked into built-in recesses in the walls. There was an obligatory dart board in a far corner, while posters of the group's icons and heroes covered up most of the grey concrete walls.

In the centre of the room was a drum-kit, as well as keyboards, a collection of microphones on stands, amplifiers and a network of cables snaking around the floor.
To top it all off, Beric even had his own amateur recording studio in a walled-off section of the room. Through the glass partition, Arya could see his computer, two screens and a small control panel that she assumed was for the recording implements.

Beric was in there, and he came out and smiled at them when he saw them.

"Hey, guys. Arya Stark, right? We didn't really get a proper introduction last time."

"That's right." Arya smiled back. "This place is awesome!"

"Thanks. My parents were surprisingly happy to let me use it, probably because it means they won't be bothered at home. Besides, they weren't using the space."

"Beric, is it okay if Arya hangs around?" Gendry asked. "She promises me she won't be any trouble."

"I didn't promise you anything." Arya rolled her eyes.

"Sure, no problem." Beric gave her a funny smirk. "I wouldn't want to say no to a girl who could put me to sleep in a choke hold."

Arya narrowed her eyes at him, although she wasn't surprised he'd also seen the photo.

"I think I'll go up and get something to eat."

Without waiting for their response, she left and made her way back up to the restaurant. She had a feeling that no one was going to allow her to forget that incident in a hurry. Everyone thought it was funny, but everyone seemed to have forgotten that Mycah had gotten hurt because of it. It angered her to realize that outside of their little group, no one else at school cared about Mycah. He was just some unknown, unimportant freshman. *Fuck you, Joffrey. Fuck you, Hound.* She thought. Arya determined then, that no one else would get hurt because of her.

She ordered herself some fries and a soda, and she ate quietly while perusing through a magazine she found on a rack. By the time she'd finished, her temper had cooled and she found her way back down to the basement. The other band members, Thoros, Tom and Edric had turned up in her absence, and were already in possession of their instruments in the middle of the room.

"Arya, make yourself at home," Beric said, indicating the couches.

She sprawled herself out on one of the couches and watched them for a moment as they began running through a new number. Beric was meticulous, and he kept stopping to make changes to an arrangement or telling the guys exactly how he wanted them to sound.

She studied Gendry's band members to keep herself occupied during these breaks. Thoros Myr was a big guy with a shaved head, and had a tattoo of a flaming sword that ran all the way up his right forearm. Tom Sevenstreams was a small guy, with a pointy nose and thin brown hair, and a half-smile that seemed to be fixed on his big mouth. The drummer, Edric, looked about sixteen and had pale blond hair and dark blue eyes that appeared purple in a certain light.

Edric had smiled at her when he'd caught her looking. She'd looked away hurriedly.

Soon, Arya found herself getting restless when it became obvious that watching the band practice wasn't as fun as she'd imagined it would be, and restlessness was never a good sign. She caught Gendry's eye.
"I'll be back," she mouthed at him, and for the second time she left the basement.

Out on the street, she blinked a few times as her eyes adjusted to the light from the comparative dimness of the basement, before she started walking towards the music store she'd seen earlier. She meant to head there directly, but she kept stopping and looking into the windows of the funky boutiques she passed by.

She even went inside a cool little store that sold hand embellished denim and tooled leather cuffs. She wasn't a big shopper like Sansa, but she still appreciated good quality like any other girl. The young woman behind the counter looked to be in her late teens or early twenties, and pretty much epitomized Arya's idea of cool.

The woman wore tight denim jeans, with a studded leather belt, black ankle boots and a black batwing blouse that she knotted on her hip. One shoulder was bared, and underneath her blouse was a meant-to-be-seen bra, in leopard print fabric, though only the strap was actually showing. She wore a leather cuff on one wrist, and a man style watch on the other. Her dark hair was chopped short into a structured bob. She looked sexy and tough at the same time.

No one looking at her would ever call her little girl.

Impulsively, as was typical of her, Arya went up to the woman and gave her what she hoped looked like a confident smile.

"I have a credit card, and thirty minutes. I'm about to turn fourteen, and I want to look like it. Dress me."

The young woman gave her a quick once-over, then she grinned at Arya. "Thirty minutes, huh?"

In five minutes, the woman had worked out Arya's preferences and had thrown her into a dressing room with a selection of distressed and washed denims, embellished skirts, studded belts, fitted T's and layering pieces.

A little over thirty minutes later, Arya walked out of the store with two black glossy shopping bags, pleased with herself. She also managed to get the woman to give her the name of the stylist who cut her hair. Perhaps it was time she got rid of her childish ponytail as well.

It was five-thirty by the time she eventually made it to Forel's Music Store, her original destination. The store was quiet due to the lateness of the hour. It was almost closing time, and Arya was the only person there. With the limited time she had, she made directly for the guitars displayed towards the rear of the shop. The range was quite extensive, and she had no real idea what she was looking for. She probably should have asked Gendry to come with her, she thought.

She looked at the tags hanging from the necks and read the descriptions. Acoustic, classical, electric, steel string, acoustic/electric, cutaway, D series, G series, solid top…Arya frowned. Then she looked at the brands (Epiphone, Fender, Gibson, Yamaha), and then the woods and colors…she shook her head in puzzlement.

"A girl looks lost."

Arya spun around at the sound of the husky male voice and found a handsome youth with unusual red and platinum streaked hair gazing down at her, with an amused half-smile gracing his lips. Jaqen H'ghar, she recalled his name.

"Oh…hi," she said, surprised. She hadn't even heard him approach her.
"Do you remember me?" he asked.

How was it possible to forget him? She wondered. Not only did she remember him, she also remembered the feel of his large hands on her waist, the grip of his fingers when he'd refused to let her go, the heat of his lap against the back of her thighs, his spicy male scent…and also the weird reaction she'd had to him that time.

She was having that weird reaction again she realized, as he stood there looking at her, waiting for her answer.

"Yes, I remember you."

His half-smile became a full smile at her words. "Are you looking for something? Can I be of service to you?"

She'd noticed the first time they'd met that he had an accent, and she now wondered where he was from. European, perhaps? Wherever he was from, English was not his native tongue. He sounded freaking sexy.

"Do you work here?" Arya asked him.

"No." He shook his head. "But I know the owner very well, and I am here so often that I know where everything is."

"Right. Um…I was thinking of maybe getting a guitar."

"So, you wish to learn to play?"

"I guess so." She shrugged. "Do you play?"

"A little," he replied.

At that moment, a bald man with a slight build and a beaky nose emerged from a doorway behind the counter.

"Ah, Jaqen! You are here just in time…I have just finished with your guitar," said the man, his accent heavy and lilting. "Stay there, I will bring it for you."

The man disappeared behind the doorway again, and came back out carrying a slim black guitar case. Jaqen took it from him with a slight bow.

"Many thanks, Syrio," Jaqen said.

"You are most welcome." The bald man turned to Arya. "You will introduce me to your pretty friend, yes?"

"Of course." Jaqen introduced Arya to Syrio Forel, before telling the man that she was looking into learning to play the guitar.

"Then you have come to the best place!" Syrio said enthusiastically. "And, Jaqen is the best person to be telling you about guitars. You have heard him play? Not yet? Jaqen you must fix that, no delay!"

Jaqen laughed. "If a girl would like to hear me play, then I shall do so gladly. Now, weren't you about to close up the shop?"
Syrio snapped his finger. "Yes, I was! Okay, it was a pleasure meeting with you, Arya Stark. You come back to Syrio's when you are ready to choose your guitar, and if Jaqen will not give you lessons, then please keep Syrio in mind."

"Sure." Arya couldn't help but smile at him. "I will, thank you."

When Syrio had left them alone, Arya looked up at Jaqen with a raised brow. "You play a little, huh?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "I play a little of everything."

"Hmm." She frowned.

"What?"

"I can't decide whether you're being modest, or just a liar."

Jaqen narrowed his eyes at her. "Such a sweet looking girl, but one would never know that you had such sharp fangs."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I have seen your photo, sweet girl, on the Spyder's website." He grinned.

Appalled, Arya spun around to walk away. "I don't want to talk about that!"

He caught her arm as she made to pass him. "Wait," he said, "I apologize. I did not mean to cause offense."

"I've got to go," she said.

"Let me walk you."

They left Syrio's shop together, and Arya shifted her shopping bags to one arm so that they wouldn't knock Jaqen's guitar case.

"What did you have done to your guitar?"

"Syrio replaced the strings and tuned it for me. He has perfect pitch and has no need for a tuner," he replied, seemingly glad that she was still talking to him. "Where am I taking you to?"

"The Hollow."

"Arya, I am sorry if I have upset you," he said sincerely.

"It's fine, just drop it," she snapped.

He shrugged. "Your guitarist friend is rehearsing with the band tonight?"

"Yes, I'm supposed to meet him back at The Hollow in a few minutes."

"Is he your boyfriend?"

Arya snorted and shot him a glare. "No, and it's none of your business even if he was."

Jaqen smiled, and didn't say anything for some moments. They reached The Hollow, and he held the door open for her. He followed her to a vacant table. Arya wondered why everyone was staring at
"How old are you, Arya?" he asked suddenly.

"Almost fourteen, why?"

Jaqen's brows raised a bit at her response. "You are young. Still a little girl."

"I am not a little girl." Arya's fists had clenched. She didn't hiss at him like she had with Gendry, but her anger was difficult to miss in the tone of her voice.

That was twice now that she had been called little girl in the one day. What would she have to do to make people see that she wasn't a little girl anymore?

Jaqen seemed to sense the change in her mood.

"You mistake my meaning," he began, "if you would give me your phone –"

"Gendry!" Arya called out, drowning out the rest of Jaqen's words. "Over here!"

She'd just seen Gendry emerge from the other room carrying his guitar case, with Edric beside him.

Gendry spotted her, having heard her call out his name, and made his way over to the table she shared with Jaqen.

Gendry

Gendry had made a face as he and Beric had watched Arya leave the basement after Beric's poor joke about not wanting to say no to a girl who could choke him out. Arya had not been impressed.

"Too soon?" Beric had asked, looking sheepish.

"Way, too soon," Gendry had said, "she's pretty cut up about what happened to Mycah."

Beric sighed. "I'm hopeless at talking to girls."

"Aren't you dating Edric's cousin, or aunt or something?"

"Allyria, yeah. She's Edric's youngest aunt." It was Beric's turn to make a face. "I have a tendency to say the wrong thing around her, too. Allyria keeps promising to kill me each time I go and put my foot in it...If she actually followed through with her threats, I'd be dead seven times over!"

"And yet you're the guy that writes these brilliant lyrics," Gendry pointed out.

"Irony is a bitch," Beric stated.

The guys arrived soon after, and Beric was keen to get started.

"It's five weeks until the first heats...that's not a lot of time!" he kept saying.

Arya returned, but there was something in her expression that made him start to worry all over again. She kept fidgeting, and staring, then switching positions on the couch.

She looked restless, and he was almost glad when she indicated she was going for a walk. She distracted him, and not always in a good way.
"Why are you hanging around a freshman girl?" Edric had asked him during another break. Beric was re-arranging a bass sequence with Thoros.

"Arya's pretty cool…once you get past the bossiness."

After practice had ended, Gendry had taken his time packing up, seeing as Arya hadn't returned. The guys had wondered off to get food and drinks. He'd thought Edric had left, but he came back and stood in front of Gendry.

"So, you're not, you know…interested in her?"

"Who?"

"Arya."

"What? No," Gendry had denied automatically, though he frowned. He hadn't thought about her that way.

"Good thing, then." Edric shrugged.

"Why's that?"

"Because, I just saw Jaqen H'ghar chatting her up."

"Who's he?"

"Only the biggest threat we have in the competition," Edric replied, "he's the vocalist of the band The Faceless Men."

"And why should I be worried?" Gendry wasn't sure if he was referring to Arya or to the competition, but Edric answered both questions anyway.

"One, girls are constantly throwing themselves at him, and Arya won't be any different. Secondly, the guy is like…a musical genius! He can pick up any instrument and play it, plus he writes most of the songs for the band. He's a real threat."

He moved faster after that, almost slamming his guitar case lid down on his fingers. He walked upstairs with Edric and entered the restaurant just as he heard Arya's voice.

"Gendry! Over here!"

He spotted her quickly, and he and Edric walked over. He noted that Jaqen H'ghar looked to be the same age as him. His hair was trippy, but he could see how girls could like him.

Arya stood up, followed by Jaqen who held out his hand for him to shake. Gendry took it, returning the pressure equally.

"You are Gendry Waters."

"And you're Jaqen H'ghar."

"Does everyone around here know each other?" Arya asked, looking from one to the other.

"Seems so," Gendry replied, "Jaqen's the lead singer of the band The Faceless Men. He's in the competition, too."
"He is?" Arya's eyes grew wider, and prettier, with her surprise.

"It is true," Jaqen said with a shrug, and gave Arya a look. "I meant to tell you."

Edric had spotted Jaqen's guitar case, and he suddenly spoke up.

"Hey Arya, Jaqen's a pretty freakin' awesome guitarist...It looks like you've definitely got competition now, Gendry!"

Gendry had a strong suspicion that Edric had meant that on more than one level.

Chapter End Notes

A/N Please note that Syrio's appearance here is as he has been described in AGOT.
Hey peeps! Don't forget that the first official game is this Friday night – our White Knights vs Braavos Academy's Sealords. If the exhibition game last week is anything to go by, we know our varsity team is definitely in with a chance to win this year's championship! Braavos Academy *stole* that championship from us last season, so don't expect our guys to let that go unpunished!

*Go White Knights!*

It seems Arya Stark has been on your radars this week – she was spotted walking along the esplanade at Trident's Bend with a young man reported to be a senior from Braavos Academy… I'll update as soon as I know more, but it looks like the younger Stark sister is about to start playing the dating game!

Perhaps big sister Sansa can give you some pointers, hey Arya? Oh, wait… you girls aren't talking to each other right now… tsk tsk… so sad.

That's all for now!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

Sansa

It had been almost an entire week since the *incident*, and Joffrey's mood had lightened considerably since the Gossip Spyder had first posted the photo on Monday. In fact, his mood had shifted by the time the second post on Tuesday morning had gone up. She hadn't wanted to believe that it was anything to do with the injured freshman boy that the Spyder wrote of. After the disastrous way their date had ended, she had seriously thought he wouldn't want anything to do with her anymore, especially after he'd completely ignored her on Monday. But Joffrey had been waiting for her at the school gate on Tuesday morning, and he'd smiled and kissed her like nothing had happened.

She hadn't wanted to believe that Arya's ginger-haired friend had really been hurt. Neither Joffrey nor the Hound said anything to her about it, or even remotely alluded to it. If Joffrey and the Hound were in any way responsible for Mycah Butcher leaving King's Landing Prep, it was not discussed in front of her. Even though Sansa had no proof of their involvement, it did not stop her from looking at Joffrey in a different light, or developing a new wariness around Sandor Clegane.

After seeing Joffrey lose his temper, and watching him wrestling her younger and much smaller sister, she knew she couldn't look at him the same way. Boys were not meant to hurt girls, even if the girl had struck first… even if she'd been provoked by the boy. She hadn't exactly lied to her father when he'd questioned her about the incident. She'd just chosen to omit certain details. Was that the same as lying? The guilt ate at her all the same. She'd seen something in Joffrey that she didn't like, but she wasn't sure what she wanted to do about it. Everyone had their flaws, she knew that, but she'd also been taught that everyone should be given a second chance.

Did she still want to be with Joffrey? She'd asked herself. *I think so. Maybe. Yes, I guess.*

Was she willing to give him another chance? She hadn't been able to answer that, but the fact she
hadn't resisted him when he'd kissed her on Tuesday was answer enough.

*Or you were just avoiding a confrontation,* said a voice in her head. *You're a coward.*

The anticipation of the football game against Braavos Academy had seen Joffrey almost completely himself again, and Sansa found herself breathing easier. There had been tense moments however, when people hadn't quite managed to hide their sniggers behind their hands fast enough. At those times, Sansa did wonder if Joffrey would snap. However, Sandor Clegane's presence seemed to have a curbing influence on him, and one look from the scarred guy was all it took for Joff to ignore the giggles, and angrily walk away.

Anyhow, it had rapidly become old news and people were moving onto new gossip.

Apparently, Arya was seeing some senior from another school. She'd have paid money to see it with her own eyes.

"Sansa," a rasping voice said above her head, and she looked up from her locker to find Sandor behind her. "Joff's looking for you."

"Oh, okay. I won't be long. Where is he?"

"Waiting in the quad."

She expected him to leave then, but he didn't. Sandor waited for her to finish fumbling in her locker, and then proceeded to walk with her to the quad. He was a step behind her, walking on her left, but his strides were longer than hers and sometimes his arm brushed against her back. She tensed each time this happened, but the hallway was crowded, and it was difficult to widen the gap between them without seeming rude.

Sandor had also not made any reference to the odd conversation-slash-confession they'd had the night after the Prep versus College game. She still had no idea why he'd told her those things about his scars, and his childhood. She'd never asked him about himself, but he'd told her anyway…and then threatened to make her regret it if she ever told anyone.

His arm brushed her back again, and this time she shivered from the contact.

"Cold?" he asked her.

*No. It's because of you.*

"I'll be fine once we're out in the sun," she replied.

It was the *not knowing* part that really got to her, she realized. She wanted to know if Joffrey had told Sandor to hurt that boy. She wanted to know if Sandor had done it. And if he had, Sansa wanted to know *why*? Aware of his intimidating presence beside her, and knowing what little of him that she did, she couldn't and didn't want to believe that Sandor Clegane was not in control of his own actions. He was called the Hound because he trailed after Joffrey like a damned guard-dog. *Seriously,* she thought, *you don't bite on command too, do you?* He didn't strike her as the type to be pushed around. Which brought her to her next and more disturbing thought; *What if he'd done it because he'd wanted to?*

What would she do if she got her answers? What would she do if she didn't like what she heard?

Sandor reached around from behind her and pushed open the glass doors leading to the quad, and followed after her. Joffrey was at a table with Trant and Blount, as well as Randa, Mya and Ros.
Sansa saw Jeyne approaching from the cafeteria, and the sight of the unpretentious girl brought her an odd sort of comfort. Miss Mordane had taught her that it was important to be humble, and it was way too easy to get caught up in the things that came with wealth and popularity. Jeyne was her grounding influence. She'd never really had friends before, and now she was surrounded by people.

"There you are!" Joffrey called out across the quad when he saw her.

Sansa made to hasten her pace, but the unexpected touch of Sandor's fingertips at the small of her back made her slow down, although she didn't look up at him.

"Sansa," he growled quietly, "things…aren't always as they seem."

Before she could ask him what he meant, he'd sidestepped her and his long strides carried him towards Joffrey's table ahead of her.

Between Joffrey and the excitable group of cheerleaders around her, Sansa's attention was fully occupied, and though she tried to catch Sandor's eyes several times, he ignored her. Neither did he give her a chance to say anything when lunch was over, dashing off almost before the bell had rung.

One more question to join the others, she thought, what isn't as it seems?

Arya

Arya picked her hair up, caught it in a fist and raised it to her head, twirling it around to make some kind of bun. It didn't look right, making her face look tight and her forehead too big. She started again, this time just letting it hang down her back. She pushed a headband onto her head to keep her hair out of her face, and swore when the reflection in the mirror showed an even younger version of herself. Angrily, she snatched off the headband and ended up pulling the brown mop into her usual high ponytail.

Good thing I managed to get that booking with the stylist tomorrow. She hadn't wasted time in calling up the salon the girl at the boutique had told her about. She wasn't sure what she wanted done yet, but it would have to be something drastic. She glanced at the bags of new clothes that were sitting on her bedroom floor. She couldn't wear those clothes until her hair had been done.

She made a face.

Fuck, I've just committed myself to a makeover. Arya hated this kind of stuff, and yet she'd voluntarily sentenced herself to one, so people would stop calling her little girl.

She half expected to see pigs flying outside her window.

Her cell phone beeped. Gendry and Hot Pie were on their way to pick her up so they could watch the game that night. Arya hadn't been at KLP long enough to develop any kind of school spirit, so she wasn't going to cheer on her school team – especially when both Joffrey and the Hound were on it. She was going to watch in the hope that the Braavos Academy boys would do what she couldn't, and pummel Joffrey and the Hound to the ground. That and she just liked to watch football. Any pummeling was a bonus.

Gendry had been acting weird since the night he'd met Jaqen H'ghar. He'd even gone all protective when Hot Pie had shown them the post on Gossip Spyder's site about Arya being seen with a Braavos Academy senior.

"Jaqen's a senior?" Gendry had asked.
"If that's the guy Arya was walking with, then yes," Hot Pie replied, "he is the guy you were seen with, wasn't it?"

Arya had shrugged, unconcerned.

"You should be careful, Arya," Gendry had said.

"About Jaqen?" she'd sputtered, incredulous.

"You don't know the guy."

"I didn't know you two weeks ago either," she'd pointed out.

"He's too old for you."

"Excuse me? He can't be more than eighteen, and that's hardly ancient."

"So, you're going to date him?"

"That's none of your business." Arya had frowned. "You sounded just like him then, he asked me the same thing."

"About who?"

"You, stupid." She'd gone pink.

"Jaqen asked if you were dating me?" Gendry had looked at her funny. "What did you say?"

"I said no, of course!" She'd looked surprised. "We're friends."

Gendry's cheeks had taken a shade of red too, and Hot Pie had sat between them, amused.

Arya sighed and pushed away from her dresser, before making her way downstairs to wait for Gendry. She passed Sansa's bedroom on the way down and overheard her sister talking to someone on the phone through the partially open door. Probably to one of those dumb cheerleaders about her pathetic boyfriend, she thought. The Spyder had got it right about her and Sansa. They hadn't spoken since the night they had fought. Arya did not see or understand what in the world her stupid sister could possibly see in Joffrey, but Sansa was not known for ever seeing beyond the superficial.

Her sister only ever saw a handsome face and charming smile, while she was completely blind to the monster lurking beneath. Arya determined that there was no way in hell she would ever take dating or relationship advice from anyone that was dating Joffrey Baratheon. She had not made any attempts to hide her distaste for Joffrey or anyone in his crowd if she passed them in the halls at school. She reserved her dirtiest scowls for the Hound. The ugly brute always stared back, but she never flinched, regardless of how scary he looked.

She heard Gendry's car coming up the driveway, and she bolted out the door to meet them. Hot Pie was riding shot-gun, so she climbed into the back seat behind Hot Pie.

"Let's go." She tapped Gendry's seat. "I don't want to be here when Sansa's friends come to pick her up."

Gendry obeyed. "You guys want to grab dinner first?"

"Yeah, okay. Something greasy would be good."
"There's this place I know on the way," Hot Pie said, and gave Gendry directions to get there.

Hot Pie's directions led them to a small diner that served good, honest, unpretentious food and Arya found a little happiness in a chicken burger and bowl of wedges and sour cream.

"Who do you think will win tonight's game?" Hot Pie asked as they ate.

"I'd bet on the Braavos boys, if only it'll mean Joff or the Hound get their heads pounded in first," Arya replied.

Gendry and Hot Pie shared a look.

"You're just about the most violent girl we know," Gendry stated. "This week, we've heard you threaten to castrate the Hound, hang and quarter Joffrey, shove a hot poker up the Hound's you-know-what, and strangle Joffrey with his own innards."

"That's just to start with." Her smile was evil. "But you'd both lose your appetites if I were to tell you what I'd do after that."

"I'd like to keep my dinner down, thank you very much." Hot Pie cleared his throat, then changed the subject. "So, what's with this Braavosi senior, Arya?"

"Jaqen?" She blushed as she said his name, and didn't notice Gendry's lips form a thin line. "There's nothing to tell."

"You're really considering dating him," Gendry stated.

"Don't be stupid," she said, "I've only met him twice."

"Twice?" Gendry had stopped eating. "I thought you only met him yesterday."

"No, I met him the first time at your audition. He was there that afternoon, and I fell into his lap."

"You fell into his lap?"

It sounded like it was a bad thing, the way Gendry said it.

"Yeah. Uh…someone bumped me and I would have fallen but Jaqen caught me…it's nothing. Can we drop it, now?"

"Do you know if he'll be coming to the game tonight?" Hot Pie asked.

"I never asked him. I didn't know he went to Braavos Academy."

Hot Pie continued. "His band is in the comp too, right? It'd be interesting to meet Gendry's competition!"

"I really wish you'd be careful, Arya," Gendry repeated what he'd told her at school that day.

"You're starting to sound like my brother," Arya muttered, "Jon gave me all these warnings about boys too before we moved. It was actually really annoying."

"I'm not your brother." Gendry scowled. "I'm not trying to be annoying."

"Then stop acting like my brother," she snapped.
His blue eyes widened at her words, and he stared at her for several moments.

"Then I won't," he finally said.

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Sandor

Sandor glanced at the clock on the scoreboard and swore when he noticed that time seemed to be moving ridiculously slow. It was still only the second quarter of their first game against Braavos Academy, and he'd never felt less enthusiastic about football as he did at that moment.

There was too much noise, the floodlights seemed too bright, and there were too many eyes watching. Braavos Academy's Sealords had won the championship last season, and so many people had turned out to see if their first game against the White Knights could live up to the hype that had been created around it. He didn't give a shit about the game. This was unusual for him, as normally he couldn't wait to get out onto the field.

He hadn't been himself since the night he'd given Sansa Stark a ride home. Little bird, as he'd come to think of her. She had been on his mind since the party at Joffrey's place.

He never meant to snap at her. She hadn't done anything to deserve his ire, but he'd been so angry that night. Angry at his brother, annoyed at Joffrey and still pumped from a combination of too much testosterone and adrenaline from the fight. He'd found himself lashing out at her when all she'd done was pay him a compliment.

Then he found he couldn't stop talking, and before he'd known it, he'd gone and told her his darkest secret. The one frightening truth he'd never told anyone before. Not even Gregor had told anyone about it. Probably because it'll confirm what a psychopathic motherfucker he is, Sandor thought bitterly. He'd had Sansa on the brain as well when he'd decided he was going to stick his nose into the business between Joffrey and Arya Stark. Because the little bird touched your shoulder and said something to you out of kindness. What the hell is wrong with you, you sappy mutt?

"Clegane! Move it!" Coach Selmy barked at him when he took too long to spur into action after the snap.

He started running, spotting the Sealord's quarterback…but he didn't see the offensive lineman bearing down on him, and the next thing he knew he was face down on the ground with a two-hundred-pound lineman on his back. He heard the crowd occupying the visitor's bleachers roar in approval. It was rare for Sandor Clegane to be taken down. Sonofabitch, focus! He got back on his feet and got ready for the next down.

Things aren't always as they seem, he'd told Sansa earlier. The words had been said before he'd realized he'd spoken. Then he'd panicked and bolted before she had the chance to respond. There was no denying that he made her nervous, and it had gotten worse since Gossip Spyder's post on Tuesday morning. He hated that, but he had known it would happen. His stomach had been churning unpleasantly for a good part of the week. He'd woken up to an SMS alert from the Gossip Spyder on Monday, and the pains in his stomach had started at about the same time he'd stopped laughing at the photo of Joffrey getting choked out by the tiny Stark girl.

When he'd realised just how serious the situation was, he'd sworn so foully and loudly that his housekeeper, Mrs. Jimenez, had banged on his bedroom door to see if he was okay.

He'd gotten a message from Joffrey almost immediately.
"The bitch will pay," it had read.

When Sandor had arrived at school, all he'd had to do was stand at his locker long enough and listen to people talk around him to get the story behind the photo on the Spyder's site. From what he'd heard, it seemed Joff had been asking for it, but had never expected the younger Stark sister to get the better of him.

"Someone has to bleed for this," were Joff's first words to him.

Sandor's immediate thought was of diminutive Arya with a busted lip and a black eye. She'd been extremely lucky to have caught Joffrey by surprise that time, but he knew that if Joffrey really wanted to hurt her, then he would.

"You can't touch Arya," he'd surprised himself by saying.

Joff had snorted angrily. "Why not? The little bitch has to learn not to mess with me."

Sandor had made sure to keep his voice level when he answered. He had to be smart about how he worded things with Joffrey.

"Think about what you're saying, Joff," he'd rasped, "you're talking about beating up a girl."

"She hit me first!" You petulant prick! Sandor had thought, though his expression hadn't changed.

"Whatever. It doesn't..."

"She made a fool out of me!" Joff seethed, his voice had risen and had started to attract the attention of other students. "She can't get away with this!"

And Sandor had realized that there would be no talking Joff out of getting his revenge.

"Someone will bleed," Joff had said again.

Who? Sandor had wondered...before a horrible possibility had come to him.

Sansa.

It would be all too easy for Joffrey to punish Sansa for whatever wrong he believed Arya had done to him. He knew Joff well enough to know that all that the jerk wanted from Sansa was sex. She meant nothing to Joffrey. The guy was incapable of affection for anyone other than himself. Sansa was a pretty toy to play with, but Joff was known for breaking his toys. Joffrey had a cruel streak, and he could make Sansa suffer.

Sandor had not wanted Joffrey to chance upon the same thought, and he'd changed tactics.

"If you really want revenge, you'll have to get it some other way. You can't have Stark blood."

Not Arya's...and definitely not Sansa's.

"It's Arya I want to bleed."

"I told you already," Sandor had repeated, "it can't happen."

"You're telling me?"
Sandor had shrugged. "It's not just about you, Joff. Think about it. Stark Industries and Baratheon Corp have just formed a partnership, and from what I hear your father needs Ned Stark. What do you think would happen if one of Ned's daughters turned up bleeding and word got around that you were somehow involved?"

He'd been thinking on his feet, without knowing if it would work, but he had to try. Joffrey appeared to think about it, before he'd finally let out a frustrated grunt.

"Fuck!" Joffrey had seen his point. "Then, who?"

"I don't know." Sandor had shrugged again. "Think about it a bit."

"I know who!" Joff had smiled and laughed cruelly. "The little bitch's ginger friend. He'll be my new punching bag…"

Sandor had remembered the last kid Joff had used as a punching bag. Joff had made that kid's life a living hell for close to a year. From memory, the kid had insulted Joffrey by calling him an inbred bastard. Whether he was inbred, Sandor couldn't say, but he'd bet money that the blond jerk was a bastard. Joffrey looked nothing like Robert Baratheon.

Sandor had had little to do with that kid's misery. Between Joffrey, Trant and Blount, the kid not only lost lunch money, he'd also been beaten up, locked in the janitor's closet, stuffed into a dumpster, humiliated in front of the class, and beaten up some more until finally the kid was nothing but a scared, sniveling mess that jumped at the sound of someone sneezing.

The kid should have known better than to insult Joffrey, so Sandor had ignored the initial bullying. But Joffrey always broke his toys, and Sandor had never liked seeing an already beaten dog get kicked and kicked again. He'd also known that there would be no respite for the kid, so long as Joffrey still found it amusing to torment him.

Sandor had put him out of his misery one afternoon when he found he couldn't just stand to watch any longer. Joffrey had dragged the kid behind a dumpster for yet another round of torture, but Sandor had found himself stepping in and telling Joff to move aside. As Joffrey watched, he'd put up a good show of beating the kid up. He made sure the kid yelled and pleaded, nothing else would have convinced Joffrey, but he broke no bones and made sure the kid would be able to walk away. When the kid appeared to have had enough, he'd pulled the boy up and slammed him against a wall, before he'd hissed a low warning at him so that Joff wouldn't hear.

"I don't want to see you back at this school again, do you understand?"

It seemed the kid had. He never came back.

Sandor's reputation had taken a beating, however. No one seemed to remember that Joffrey and the others had picked on this kid mercilessly for months before. Everyone only remembered that it was the Hound who'd cornered the kid and beat him up so bad he was too scared to come back to school.

"Yeah, I'll make the ginger-kid my new punching bag," Joffrey had said again.

Sandor's lip had curled in distaste. This hadn't been what he'd mind, but at least Joffrey wasn't insisting on going after the Stark sisters anymore. The ginger-kid had done nothing to Joffrey, and didn't deserve whatever torment Joffrey had in mind for him. He hadn't meant for anyone else to get hurt, but at least he could make sure the kid's suffering wasn't prolonged.

Sandor had decided that his reputation could take another beating.
"Let me break him in for you," he'd made himself snarl.

Joffrey's eyes had gleamed cruelly as he'd agreed. "When?"

"This afternoon." Better to get this done quickly, Sandor had thought.

It hadn't been difficult to get the ginger-haired freshman alone.

The backdrop was different; boy's locker room instead of behind a dumpster. Different kid and different circumstances, but still a familiar scene. The ginger kid had looked at him in fright, then at Joffrey, and had lost all color when he'd put two and two together.

"Please! Don't do this!"

"Shut the fuck up, kid." That was all the warning Sandor had given him before he'd grabbed the kid and pushed him against a bank of lockers.

He slammed hard against it, making Sandor wince. Too hard. Hold back.

Joffrey had laughed. "That's what you get for thinking you and that Stark bitch could make a fool out of me!"

The kid tried to make a run for it, but Sandor yanked him back and drove a fist into his stomach, just hard enough to wind him. It took every ounce of control he had to keep his strength in check. If he didn't watch himself, the kid could wind up seriously damaged. The kid had fallen to the ground, and Sandor landed a kick to his thigh, flooring him completely. The kid howled in pain. Sandor closed himself to it, instead listening to Joffrey's reactions. That's it, laugh you demented fuck!

He'd put a huge hand to the kids head and pressed him into the floor, hard enough to mark his freckled cheek.

"Bet you're sorry now, huh?" Sandor had rasped. Say you're sorry, you stupid kid!

"I'm sorry!" the kid yelped.

Sandor lifted him up, then backhanded him across the face. The kid's lip split.

There you go, Joff. Blood.

He had exaggerated his movements as he made a show of kicking and kneeing the kid, and it soon became apparent that the kid had clearly been expecting the blows to land harder. He'd eyed Sandor strangely, even through the obvious pain on his face.

Think, kid! Sandor had willed, driving the kid against the locker again. He tripped him to the floor, and held him down. The kid had had enough.

Sandor had leaned over, and made sure Joffrey wouldn't hear him.

"Make sure I never see you at this school again," Sandor said in a menacingly low growl, forcing the kid to meet his eyes. "If you come back here, you and that Stark bitch will both get it. Do you understand?"

The ginger-kid's watery eyes had widened, and Sandor hoped it was because he truly understood what he meant, and he nodded once.

"It's better this way," Sandor had grumbled, then he'd stood up and gave the kid one final kick in the
"Good work, dog!" Joffrey had smiled an awful smile as he'd looked at the bleeding boy on the floor.

"Let's get the fuck out of here." Sandor had fled the boy's locker room, eager to distance himself from what he'd just done.

The very next day, Tuesday, the Hound had been linked to the bleeding freshman on the Gossip Spyder's site. The ginger-kid hadn't been seen at school since. Joffrey had not seemed to notice, however, his taste for blood apparently appeased. Arya Stark had stared daggers at him each time they crossed paths the entire week, and he'd glared right back. He wondered what she would do if she ever learned the truth.

Sansa was another matter. She looked at him with fright in her eyes again, and that caused him anger and an inexplicable ache in his chest. Maybe that was why he'd felt compelled to tell her that things aren't always as they seem. He gave an uncharacteristic sigh. It was best that she didn't know the truth about what he'd done. She already knew one too many of his secrets.

"Clegane!"

There was a rap on his helmet as Coach Selmy slapped him around the head. He looked up at his stern faced coach.

"Coach?"

"Half-time's over...get back out there." Coach Selmy gave him a funny look.

It was the third quarter already, and he hadn't even noticed. He really was off his game. He got taken down a second time. The last quarter saw him go down for the third time that night, pinned down by the same offensive lineman who'd taken him down that first time. There were shouts of disbelief all around him. For the Hound to be taken down once was lucky, twice was by divine intervention, but three times was unheard of.

From the sideline, he heard a feminine howling.

"Yeah, serves you right! Get him!" It was coming from the home bleachers, and he recognized the voice as belonging to Arya Stark.

"Someone shut that bitch up!" he growled when he was back on his feet.

No one did, or if they tried they weren't successful as Arya continued to heckle not only him, but Joffrey as well. The Braavos boys were brutal, and had clearly upped their game in preparation for the season. It was lucky then that the rest of Sandor's teammates were on top of their game.

By some miracle, they won by two points.

"What the fuck's the matter with you tonight?" Joffrey demanded as they made their way to the change rooms after the game.

He shrugged. "Might be coming down with something."

Joff sniffed at that, the Hound never got sick. "Might be you just need to get laid!"

"Might be," he agreed.
In the locker room Coach Selmy had given him a talking to, concerned about his mental game, not his physical.

"Something on your mind, boy?"

"Nothing that won't be dealt with by the next game, Coach," he replied honestly.

The Hound never lied. If he had one redeeming quality, that was it.

Coach Selmy had given him one of his steely, see-right-into-your-soul kind of stares, before he merely nodded. "See that you do, Clegane."

There was a party at Trant's place that night, but he didn't feel like going. He just wanted to go home and get drunk where no one could see him wallow in whatever shit he seemed to be in.

He walked outside, intending to make a quiet getaway, and he thought he'd managed it as he traversed the dark hedge lined pathway down to the lot...when something small smacked right into his chest.

"Ow!" a girl yelped.

"Watchit!" he rasped, reaching out and finding slim shoulders under his fingers.

"You!"

"Fuck. It's the little sister," he growled, displeased.

Arya Stark stood there, glaring at him furiously.

Arya pulled away from the Hound's grasp and took a couple of steps back.

"Get the fuck away from me, asshole!" she hissed.

"In case you forgot, you ran into me." He leaned over her menacingly.

"I'm not afraid of you!" She glared up at him defiantly.

"Maybe you should be," he snarled, "don't you know? You shouldn't get in my way."

"Or else what?" she demanded. "You'll beat me up like you did Mycah?"

"Who?"

"My friend!" she yelled up at him, "the one you beat up in the boy's locker room!"

"I don't remember beating up anyone called Mycah," Sandor sneered.

"You piece of shit!" Arya's voice rose a notch. "You can't even admit to it!"

"What exactly are you accusing me of, bitch?" he demanded gruffly, "and, be careful what you say next."

His eyes narrowed, and his burned lip twitched. Arya could see his temper rising.
"Oh, you know exactly what I'm talking about," she began, "I'm talking about you beating up a freshman half your size, for something that had nothing to do with him, just because that prick Joffrey ordered you to do it!"

The Hound laughed, the sound of it harsh and grating to her ears, then he grabbed her by her arm and pulled her close, lowering his face down so that his eyes were level with hers. She was startled to find that his eyes were almost the same grey as her own.

Except his eyes were full of an anger she hadn't been prepared for.

"You have no idea what you're talking about, little bitch!" he snarled in that raspy voice of his. "And, be careful of who might be listening before you go accusing Joffrey."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Oh, no," he laughed, "If I were threatening you, you'd know it."

"Really? Sounded like a threat to me."

He grasped both of her shoulders and shook her just hard enough to make her eyes go wide and round in her head.

"Go on. Keep pushing me, little bitch! I dare you."

Arya felt the strength in his fingers, and her heart beat faster.

"Let me go!" she hissed.

He let her go immediately, and Arya took another two steps further from him.

"You're a thug and I hate you! I wish you'd die and go to hell! I want to see you dead!"

He scowled, unimpressed. "Join the queue."

"...I'd like nothing better than to slit your throat!" He raised his remaining brow at that. "Then bash your ugly face to a pulp!"

"Stop trying to come up with ways to kill me. It won't do you any good."

Arya made to launch herself at him, but at that moment another pair of hands grasped her shoulders from behind her, preventing her from moving.

"You have more courage than sense, lovely girl."

She recognized the voice immediately, but there was something hard in the husky tones she'd never heard before. Surprised, she whipped her head around and found Jaqen H'ghar at her back. He was glaring at the Hound.

"Who the hell are you?" the Hound demanded.

"I am a friend of hers, and my name is not your concern," Jaqen replied, his voice low and laced with something dangerous. "I think that you should leave now."

The Hound's eyes had narrowed further still.

"You know him?" he asked Arya.
"Why the hell would he care about that?" Sandor Clegane looked unwilling to leave her alone with a strange boy. Surely, she was imagining it?

"He's a friend," she confirmed.

"Then the bitch is all yours," he said to Jaqen, before he turned back to Arya. "I'd stop asking questions now, if I were you. It's better this way." And without another word, Sandor Clegane turned on his heel and walked away.

*It's better this way.*

The words jarred in Arya's mind.

"Hey, come back here!" She strained against Jaqen's grip. "I'm not done talking to you!"

"Let him go, Arya," Jaqen said.

"But…!"

"Your fight with him is over for today. Let it go."

Arya let out a shaky breath, reigning in her temper.

*It's better this way.* That was the last text message she received from Mycah, and now the Hound had repeated the same words to her. Clearly, obviously, he was hiding something and warning her not to go digging for answers.

After a moment, Arya turned questioning eyes to Jaqen. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to watch the game. My friends and I decided we would come at the last minute," he replied, "they are waiting for me at the car park."

She glanced at the darkened pathway behind him and figured he'd come from the bathrooms too. That's where she had been moments before she'd collided with the Hound.

"So, you really are a senior from Braavos Academy?" She forced her mind to focus on something other than Sandor Clegane.

Jaqen's presence was disorienting. He was wearing jeans and a blue t-shirt that pulled tight across his chest and shoulders, accentuating their breadth. She could smell him as well. She was coming to associate the smell of spices with Jaqen.

"That is correct." His hands had dropped to his sides the moment he felt her relax. "I had hoped to meet you earlier, but I did not have your number and I was not certain that you would be here tonight. It seems that Fate has decided I would come to find you when you needed me." He tilted his head and studied her face. "You are okay now, after that?"

Arya nodded. Her arms were a little sore from where the Hound's fingers had gripped her, but she was otherwise unharmed.

"I guess you've heard the story going around…about that photo of me and Joffrey."

"I have heard a few versions, yes," he agreed, "what I haven't heard is the truth."

"How much did you see?" she asked, "of what happened, just before?"
Jaqen shrugged, but it was clear that he was concerned. "Enough to know that you were about to do something you might come to regret. As I said before, you have more courage than sense."

"You don't know what I'm capable of. You don't know me, Jaqen." Arya suddenly remembered what Gendry had said.

"I know enough to make me want to find out more, lovely girl," he replied, and he smiled at her gently.

"Oh," she said. She was beginning to understand.

She panicked. Her eyes must have spoken her uncertainty, because Jaqen was suddenly reaching out for her. Arya moved out of his reach.

"Arya..." he began softly, "please, stay a moment longer."

"I have to go...my friends...Gendry's waiting for me."

He backed off. "Then I will say goodnight, Arya."

"Goodnight, Jaqen," she returned awkwardly, "thanks for your help...with the Hound."

"I'm glad to help." He inclined his head. "I shall see you again, sweet girl, if Fate is kind."

She turned and fled, and by the time she reached Gendry and Hot Pie, she was flushed and breathing heavily.

"What's the matter with you?" Gendry asked, noting her pink cheeks.

"Nothing. I was just running."

There was no way she was going to tell them about the strange encounters she'd had that night. She was all mixed up inside, and her brain didn't know what emotion to feel. Her encounter with the Hound had left her feeling angry and anxious about his parting comment, while the brief and unexpected run-in with Jaqen had her feeling embarrassed and tingly.

Then there was Gendry who kept watching her in concern as he stood there looking very cute with his dark brows furrowed, and his arms folded across his chest. It made her tummy feel funny.

At that moment, she understood exactly what it meant to be overwhelmed.
Hello again, my faithful followers!

I hear there's going to be a double celebration shortly, with both Sansa and Arya having their birthdays within days of each other. Just don't go expecting a party now, word on the grapevine is the sisters still aren't talking to each other…

Still on the Stark girls, has anyone noticed a difference with Arya Stark's appearance? In case the number of question marks I just used hasn't given you a clue, I'll spell it out and just say W.O.W… Arya Stark has definitely made it clear that she's all grown up!

In some school news, the auditions for our award winning school choir are being held this week, and I happened to take a look at the sign-up sheet and found Sansa Stark's name on the list. Good luck Sansa! Will Joffrey be coming to cheer you on? Auditions are being held in the auditorium later this week, for those of you who are as curious as I am…not that you'll see me, of course!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

Gendry

Gendry glanced at his watch and noted that Arya should have already arrived at school. She'd told him that her mother was taking her to the doctor for a check-up in the morning and that she wouldn't get to school until lunch.

She'd also told him and Hot Pie not to buy any food from the cafeteria as she'd be picking something up from outside on her way to school. He wished she would hurry up because he was starving, and Hot Pie would almost be ready to start gnawing the table he'd told him to reserve in the quad.

"Let me know when you get here." He sent her a text message.

"Just got here. At locker." Came her response a few moments later.

Gendry pivoted on his heel and headed back the way he'd come so that he could go and meet her, and also to see what she'd brought for lunch.

He turned the corner into the corridor where her locker was located and searched over the tops of peoples' heads to see if he could spot her familiar shape. He didn't see her, but there was a girl there standing at what looked to be the locker next to Arya's. She was just the right height and shape to catch his attention. Gendry had a type. He liked petite, dark-haired girls.

All he could see was the back of this girl, and he appreciated her delicate frame and the gentle curves in the right places. She was wearing skintight jeans, flat biker boots, and a slim white tee under which he could see the outline of a blue tank. She had a leather cuff on one wrist, and the other hand clutched a Burger King bag. His eyes travelled further up, and noted that the girl had dark brown hair that reached just past her shoulders, the ends of which had been dip-dyed a shade of electric purple. *Turn around*, he thought, *I have to see your face.*
He glanced at the number stenciled at the top of the locker, and it took him a moment to realize that the unknown girl was standing at Arya's locker. The girl turned around, and Gendry's gasp was so sharp that he ended up coughing.

"Arya?" he managed to say.

Gendry couldn't believe what he was seeing. Arya looked amazing. Like a little punk-rock pixie.

"Oh, get over it, Gendry." She rolled her eyes and slammed her locker shut. "So, I got some new clothes and a haircut. What's the big deal?"

*You look hot!*

"Sorry, you just surprised me," he said, "you look different."

She scowled at him.

"You look good!" he rushed to say, "I wasn't expecting that."

"You didn't expect that I'd clean up this well?"

"No...! I mean, yes!" he swore, aghast that she would think that. "I mean, you were always pretty!"

*Fuck! Why did I say that?*

Arya's face split into a wide grin. "I'm just messin' with ya!"

"Wha-!"

"You should see your face!" she laughed, then shoved the Burger King bag into his hands while she balanced a cardboard tray laden with drinks in her own. "Make yourself useful and hold that."

"You're so cruel, Arya..."

"And you're stupid." She looked up at him and he noticed that her smile had softened, and she wasn't quite meeting his eyes. "Stupid, but sweet... thanks for saying that I was always pretty."

She bounded ahead of him and shooed him out of the double doors given that his hands were now full. Gendry didn't reply. He didn't trust himself to say anything that wouldn't make things more awkward. He'd meant what he'd said, he reasoned. Just a few days previously she'd told him to stop acting like an annoying, overprotective brother, and he had realized, to his own surprise, that he did not want her to see him like a brother, just as he didn't see her as a sister.

He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do now that he'd admitted he liked her. His experience with girls was limited to a few rather awkward dates that ended in more awkward and embarrassing fumbling when he'd attempted to kiss them. Arya was nothing like the girls he'd dated before, and that only added to his current bewilderment. He'd never met anyone like her, and he found himself wondering what twists and quirks of fate must have occurred for him to have been given the chance to meet this most unusual girl.

He'd told her before that he had no idea who his father was, but he was smart enough to figure out that whoever his mother had slept with to conceive him was connected to a whole lot of money. He was also smart enough to understand that without his own connection to this money, he would never have set foot in King's Landing Prep, and he never would have met Arya Stark.
He observed as everyone turned to gape at the new-look Arya. Girl's gasped and whispered behind their hands, while guys nudged each other and made faces Gendry knew meant they liked what they saw. He was probably wearing the same expression himself, he figured. He even saw Sansa and her friends staring. Sansa's expression was hard to figure out, but he would bet that she was surprised at the reaction her little sister was getting. Hot Pie looked to be one of the few guys in the place that was more impressed with the contents of the Burger King bag than by Arya's new look. Gendry liked the guy more for that.

Arya divvied out the burgers and fries, and Gendry found that he was unable to stop looking at her. He wondered what had prompted her to suddenly change her look. There was something different about her face as well, but he couldn't pin-point what it was, and he didn't think it was polite to ask her. His foster-mom had once said something about women and their beauty secrets, and that men should never ask.

"So, how did it go this morning with your doctor?" he asked instead.

"What?" Arya looked startled, then she looked away and shrugged. "Fine, just fine."

"Well, that's good." Gendry noticed she had a nice blush to her. "You look healthy."

She rolled her eyes.

"Arya, the Spyder says your birthday is coming up." Hot Pie changed the subject. "How are we celebrating?"

"Well, my birthday is on a Friday, so we can start by you bringing me a pie for lunch that day." She grinned. "Then we'll probably watch the football game that night, and if I get my way the White Knights will get the shit kicked out of them again, and maybe we'll finish off by grabbing burgers and thick shakes from that diner we went to the other day."

"I can do that." Hot Pie laughed. "What's your favorite kind?"

"Anything with berries in it." She grinned.

Hot Pie's family owned a successful franchise of specialty bakeries. He'd told them that his mom and grandmother had started off with one small bakery before he was born, but his mom had decided she would turn the business into a franchise when he was about six years old, and within a decade, Mrs. Hot Pie had become a recognized brand, due in part to some clever tongue-in-cheek advertising, and a solid business plan, while Hot Pie's mother had become a self-made multi-millionaireess.

Gendry laughed and shook his head. "Is that all? That sounds too simple."

"Well, it's true. I'm about as low maintenance as you can get, or so my brother Jon says." Arya sighed. "It would be perfect if Jon could be with us, but he said he wouldn't be able to come down until Saturday evening."

"So, your family has planned something to celebrate your birthday as well?"

"It's probably going to be some boring dinner again at some restaurant, and both Sansa and I will probably get similar presents like we do every year."

"When's Sansa's birthday?"

"The Sunday following my birthday," she said unhappily.
"Your birthdays are just a day apart?" Hot Pie exclaimed. "That sucks."

"Don't get me started."

"Well, how about we do something to celebrate your birthday, so it's just about you?" Gendry heard himself say. "I mean, really celebrate, not just watching a high-school football game and eating at a diner afterwards."

She looked thoughtfully at him. "How do you celebrate your birthday?"

"Me?" He hadn't been expecting that, and he didn't know how to tell her that he'd never had any money before to properly celebrate anything. In the end, he went and told her the honest answer. "Well, for the past six years since I've been living with the Motts, every year Mrs. Mott would cook a home-cooked meal, and bake a cake for me, or Mr. Mott would bring out the barbecue and I would have a few friends over and we'd eat ourselves stupid and drink too much fizzy drinks."

She was wearing a funny expression now, and he couldn't work it out. "What's a home-cooked meal taste like?"

"Huh?"

"My mother doesn't cook," she said dismissively. "My parents hire a chef. I guess I've never had a proper home-cooked meal in my entire life."

_How the other half live_, Gendry mused.

"Is that what you want?" He suddenly had an idea. He'd need to speak with Mr. and Mrs. Mott first, but he couldn't see why it would be a problem. "If you would like a home-cooked meal for your birthday, Arya Stark, I can make that happen."

"Really? You'd do that for me?" Her expression showed a kind of stunned, disbelief.

"Of course."

"Thanks, Gendry. That sounds perfect!"

The smile that Arya gave him was so bright and dazzling that Gendry felt the force of it hit him square in the chest, right where his heart was.

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_Sansa_

Sansa was blushing to the roots of her hair as she stared at the nameplate on the doorway of the discreet looking clinic.

"Mother?" She turned towards Catelyn. "Why have you brought me here?"

Catelyn pursed her lips. "Because it's time for you to learn about how to protect yourself."

"But, I'm not…I'm still…" Sansa couldn't even bring herself to say it.

She wasn't sleeping with Joffrey. She wasn't anywhere near close to going there…but her boyfriend had hinted at it.

"That's good, and I should hope you stay that way until you're well and truly ready."
"Then why are we here?"

"Just in case your definition of well and truly ready is different to mine," Catelyn replied. "Really Sansa, don't make this difficult."

In the end, Sansa had met with the efficient female doctor and listened as the doctor told her of various birth control options. She had then asked Sansa a number of incredibly personal questions and she had gone bright red upon hearing them. It was a good thing the doctor had asked her mother to step outside of the room during the visit, otherwise she would never have been able to answer her.

"Honestly, I'd expected Arya to give me more trouble. Not you," Catelyn muttered to herself as they filled her prescription at the drugstore after the appointment at the clinic.

"You've taken Arya to the clinic, too?" Sansa was shocked.

"Yes, earlier in the week. Didn't she tell you?"

"No, she didn't." Sansa didn't elaborate that she and Arya hadn't spoken in over a week.

She had been learning all sorts of things about Arya recently, and all of it had come as second-hand knowledge. For instance, she'd had no idea that Arya was planning on going and changing her entire look. Or that she might be seeing a senior from another school, or that Arya now more than likely had the same prescription for oral contraceptive pills. Her mind reeled at the thought of Arya dating, being on the pill and possibly losing her virginity before she did. Never mind the senior from Braavos Academy, Sansa had noticed the way Gendry Waters had been looking at Arya lately.

Her sister had gone from annoying little girl to tough, punk-rock princess in the blink of an eye and she'd missed it. That made her kind of sad, she realized. She knew of other girls who were best friends with their sisters, and she'd always wondered what it would be like to have that kind of relationship with Arya. They'd never really had anything in common. They had different styles, and because Sansa was taller and bustier, they didn't share clothes or shoes. They didn't like the same music, or watch the same shows, and meal times at home had always been a problem for their chef as they didn't even like the same kinds of food. They shared parents and siblings and DNA, and not much else. You can't choose your family, she thought, fate does that for you.

Yet there had been times in their childhood, times when they weren't arguing with each other and they got along for long enough moments to talk about the things that mattered. There had been times when they had sought comfort from each other, like when their parents had arguments about Jon and the woman who had been Jon's mother and they had been too young to understand what it meant. On occasion, Sansa had even been the big sister she was supposed to be. Like the day Arya had got her first period, and their mother had not been at home to help her deal with it. Sansa remembered that day, almost two years previously, when Arya had let out an uncharacteristic scream from her bedroom in Winterfell Manor one Saturday morning. Jon and Robb had come running almost immediately, but Arya had yelled at them to go away.

"Let me in, Arya." Jon had rapped on her bedroom door. "What's wrong? Why did you scream?"

"Go away, Jon!" had been her muffled response. "I want Mom. Where's Mom?"

"She and father are attending some breakfast conference and left earlier," Robb had replied, "open the door so we can help you."

There'd been a pause, and then Arya had called out in a shaky voice. "You can't help me."

That was when Sansa had realized what the problem was, and she'd calmly pushed her brothers
aside and spoke softly as she knew that her sister was probably right up against her door on the other side.

"I get it, Arya," she'd said, "let me in."

"Sansa!" Arya's voice had been full of relief, and the door had opened just wide enough to drag her inside.

Patiently and without any teasing, Sansa talked Arya through the things Arya should have known about periods but had forgotten in her panic, and answered her questions, before helping her deal with her bloodied sheets. Sansa had even dealt with their curious brothers who still hadn't caught on to what was happening, and later in the day when Theon, Bran and Rickon had asked about Arya's screaming, she'd been tactful and mindful of her sister's embarrassment and had merely said; "She's a lady now, that's all you need to know."

A then five-year-old Rickon had thought this was some kind of achievement that deserved a hug, and he'd gone and given Arya a cuddle.

Arya had also never had any female friends, so Sansa assumed she would be the one person Arya would speak to about boys. Not that she would have been much help, she was only a year older, and only slightly more experienced, but at least they might have shared confidences and sought each other's advice the way other sisters did. But Sansa was dating Joffrey Baratheon, and Arya hated her boyfriend. They would never see eye-to-eye as long as she was with Joffrey.

Sansa thought of the box of pills that was now buried deep in the tote bag she used for school, and thought of Joffrey. She'd been very upfront with him about being a virgin, particularly after that first time they'd made out in the back of his car and he'd gotten way too carried away and she'd had to pull away from him in panic. He'd been trying to get his hand down her underpants, and she just wasn't ready for him to do that. He'd seemed a little put off, just for a split second, then he'd turned charming again the next second.

"Of course I can be patient," he'd said and smiled at her. "The wait will be worth it."

She'd smiled at him, relieved that he wasn't mad or too disappointed, and let him keep kissing her. She wondered how he would react if he knew she now had a script for the pill. Nope, not yet. She decided, she wasn't ready even to consider where that conversation with Joffrey would go. She needed to speak to another girl about this, and the most likely girl in her new group of friends who would have the answers seemed to be Randa.

Randa was a senior and had been dating a college guy on and off for some months. She'd also made no secret that the reason she kept taking him back was because the guy was awesome in the bedroom. Mya, also a senior, was currently dating another senior on the varsity team called Lothor Brune. She and Randa often swapped stories between themselves in hushed tones punctuated with lots of giggling. By far however, Randa was the most sexually educated of the two. If anyone could answer Sansa's questions about sex without getting all textbook or clinical on her, then it would be Myranda Royce. She now just had to figure out how to broach the subject with the older girl, without going bright red in the face.

The car ride back to school allowed her to regain her composure, and Sansa pushed all thought of the little box of pills from her mind to concentrate on the choir audition she had that afternoon. She'd been practicing the song she had chosen every day for the past fortnight in preparation. She'd even gone to the extreme of recording her own voice using a basic recording program on her computer that Jeyne had told her about and playing it back so that she could listen and work on the parts she found weak. She'd converted it to MP3 format and loaded it to her iPod so she could hum it and
practice even while she was on the go.

There were thirty places on the choir, fifteen of which had already been filled by junior and senior students who'd been in the choir the previous year. The remaining places up for grabs would be decided on merit, and open to all students in any grade.

"You've been practicing non-stop, Sansa," Catelyn said as she pulled up in front of the school gate. "You really want this, don't you?"

"I do, mother," Sansa replied earnestly, "I didn't realize before, but this is important to me."

Catelyn gave her an encouraging smile. "You'll do fine, sweetheart. Good luck."

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**Sandor**

"Where the hell is she?" Joffrey looked around the quad, expecting Sansa to be waiting for him as she had started to do.

"I don't think she's here yet," Sandor replied, "she said something about a doctor's appointment."

"I didn't know that."

"She told you," Sandor said, sounding exasperated. "I was there, that's how I know."

"Is she sick? I didn't notice."

"She's your girlfriend. How should I know?"

"Girlfriend," Joffrey scoffed at the word. "Just until she puts out, and just until I get tired of her."

"Wanna say that any louder?" Sandor looked around them. "If that fucking Spyder hears you say that and blabs about it on the website, you can forget about getting it on with the redhead."

"Fucking Spyder…If I ever find out who it is, I'll kick his teeth in!" Joffrey spat, but his temper quickly waned as his attention was diverted by a group of cheerleaders heading their way.

"I heard Ros is into you," Joff nudged him.

"Which one's she?" Sandor asked, not really interested. "Doesn't matter, she must be fucking blind!"

"That's Ros." Joffrey laughed. "With the big tits!"

Sandor noted the busty cheerleader with the dark-red hair, who looked away when she saw him staring. He sneered, unimpressed.

"When was the last time you got laid?" Joff was smirking. "Ros will put out, she looks the type."

"It's been a while," he admitted, "but I'm not desperate enough to fuck a girl who's probably been with half the team."

"You've banged sluts before,"

"I meant with half of the White Knights."

"Suit yourself." Joffrey shrugged. "Hey, did I tell you that Sansa's a virgin?"
Both of Sandor's hands clenched into fists at the words that confirmed what he'd already suspected.

"No, you didn't."

"Well, she is,"

"What does that mean for you?"

"Means I've got to take it slow, doesn't it?" Joff said, annoyed. "My mother said that I should be nice to her. Well, nicer than I am to other girls, anyway!" Joff sniggered. "What mother doesn't know won't hurt her."

Sandor chose not to comment. He had a distinct feeling that Cersei Lannister-Baratheon knew exactly what kind of man her son was. Joffrey did not know the meaning of the word 'faithful', and if Sansa was not going to be putting out immediately, then Joff would get what he wanted somewhere else.

Sansa Stark chose that moment to arrive, and Sandor watched as she approached their group's table. She was wearing a short, sleeveless, white cotton dress and tan colored sandals on her feet. In flat shoes, the top of her head barely grazed his chin. She'd pulled her hair into a low ponytail to one side of her head, and its auburn lengths draped over one creamy shoulder. He had the sudden urge to rip the elastic out of her hair, so he fidgeted with his iPod to keep his fingers occupied. He preferred her hair loose and tumbling down her back, like the way she had been wearing it when he'd first met her.

"Hey, babe." Joffrey kissed her in greeting. "Everything go okay with the doctor?"

"Oh, yes. Everything's fine," Sansa replied, looking surprised that Joffrey had asked.

Sandor suddenly regretted telling him about her appointment, because now he'd made Joffrey seem like a caring boyfriend.

"Hey, Sansa," Jeyne called to her from the other end of the table, "are you ready for this afternoon?"

Sansa smiled back nervously. "As ready as I can be."

"We'll all be coming to watch." Randa smiled at her. "And cheer you both on!"

"What's happening this afternoon?" Joffrey asked.

"Oh, Jeyne and I have auditions for the choir today," Sansa replied.

"The choir? Really?" Joffrey looked like he wanted to laugh, and was barely keeping it in. "I didn't know you could sing."

Sansa shrugged. "I don't know if I'll make it in."

"Sure," was what he actually said.

Later that afternoon, after classes had ended for the day, Sandor found himself loitering around the auditorium entrance as he waited for the rest of the guys to turn up. Sansa had looked nervous when she'd learned all of them would be turning up to watch her and Jeyne sing, and he almost felt nervous for her. He figured she would have to get a grip on her nervousness. She was planning on joining the
choir and that meant having to perform in front of a crowd. She could start with singing in front of her friends. *Is that what I am, a friend?* He doubted that she considered him as such.

Her friend Jeyne was still giving her encouragement when he saw them approaching. Sansa saw him, looked around expecting to see Joffrey with him and looked perplexed when she realized he was the first one there.

"Um…Could you just let Joff and the others know that we've gone inside?" she asked him.

"Yeah, okay." He nodded.

"Thank you." She offered him a smile, before she followed Jeyne into the auditorium.

Sandor felt he should have wished them both good luck, but the words never made it past his scarred lips. It didn't seem natural. When Joffrey, Trant, Blount and the cheerleaders Randa, Mya, Ros and the dark one known as Yaya turned up, he passed on the message and he silently filed in after them into the rapidly filling auditorium. He knew the choir had won awards in years past, but he didn't think it was this popular. It seemed that the Spyder's post had attracted a lot of attention to the auditions. Sansa was going to have a larger audience than she may have wanted.

The school's Musical Director, Mr. Bard, announced that those auditioning were to be called up by surname, in alphabetical order, and each would simply sing until they were told to stop. Sandor had groaned when he'd heard that. Sansa would be among the last to audition.

There were roughly fifty students who'd come to audition, and almost half of them had been asked to stop singing within the first twenty seconds of opening their mouths. Sandor had laughed along with everyone else at the particularly bad singers. He had no pity for delusional fools.

Sansa's friend, Jeyne Poole, was then called to the stage, and he did pay attention to her. He had nothing against Jeyne. She was nice, and didn't seem to have any hidden agenda where her friendship with Sansa was concerned. She sang a song from a musical, something about trying to defy gravity. She had a strong voice, and though Mr. Bard had asked her to stop singing after the first chorus, there had been a smile on the man's face, and Jeyne looked happy with her performance.

At long last, Sansa's name was finally called, and she walked to the stage amid clapping and cheering from her personal cheer squad led by Randa and Mya. Sansa looked confident under the spotlight, and beautiful.

"What are you singing for us today, Miss Stark?" Mr. Bard asked when he'd shushed the crowd.

Sansa held the microphone to her lips. "I'll be singing *Angel*, by Sarah McLachlan."

"Very well. Whenever you're ready."

Sansa took a moment to compose herself, and then she cued some unseen audio guy. The sound of a piano filled the air. Suddenly, Sandor found himself tensing up. He was anxious, he realized. He'd never thought to find out if the little bird could actually chirp prettily for real. It hadn't occurred to him that she might end up humiliated. He didn't want that for her.

*Any of these assholes laugh, they're dead.*

And then Sansa opened her mouth.

"*Spend all your time waitin', for that second chance. For a break that would make it okay...*"
The skin on his arms and back of his neck prickled, and Sandor found that he was sitting up in his seat.

"…There's always some reason to feel not good enough, and it's hard at the end of the day. I need some distraction, oh beautiful release. Memories seep from my veins…"

Her voice was beautiful. How could he have ever thought it would be otherwise?

"…They may be empty and weightless and maybe, I'll find some peace tonight…"

The entire auditorium had grown silent as Sansa's achingly haunting tones filled the room. Sandor had stopped breathing.

"…In the arms of the Angel, fly away from here…From this dark, cold hotel room, and the endlessness that you fear…"

There was a tightness in his chest he hadn't felt in a while. He didn't know if it was the song itself, or if it as Sansa's voice, but there were suddenly memories coming to him that he hadn't thought about in a very long time. Memories from the worst time of his life.

"…You are pulled from the wreckage of your silent reverie. You're in the arms of the Angel, may you find some comfort here…"

He was staring right at her, and though he was certain she couldn't see him, why did it feel like she was looking right back at him, and singing for him? She kept on singing, well into the second verse now, and Sandor hoped that the Musical Director wouldn't call a stop. He desperately wanted Sansa to finish the song. He needed her to finish the song. He'd never expected he could react like this to a song. He'd never felt anything like it. His throat felt raw, and there was a pricking at the back of his eyelids. That shocked him, and he felt like he'd been punched in the guts. Hell, no! He thought. I am not fucking tearing up.

So he momentarily closed his eyes, and let the rest of Sansa's song wash over him as he got a grip on himself. However, closing his eyes had made the memories appear clearer in his mind. He was six years old again, and he was wearing black. His face had still been whole and unmarred. They were burying his mother, and Leonor, his three-year-old sister. And then he remembered. The same song had been playing as his mother's casket, and Leonor's much tinier casket had been lowered into the ground. It was the same day that his father had stopped caring about his two living sons. Months later, Gregor had pushed his face into the fire.

Sandor reopened his eyes as Sansa's song came to an end. There was a moment of absolute silence… before the entire auditorium broke out in thundering applause. Sandor didn't move a muscle, he couldn't even if he'd wanted to. The cheerleaders were jumping out of their seats, and even Joffrey was hollering enthusiastically. He wanted to leave, but he couldn't do so without attracting attention to himself. He forced himself to get his shit together.

Luckily, there were only two other students to audition after Sansa, and they barely lasted twenty seconds on the stage before Mr. Bard had told them to stop. The auditions were finally over, and Mr. Bard announced that the list of those who'd earned a place would be posted up on the performing arts notice board the next day. Afterwards, he fought the urge to run down the dawdlers who took their time exiting the building. He would have made a faster escape, if it hadn't been for Joff, who for some unfathomable reason insisted that he stay to congratulate Sansa.

"You don't even know if she made it in," he pointed out, annoyed.

"Are you kidding? Didn't you hear her in there?" Joff asked, behaving uncharacteristically like a real
caring and supporting boyfriend.

"That's got to have been the most painful two hours of my life!" Sandor snarled, before he turned around fully intending to stalk away…and promptly collided into Sansa.

She yelped at the force of the impact. He'd barely moved, but his sheer bulk and unchecked strength saw that his car keys, cell phone and iPod were knocked out of his hands, while she dropped everything she'd been holding and lost her balance.

Only Sandor's quick reflexes saved her from sprawling face first into the concrete floor. He'd managed to slip his arm around her waist and drag her against his side tightly.

"Damn it!" he growled.

Sansa looked up at him, meeting his eyes for the first time since the night he'd forced her to look him in the face. She looked hurt, and he knew that she'd been right behind him when he'd made that comment about the most painful two hours of his life. Yes, listening to her song had been painful for him…but not in the way she was probably thinking. Well, fuck if I'm going to apologize in front of all these people.

Sandor let her go abruptly, then bent down and started picking up belongings.

"Stick to quarterbacks, Hound," Blount laughed, "and don't bruise up the women!"

Sandor wanted to kick the guy's head in for that comment.

"Are you okay, Sansa?" Jeyne rushed to her, and Joffrey was finally spurred into taking interest in his girlfriend and not just laughing at Blount's off-color joke.

"I'm fine," Sansa replied, clearly not fine.

There were two identical iPod's on the floor, as well as a jumble of lipglosses, pens, a small cardboard box that looked like medication of some kind – he frowned as he read and memorized the name on the box, was Sansa sick? – putting it from his mind, Sandor picked up the closest iPod to his car keys and cell phone and stood back up, not bothering to help Jeyne who was stuffing items back into Sansa's bag. Only Sansa watched him leave.

It was a relief to get inside his Mustang. He plugged his iPod into the USB adaptor on his stereo, hoping to drown out his thoughts with the hard rock and metal he normally preferred, but began swearing anew when the song list that showed up on his display (Adele, Sara Bareilles, Sarah McLachlan, Rosie Thomas, Laura Marling, Soley) told him that he'd picked up the wrong iPod.

Fate was a bitch with a warped sense of humor, Sandor thought darkly.

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**Arya**

Unnoticed, way up in the nosebleed section of the auditorium, Arya, Gendry and Hot Pie exited the building from a little used doorway and made their way to the student lot.

"Did you know your sister could sing like that?" Gendry asked her.

Reluctantly, Arya nodded. "It's probably the only other real talent Sansa has."

"What's her other talent?" Hot Pie asked.
'Needlepoint.' Arya screwed up her nose. 'Like, cross-stitch and embroidery.'

Gendry and Hot Pie laughed. 'You're joking, right?'

'Sadly, no.' Arya had known from the second her sister had opened her mouth that Sansa had secured herself a spot in the choir.

Sansa had been blessed with too many gifts, she felt. Her sister had beauty, charm, poise, elegance, a decent amount of book-smarts, a magical singing voice, and even the ability to sew neat stitches. Growing up being compared to her sister time and time again meant that she never forgot her own shortcomings.

Speaking of shortcomings, being short was the first on that list. If ever there was anyone who understood the little-dog complex, it was her. Being the smallest in her family, not counting Rickon (though she figured he'd be bigger than her too in a few years), she often had to speak louder and try harder than anyone else to get some recognition or attention. Even twelve-year-old Bran was now taller than her, and getting broader. Jon was the eldest and resembled their father the most, as well as inheriting a lot of his mannerisms and traits. Robb was barely a year younger than Jon, and though he looked more like their mother, he and Jon were very similar in personality. Both of them had also inherited their father's intellect and had excelled at school. Sansa was Sansa. Bran was a gifted student, and often seemed a lot older than his years, and Rickon being the baby of the family, usually got spoilt rotten.

Suffer from middle-child syndrome, much? Having so many brilliant siblings, it was often easy to slip under the radar. Unless she was getting into some kind of trouble, she was mostly left alone to do her own thing.

'Can you drop me off at Harrenhal Mall?' Arya asked Gendry.

'You're not going home, yet?'

'It's only five, it's still early.'

'What do you want to do at the mall?'

'What do girls do at the mall, stupid?' She rolled her eyes. 'I'm going shopping.'

After going through the contents of her closet over the weekend, and having already worn most of the new clothes she'd bought from the boutique at Trident's Bend, she'd realized very quickly that she needed way more clothes that was in keeping with the new look she'd adopted.

Hot Pie bade them goodnight and went to his own car, and Arya let herself into Gendry's car.

'I can drop you off, it's on my way to Beric's,' Gendry told her as he backed his car out. 'How will you get home?'

'I'll take a taxi or have my father's driver pick me up.'

'I can pick you up when I'm done at Beric's, if you want a ride home,' he offered.

'Thanks, but I'll be fine. I don't want you to rush.'

'All right, but call me if your first two options don't work out.'

'Okay, I will.' She smiled at him, touched by his concern.
Gendry took the exit to get onto the Kingsroad Expressway, and within minutes they were on their way to the largest mall in the state. He'd gotten over his initial shock at her new appearance, and she noticed almost immediately that he seemed to stop treating her like a kid sister. He still showed some overprotective tendencies, like wanting to make sure she had a way to get home, for example, but there were subtle changes in the way he acted and spoke to her. Amazing what tighter clothes and purple hair can do. She thought. Her plan had definitely worked. She'd been getting stared at by boys for the best part of the week.

Her own mother too had apparently decided she was grown up and getting enough attention from boys that she'd taken her to that doctor, who'd spoken to her about contraceptives and safe sex. Arya had actually believed she was just going to an ordinary doctor for an ordinary check-up.

Her mother had not even hinted at it during the entire car ride to the clinic, and Arya had been completely blind-sided. Rendered speechless, in fact. She'd never even kissed a boy, and sex to her was a destination that was far, far away...light years away.

"You're awfully quiet, Arya," her mother had said.

"I'm surprised, that's all," she'd said, "I don't even have a boyfriend, so why now?"

Catelyn Stark had given her youngest daughter a look that Arya had never seen, and when she'd replied to her, it was in a tone her mother used when she was talking to grown-ups.

"You've changed so much in just a matter of weeks, Arya. First you're making friends with older boys, and now you've gone and changed your hair, your clothes and you've even gone and had your eyebrows waxed, for Christ's sake! You're headstrong, and you never listen to a word I say..."

"But, mother..." Arya had begun to defend herself.

"No, Arya. Hear me out," her mother had interrupted her. "You're growing up faster than I can keep up with, and it's because you are so headstrong that I took you to the clinic today. You're going to make up your own mind, regardless of what I or your father say to you, and all I want to do is make sure that you are safe when you decide that you're ready."

They hadn't spoken about it since, and the box of pills had sat in her dresser drawer unopened, still in the brown paper bag it had come in when they'd collected it from the drugstore.

Harrenhal Mall loomed large ahead of them. The biggest mall in the South boasted five separate tower complexes, each complex housing a different specialty. She told Gendry to drop her off at Tower 2, which housed mainly women's specialty stores.

"Hey, I've spoken to my foster-parents," Gendry said as he pulled into the drop-off zone and engaged the hand-brake. "How's next Thursday night for dinner suit you?"

"Next, Thursday?"

"You know? Your home-cooked birthday dinner?"

"You were serious?" Arya exclaimed. "That's fantastic! Oh, my God! Thank you!"

Spontaneously, like everything she did, she reached over the gears and threw her arms around his neck, giving him an enthusiastic hug. She let him go shortly, but not before she had noticed how warm he was, or that he smelled nice.

"Um...you're welcome," he said, slightly pink in the cheeks.
Arya let herself out of the car and gave him another smile before she shut the door.

"Thanks again for the ride, Gendry. See you at school tomorrow."

She waved as he drove away, then turned and headed inside the mall, where she proceeded to try and break the record that the sales girl in the boutique at Trident's Bend had set. She walked into a likely looking store and approached the girl at the counter.

"I have a credit card," she said to her, "how much damage do you think I could do in fifteen minutes?"

Quite a bit, as it turned out, and three other stores later, she figured she'd done enough damage to attract her father's attention. Their parents had given both herself and Sansa a credit card with set limits, and Arya had never come close to her limit before. Until recently. She glanced at her watch and called her mother to send the car down for her, then found a juice bar where she waited for her ride home.

Jaqen

Jaqen walked into his favorite tapioca pearl and juice bar and ordered himself a large watermelon frappe, and waited for the girl behind the counter to fix his drink. If he hadn't then heard the sharp intake of breath, he might have not seen her altogether. But he had, and so he lifted his head towards the dimly lit side of the room. His mouth formed a half smile.

A markedly changed, slightly older looking version of Arya Stark sat in a booth by herself, holding a magazine and nursing what looked like an iced tea. There were shopping bags on the floor at her feet and on the seat beside her. His immediate reaction was to go to her, but he hesitated. The last time he had seen her, she'd rebuffed him. Not that he felt he'd come on strong at all. He hesitated also, because he knew that she was only a freshman, about to turn fourteen according to her. Normally, he wouldn't have looked twice at girls her age, and he still wasn't quite sure why she had a pull on him. But Fate had seen to it that he was the one to catch her that day at the audition, and that it was into his lap that she had fallen. Then she had looked up at him with those beautiful grey doe-eyes of hers, and he'd called her a lovely girl.

He'd never used those words to describe a girl before, but she was lovely, more so now that she had colored her hair and wore tighter-fitting clothes. She looked tougher, and even sweeter for the effort. _Sweet, lovely girl._ He didn't believe in coincidences, or luck, but he did believe in Fate. If Fate was a God, she was the only one he believed in. He was meant to meet this girl, and he was going to find out why.

"Here you are," the girl at the counter handed him his frappe.

"Thanks." He smiled at her, then purposely strode to Arya's booth.

Her eyes never left him the entire time, and she glanced up at him uncertainly when he stopped in front of her.

"We meet again, lovely girl. Fate has been kind." He gave her another half-smile. "May I join you?"

She nodded.

"How are you, Jaqen?" she asked as he slid into the booth across the table from her.

"A man has never felt better," he replied, and allowed his eyes to roam over her face. She wasn't
wearing makeup, but there was something different about her, in the set of her mouth and the tilt of her chin. Confidence, perhaps? Or bravado? "A little girl becomes a young woman," he said in a low whisper, not sure if he was saying it for his benefit or hers.

"I wasn't a little girl," she returned, "not when you met me."

"And I was always aware," he came back, "though, you mistook my meaning."

"What was your meaning, then?"

"Just that you are young and inexperienced," He frowned slightly. "But I do not see you as a child."

"No?"

"No, I don't," he repeated. "Do you believe in Fate, Arya?"

"You mean, like destiny? I don't know…why?"

He tilted his head and fixed her with a look he hoped would show her that he was serious.

"Fate has brought us together on three occasions before today, and three times you've fled from me," Jaqen said, "three chances Fate has given, and three times you have denied her. Now, you must pay them back."

The expression in her eyes clearly showed that she didn't understand what he was alluding to. Young, and inexperienced. He reminded himself.

"I don't believe in coincidences, Arya. We were destined to meet." Jaqen smiled at her. "I ask that you allow me to take you on three dates."

"Three, what?"

"Three dates," he said again, "no more, no less. For the three times you denied Fate when she was kind enough to bring us together."

"You're asking me out," Arya stated, and her expressive doe-eyes couldn't hide her shock.

"Yes, I am. Although you do not need to give me your answer right away."

Jaqen decided that he would leave it in her hands. He had been honest with her, and made it very clear what he wanted. Now it was up to her. Arya had sat back in her seat, and he found the way she was suddenly chewing on her bottom lip adorable.

"I will not push you, lovely girl," he said softly, sensing the same uncertainty around her that he'd felt the last time they'd met. "If you do not want to accept, then tell me, and I shall not bother you anymore."

She looked at him, and he met her eyes, trying to figure out what was going through her mind. She was measuring him up, for certain, and fighting some kind of internal battle at the same time. She watched him for the longest time, and Jaqen wondered how it was that the stare of this one girl could unsettle him so, when he'd been bothered less by the many eyes of the crowd that came to his performances.

"Three dates," she repeated.

"As I have said," he confirmed. "Say yes, and I will do the rest."
"I don't need to decide right now, you said. Give me your phone number, Jaqen." Arya slid her phone across the table, and watched as he keyed his number in. He slid the phone back to her. She finally gifted him with a smile, showing little pointy teeth. "Your fate is now in my hands."
Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! This is a special 'Double Episode' – it was just such a mammoth chapter and I had to split up the parts. I hope you like it!

Jon Stark makes a cameo appearance – yes he is a Stark. Illegitimate kids aren't named after where they're born in this world.

Allyria Dayne makes her debut in this episode – I took liberties with her appearance, I haven't been able to find a description of her anywhere.

Gossip Spyder

Rise and shine, peeps!

It's a glorious day here in King's Landing, and the new day brings with it new gossip...my specialty!

It looks like Sansa Stark has well and truly immersed herself into the choir culture. As you may already know, she and her friend Jeyne Poole both scored spots in the choir, and rehearsals have begun for the annual Blue Rose Song Festival that will be held later in the year – remember to check out the clip of Sansa's audition if you haven't done so already.

Now...juicy goss...you may recall in an earlier post about Arya Stark being seen with a senior from Braavos Academy. I can now reveal that this senior is in fact Jaqen H'ghar, a local celebrity among hipsters. Arya and Jaqen were seen getting cosy in a booth at a juice bar in Harrenhal Mall recently. You may have heard his band The Faceless Men performing at hipster club 'House of Black & White'...check out the links to their most recent gigs...these guys are hot!

Arya Stark, what does your boy-slash-friend, Gendry 'The Bull' Waters, think of you getting acquainted with the competition? The first heats of Battle of The Bands are three weeks away! Can't wait!

And lastly...Sansa and Arya, I want to wish you both a very happy birthday!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

Eddard

Ned tore open the plain white A4 envelope that Jory Cassel had left on his desk.

"Someone left this for you," Jory had said, "they didn't leave a name."

The contents spilled out onto the leather-topped desk in his office at Stark Industries, and the first
thing that caught his eye was a photograph amid the sheaf of papers.

"Robert?" he frowned as he picked it up.

His frown deepened when he inspected the picture closer and saw that the handsome boy in the photograph was a teenager, wearing the current style teenagers wore, and holding a cell phone to his ear. This was not Robert Baratheon. The boy in the photo, however, was the spitting image of a younger Robert, as Ned remembered him from back in their boarding school days at Eyrie Boys Academy.

Gooseflesh trailed up his arms as he quickly examined the other documents in front of him. Copies of the boy’s birth certificate, the death certificate of the boy's mother, academic transcripts, documents from social services detailing the boy's welfare and names of foster families he'd stayed with. The documents looked familiar. In fact, Jory had given him a set just like it the week prior. Ned picked up the birth certificate and read the boy's name to be certain. Gendry Waters.

He called Jory back into his office.

"This is about that boy I asked you to look into," Ned told him when the man appeared. "Take a look."

Jory inspected the documents in front of him. The social services documents and the mother's death certificate were the same as the ones he’d supplied Ned a week before, but it was the birth certificate that made his eyes go wide. The name of the boy's father had been supplied in this version. The copy he had given to Ned had left that space blank. He looked back up at Ned.

"Is this true?"

"Take a look at the boy's photo, and you tell me." Ned handed it to him.

The resemblance was uncanny.

"He could be Renly Baratheon's twin," Jory said with an uncertain laugh.

"Do you have any idea who left this envelope?"

"No. Reception found it this morning with the rest of the day's mail."

"Someone knows I've been asking questions about this boy." Ned rubbed a hand over his face. "Someone knows that Gendry Waters is the illegitimate son of Robert Baratheon."

"Robert told you nothing about him?" Jory asked. "Assuming Robert knows about the boy, that is."

"If Robert is aware of the boy's existence, he's made no mention of him to me," Ned replied.

He knew that Robert was a serial womanizer. He'd seen the man in action back when they were still in their prime. For all he knew, Robert could have dozens of illegitimate children all over the country.

There was something about the Waters boy that was different, however. He could sense it.

"Do you think Robert is the benefactor?" Jory wondered.

It made sense. Gendry Waters had been left a fortune that wasn't to be sniffed at, as well as the opportunity to study at the same school that Robert's legitimate children attended. Gendry and Joffrey would be in the same year.

All of the Baratheon men – Robert, his brothers Stannis and Renly, all had the same inky black hair and dark blue eyes. He recalled seeing portraits of long dead Baratheons on the walls of the Baratheon's ancestral home, all of whom had black hair and blue eyes.

Ned’s palms began to sweat at the sudden realization, but nothing else gave him away on the outside.

*Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen are not Robert's children.*

A DNA test would prove it, but Ned didn’t need any more convincing. If Robert had somehow stumbled across this knowledge, then Ned would consider it reason enough for Robert to seek out his own natural children.

To acknowledge the boy in public would be unthinkable, however. The scandal and the number of questions it would raise would be too many, and potentially damaging not just to Robert's family – the Lannisters would have heads rolling! –but may have repercussions for Baratheon Incorporated as well.

And the boy – the media would rip the boy's life apart. The kid's life had just been so recently changed with his new wealth. Ned had seen from the boy's academic transcripts that he had a fair mind on him, and he wouldn't have been surprised if the boy had made a few educated deductions of his own about his paternity.

Perhaps it would be best that Gendry Waters remain unaware of his father's identity,

"He may well be, but the boy is his business." Ned passed a hand over his face again. "Robert has his reasons for keeping the boy a secret, so none of this must leave the room. See that these documents are destroyed, would you? It's bad enough that someone knows we were asking questions."

"This could be a disaster if this ever got into the wrong hands." Jory acknowledged. "Why would this person want you to know the truth?"

"I don't know…but I think it's time I got to know my daughter's friends." Ned decided. "Arya's having dinner with this boy and his foster-family this Thursday."

"Arya's started dating?" Jory had been in the Stark family's employ since Arya was in grade school, and was regarded like an uncle by the Stark children.

Ned gave him a beleaguered sort of smile. "I'm not sure. I think this boy might just be a friend…but she's blossomed recently…changed completely, actually."

"You have no idea what's going on inside her head, do you?" Jory called it as he saw it.

"I haven't the faintest idea, Jory," Ned finally admitted, "that's always been the case with Arya. Sansa's easier to figure out, she's an open book…but Arya, she's always kept me guessing."

Ned was unsettled to realize that unless he did something about it now, he would always be guessing, and he would never really know his daughter.

"I have an idea," he said to Jory, and he picked up the phone on his desk.

He dialed a number and waited for the line to be picked up.
"Hello, father," came the deep timbre of his son's voice.

"Jon." Ned smiled into the phone. "Is there any chance that you boys can get down here earlier this week?"

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**Sandor**

Sandor patted his jacket pocket to make sure that Sansa's iPod was still there. He'd meant to give it back to her right away, but it had been almost a week since the audition, and he had yet to return it. Stranger still, Sansa hadn't sought him out about the return of his iPod, either. After the audition, he'd reached home and had dumped the iPod on his desk, then promptly forgot about it until the weekend when he'd sat down to get some homework done. He'd then plugged the mp3 player into his computer and scrolled through the playlist, curious to see what kind of music Sansa Stark was into. She listened to a lot of chicks playing pianos and guitars, and angst-ridden groups as well as some pop and Top-40 kind of music.

He'd found her voice on it too. She'd recorded herself singing *Angel*, and he'd been listening to it every day since. *Give her back the iPod before you turn into a complete sap.*

Sansa was turning fifteen on the weekend, and there was talk of going to Narrow Sea Ocean Park on her birthday to celebrate. The cheerleaders had come up with this idea, and he was still undecided about going, though Joffrey was insisting that he go.

Joffrey had also told him of his plan to take Sansa to his family's riverfront guest house afterwards, where he'd planned some romantic dinner and seduction bullshit. He'd been bragging to the guys how he'd have Sansa's cherry before the weekend was out.

Sandor had sat and ground his teeth together the whole time the jerk had talked. *It's none of your business*, he told himself.

He rounded the corner just as a classroom door opened and a girl stepped out of it, barreling straight into his chest. He caught her around her shoulders, recognizing the purple tips of her hair first, then her swearing.

"...sonofa…motherfucker..!"

*Stark girls everywhere I turn!*

"That's twice now, little bitch," he growled over her head, "throwing yourself at me, are you?"

She stiffened at the sound of his voice, and she looked up at him sharply, grey eyes narrowed.

Sandor realized then that she was pretty. Not at all like the little bird, but pretty in her own right.

He'd noticed the hair and the clothes, like everyone else had, but he hadn't really paid attention before. *Too busy staring at her sister*, he thought.

Up close, he kind of liked what he saw. If she'd been taller, a little older and about a cup size larger around the bust, she could have almost been his type.

"You wish! Asshole!" Arya shrugged him off roughly. "I'd rather throw myself off a cliff first!"

*Key word being almost*, he thought.
"I'd pay to see that," he sniped back.

"Why just be in the audience, when you can be an active participant?"

"Just because you look tough, doesn't mean you are."

"Just because you're breathing right now, doesn't mean you will be tomorrow."

"Still want me dead, huh?"

"Oh, yes," she hissed through clenched teeth, "that's not going to change."

"You're a bitch."

"So you've said."

"Where's your sister?" he asked, changing the subject.

"How the hell should I know?" Arya's eyes narrowed even further.

"Is she sick?" he suddenly wondered, "what are the pills for?"

"Sick? What pills?" Arya looked taken aback at his sudden line of questioning. "What are you talking about…?"

Then she inhaled sharply and her eyes went big. "…Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

Sandor raised his brow at her reaction.

"…So fucking gross! How can she let that creep touch her? Stupid, stupid, stupid brainless bimbo!"

"You're calling your sister a stupid, brainless, bimbo?"

Arya rounded on him, eyes suddenly fierce and furious. "Tell that jerk, he'd better not hurt her, do you hear me?"

His own eyes narrowed at her tone.

She took his silence to mean that he understood.

"Get the fuck out of my face!"

Arya shoved him out of her way, and stalked down the corridor in the opposite direction.

Her little outburst had served to rouse his curiosity further, and he took out his cell phone and opened a web browser to do what he should have done in the first place. He typed in the name of the medication he'd seen drop from Sansa's bag, and tapped on the first hit that came up. He read the first few sentences, and immediately understood why Arya had reacted the way she had.

"Stupid, brainless little bird," he muttered, feeling uneasy.

Arya had been referring to Joffrey, and she was right in her concern.

Did Joffrey know about Sansa's pills? He probably didn't, Sandor figured, because Joff would have told him about it. Sandor had no intention of telling him about their existence, either. He had no intention of giving Joff anything that might lead to his seduction plan succeeding.
Joffrey, you piece of shit, you had better not hurt her.

In any case, what could he do about it? Sandor wondered. She wasn't his girlfriend. Not his responsibility. Not his to care about.

He didn't even have her friendship. She was frightened of him.

All he had was her iPod with her voice on it.

You are a pathetic dog.

Feeling like the absolute worst kind of fool, Sandor decided that Sansa wasn't getting her iPod back.

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**Arya**

"Argh! Fuck you, Spyder!" Arya swore when she read the gossipmonger's post that finally linked her to Jaqen H'ghar.

She hadn't cared about being gossiped about when there had been no names to tie her to anyone, but now everyone knew the name of the Braavos Academy senior, and it turned out that *The Faceless Men* had quite a local following. She'd clicked on every link on the Spyder's site and watched as the girls in the crowd screamed.

It was easy to see why. As a band, they were incredible. They had varied sounds, reminding her of *Incubus* and *My Chemical Romance*, but they also had a sound that was uniquely their own. Every member of the four-member group had been classically trained at some point. All of them were undeniably talented.

But Jaqen…Jaqen was brilliance personified. She had found his speaking voice sexy. His singing voice however, was to her ears, as molten caramel was on her tongue. Smooth, warm, buttery-golden, and silky. His guitar skills were phenomenal, and she hated to admit it, but Gendry and Beric's band had every right to be concerned. Jaqen was unlike anyone she had ever met before, and he intrigued her. He also elicited the most unfamiliar of responses in her, and that made her wary.

She couldn't believe he'd asked her out. She had no idea why he was even interested in her, and she would never have believed any of it had been real except there was a phone number in her contact list under his name. His invitation had also remained unanswered. She didn't know what she wanted to do, but she knew she couldn't keep him waiting. Even as inexperienced as she was, she knew it was rude to keep a guy hanging.

She had almost gone to Sansa to ask her advice. She had almost called a truce on their standoff, and spoken to her. She almost had – until the Hound had let slip, through his own ignorance, that Sansa was on the pill. Of course their mother would have taken Sansa to the clinic as well, Arya chastised herself for her oversight. If Sansa had a prescription for the pill, it meant she was thinking of, if she wasn't already, doing the nasty with Joffrey.

*Ughhhhh!* Just the thought of Joffrey made her skin crawl.

It had renewed her anger at her sister, but also made her very worried. Sansa was blind as far as Joffrey was concerned, and she couldn't see the potential menace that Arya did. Regardless of how much her older sister angered and frustrated her, Arya didn't want to see her hurt.

*Not unless it's by my own hands, but that's beside the point.*
Moving away from her computer, she pushed her stupid sister's problems out of her mind and reminded herself that it was Thursday and that she was having dinner at Gendry's that evening. She'd been looking forward to it all week! Gendry had said he'd invited the guys in the band, as well as Beric's girlfriend Allyria, and also Jenny, the girl Tom was currently dating. They would all meet up at Gendry's house after school.

Arya went to her closet and picked out a new outfit to wear, choosing a white sleeveless top with a print on the front, and layered it over a bright orange tank. She chose tight black jeans to match it with, and black, Cuban heeled boots. She shrugged a distressed denim jacket over her skinny shoulders to guard against the oncoming autumn chill in the air. She looked at her reflection in her mirror, and wondered what Gendry would make of the slogan on her top. *I PREFER THE DRUMMER*, it read.

"Arya, I recall you'll be having dinner at Gendry's tonight," her father said to her when she came down for breakfast. "Will you be going to his foster-parents' house directly after school?"

"Ahuh," Arya replied, buttering a slice of toast. "I might need the driver to pick me up later tonight."

"That's fine, just remember to call." Ned nodded. "Have you spoken to Jon recently?"

Arya grinned. "Yep, and he says they'll definitely be here this weekend!"

"All three of them?"

"Yes, even Theon."

Arya's phone beeped, and she kissed her father on the cheek before she headed out the door.

"That's Hot Pie letting me know he's on his way."

"Hot Pie? What is the boy's real name, Arya?"

"I can't pronounce it. It's about thirteen syllables long, and I can't spell it," Arya shrugged, "But you should know that his mom owns that franchise."

"*Mrs. Hot Pie?*"

"That's the one!"

"I'm impressed Arya," he called out to her, "you picked friends that can drive, and also one that can supply you with your favorite bakery treat!"

"It's called networking, father." She laughed. "I learned from you!"

She finished eating her toast by the time she got to the front door, and heard her mother coming down the stairs, telling off a misbehaving Rickon.

"Are you leaving now, Arya?"

"Yes, mother. Have a nice day!" Arya called to Catelyn as she bounded down the front steps.

Hot Pie was in his unassuming and reliable, silver Chrysler when she got to the foot of the gate.

"Why didn't you buzz yourself in through the gate?" she asked when she got into the front seat, "Instead you made me run down here."
"I forgot the combination," he replied sheepishly, "nice shirt!"

"Thanks!"

Hot Pie and Gendry sometimes picked her up on their way to school, depending on their own schedules. She preferred riding with them rather than having to share a ride with Sansa.

She and Hot Pie got caught up in traffic, and were consequently running late to class when they finally reached King's Landing Prep. She didn't get to see Gendry until lunch, where it appeared Beric, Allyria and Edric had decided to join them. Tom and Thoros were the only members of the band that were no longer at school.

"Hey, guys!" Arya greeted them.

"There's the birthday girl!" Beric smiled at her.

"What made you decide to forsake the performing arts block and join us today?" Arya asked them.

"The chance to bask in warm sunshine, and the prospect of talking about something other than *Battle of the Bands*!" Allyria replied with a laugh.

Arya had met and spoken to Allyria several times since Gendry had joined Beric's band. She was a senior, like Beric, and had long golden-blond hair and the same blue-violet eyes as Edric, her nephew. She'd explained that while she was technically Edric's aunt, their two-year age gap meant they related more as older sister and younger brother.

"That starts in three weeks, right?" Arya said, shrugging out of her jacket now that she was in the open sunshine.

"Don't get Beric started…"

Allyria and Beric then caught sight of her shirt and laughed.

Gendry rolled his eyes and began muttering to himself. "Unbelievable…"

Then Arya saw that Edric was staring at her, smiling at her unusually, while his eyes twinkled purple in amusement.

"I had no idea you felt that way," he said to her quietly.

"Excuse me?" She looked up at him.

"It's me she's after…not Jaqen." Edric beamed, and put his arm around Arya's waist.

"What?" Arya squawked, turning in the crook of his arm.

"It's says so on your shirt…" Edric pointed out, and Arya saw that his blue eyes were filled with humor. "…I prefer the drummer…"

Arya blushed scarlet. She'd meant to get a laugh by wearing the shirt, but she'd never thought about what the actual drummer himself would make of it.

"She's so cute when she blushes!" Edric gave her a squeeze and let her go, laughing all the while.

"The look on your face was priceless!" Allyria laughed.
She sat next to Gendry as the laughter died down and conversation resumed around them about what Mrs. Mott would be serving for dinner that night, and of course Beric couldn't help but talk about Battle of the Bands.

"It's true," Gendry said, "you are cute when you blush."

"Oh, give it a rest." She poked her tongue out at him and unwrapped her sandwich, but she was secretly pleased.

Gendry lowered his voice and asked her about whether she'd read the Spyder's post that morning.

"Were you really with Jaqen at that juice bar?"

Arya winced, and wondered how much she should tell him. "Yep, but it was coincidence. I was already there and he walked in and saw me."

She recalled Jaqen saying he didn't believe in coincidence.

"What did he want?" Gendry's question was innocent enough, but something made her hold back.

"Nothing," she lied, "he just said hello."

She didn't want Gendry knowing about Jaqen asking her out. Especially not after the way he'd gone all weird when he'd found out how she and Jaqen had met, and the fact Gendry just plain didn't seem to like the guy. Gendry was her friend, but it wasn't any of his business who she wanted to date.

They got caught up in the conversation around them, and Hot Pie did his best to try and coax Gendry into telling them what his foster-mom would be feeding them that night, but Gendry had just laughed away all of their questions.

"It's meant to be a surprise for Arya," he said, "and, Ellen's been looking forward to tonight since I first mentioned it to her."

Arya was also looking forward to meeting Gendry's family. That's what they were, regardless of what he said about them not being his real family. He had lived with them for six years, and there was genuine affection in his voice when he talked about them.

After school, Arya walked down to the student lot to wait for Gendry at his car, and noticed that a crowd had gathered around a flashy silver Porsche.

I know that Porsche…

Arya hastened her steps and took the steps at a bound, two at a time.

She saw Robb's auburn head first, and her heart began to race. Theon stood leaning against the Porsche, pretending to look bored as high-school girls checked him out…and then she saw Jon.

His dark hair was disheveled, and he wore black jeans, boots and a white Henley tee that showed off his muscular arms like nobody's business. Her brothers were good-looking, and they knew it!

"Jon!" she called out, and tried to fight her way past the inordinate number of girls that had crowded around them. "Over here, Jon!"

Her brother turned his head at the sound of her voice.

Jon saw nothing but a flash of purple, before a small, feminine body crashed into him, knocking the
breath out of his lungs. He had to take a step back to keep from toppling over.

"Arya?" Jon pulled his head back to look at the girl in his arms who sounded like Arya.

Little pointy teeth were bared to him in a smile, in a face that was altogether leaner than he remembered. He took in the layered and colored hair next, then the tighter clothes that clung to curves she never had before, and his eyes widened.

"Oh, my god…Arya!"

"It's so good to see you!" She hugged him again. "You're here early! I thought you wouldn't get here until Saturday?"

She pulled away from him, and went to hug an equally stunned Robb.

"Hi Robb!"

"What have you done to yourself, Arya?" Robb hugged his barely recognizable little sister. "You look great!"

She hugged Theon last, tighter than she normally would have, just because she was just so happy to see them!

"Whoa!" Theon whistled. "Baby sister isn't such a baby anymore!"

"Shut up, Theon." She let him go and punched his arm.

"I can't get over how she looks…" Jon was saying to Robb.

"I had no idea you guys were going to be here early!" She turned to Jon and Robb again. This was the cherry on top, she thought.

"Father knew," Jon said, "we wanted to surprise you."

"Where's Sansa?" Robb asked, looking around expecting to see their other sister.

Arya made a face. "Probably with Joffrey, her boyfriend."

"Joffrey Baratheon?" Robb and Theon asked at the same time.

"There'd better only be one douche called Joffrey," Arya replied, at which her brothers laughed.

Gendry turned up at that moment, with Hot Pie not far behind him, and stood at Arya's shoulder. Jon held out his hand to him immediately.

"Hey, Gendry!" He smiled at him widely. "Good to meet you in person."

Arya gaped. "You guys know each other?"

"Only online, and just recently." Gendry replied.

"Gendry tracked me down through Facebook to see if I'd be able to make it to the house party you guys are having tonight for your birthday." Jon grinned. "Looks like I'll make it after all!"

Jon and Arya introduced Gendry and Hot Pie to Robb and Theon, and Gendry extended the invitation to that night's dinner to both of them. Both of them declined politely, knowing that Arya
would prefer Jon to herself.

"I'll catch up with you when you get back, and there's still the weekend," Robb said to Arya. "I'd like to catch up with mother and father, and see Bran and Rickon."

"And find out about this douche Sansa's dating," Theon supplied, an odd look on his face.

Robb had always been closer to Sansa when they were growing up. She sincerely hoped Robb would get to meet him, and find him lacking.

"Then we'll see you back at Chateau Maegor later," Jon said to Robb and Theon as they got into Robb's Porsche.

"Have fun tonight, little sister!" Robb waved to her as they drove off.

Jon now turned to Arya and Gendry.

"Where to?"

"This way." Gendry let them to his BMW.

Arya occupied the back seat while she let Jon take the front. Hot Pie said he'd meet them at Gendry's as he had to go and pick up the pies he'd promised Arya first. Beric and the others would all meet at Gendry's place later.

"That's right, we have to make a stop first. Don't we, Gendry?" Jon said.

"That's right, we do," Gendry agreed.

"What's going on, you two?" Arya demanded. "How long have you been chatting on Facebook? Where are we going? Why do we have to make a stop?"

"Still such a little pain…" Jon sighed, but with obvious affection. "How'd you end up friends with this little twerp, Gendry?"

"Jon!" Arya wailed.

"I met her on my first day," Gendry replied, "she kind of latched on, and I haven't been able to shake her since."

"Gendry!" Arya exclaimed, but she was smiling.

It was great that her beloved brother, and the boy she considered her closest friend were getting along.

They soon came to Trident's Bend, and Gendry parked the car in front of the boutique Arya had shopped at. She got out of the car and waited for one of them to let her know what was going on.

"Will one of you tell me what this is about?"

"You'll see." Jon smiled at her and took her arm.

"Just go with it, Arya," Gendry said, "stop fussing."

Jon and Gendry marched her down the esplanade, and Arya's eyes widened when they stopped in front of Forel's Music Store.
"Jon?" She looked at him. "You didn't. Did you?"

He shrugged. "Get inside, Arya."

"Did he, Gendry?" she grinned at him brightly.

The sheer joy in her smile undid him, and he gave in a little. "Okay, fine. Jon came up with the idea. I just told him where he could buy it."

Syrio Forel himself greeted them as they entered his store, and his eyes twinkled when he recognized Arya.

"Ah! Arya Stark!" He looked at her companions. "And, you are The Bull, yes?"

Gendry nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Wonderful! Jaqen has spoken of you."

Gendry's eyes narrowed at the mention of Jaqen's name.

"And you are Jon Stark." Syrio smiled at her brother. "We spoke on the phone, and I have just what you asked for, all ready. I shall get it for you."

"Thank you, for all your help, Syrio."

Jon watched his sister the entire time as Syrio produced the guitar case on the counter and lifted the lid.

"Oh…Jon!" was all Arya could manage to say.

"You have a very special brother, Arya Stark," Syrio Forel stated. "He loves you very much."

Jon had bought her a Gibson Hummingbird acoustic guitar. It was an iconic model, first produced in the 60's, and boasted a Sitka Spruce top, with Mahogany back and sides, and a square-shoulder dreadnought body type.

It was the perfect guitar for her, and only Jon would have known that.

"It's too much…" she said, "Jon, I don't even know how to play."

"But you will," he said, "and you'll learn to play it damn well, too."

Arya hugged him again. "Thank you so much!"

"It's got a name, too, if you want to know," he said, "can you guess?"

"You named my guitar?" She looked at the beautiful guitar in the case, with its distinctive hummingbird design on the pickguard and Mother of Pearl accents on the fretboard. "What did you call it?"

"Needle," he replied, and Arya smiled at him in understanding. "I'll teach you to play the rest of that song, I promise."

He was referring to the song he'd started to teach her, but never finished. Neil Young's *The Needle And The Damage Done*. 
The Mott's and Gendry lived in a six bedroom house in the suburb of The Forge Estates. It wasn't a mansion, but a grand house all the same. On entering, Arya noticed that the double doors had a carving of a hunting scene depicted on it, and that two stone statues of knights dressed in armor bearing the shapes of a griffon and a unicorn guarded the entrance.

"The statues came with the house," Gendry said when he caught her amused expression.

Despite the statues, the house was cozy and comfortable. It was a real family home. Mr. Tobho Mott, and Mrs. Ellen Mott were in their early forties, and had two children of their own. An eleven year old son named Toby, and a seven year old daughter named Tabitha. Gendry's brother and sister, in effect. Tabitha had run to Gendry the moment he'd walked in through the door, and Arya realized that the seven year old would have only been a baby when Gendry joined their family. Tabitha probably considered him as a real brother.

Mr. Mott, a wiry and balding man, had shaken their hands when he'd welcomed them into their home, while Mrs. Mott was brown haired, a little plump, and quite pretty. Their children were both brown haired, but had inherited their father's skinny frame. Arya and Jon had thanked Gendry's foster-parents profusely for hosting Arya's birthday dinner, especially considering they had never met her before.

"Oh, think nothing of it," Mrs. Mott had said as she'd checked on whatever was roasting away in the oven. "We've been looking forward to meeting you, Arya."

Gendry had shown them quickly around the house, and then he and Jon had gone to help Mr. Mott set up the four-burner barbeque in the back garden, while Arya had chatted with Mrs. Mott and Tabitha in the kitchen. Mrs. Mott had two dishes in the oven, as well as various pots on the stove bubbling away, and all of it smelling wonderful!

Hot Pie arrived a short while later, with three boxes of pies baked by his mother, Mrs. Hot Pie herself, especially for Arya. Beric, Allyria, Edric, Thoros, Tom and his girlfriend Jenny all arrived together, and it became evident that dinner would have to be served buffet style seeing as the house had suddenly filled up with people. Jon and Arya had never experienced anything like it, and both were loving every moment of it.

Mr. Mott had the guys cooking up the burgers and hot-dogs on the barbeque, while Mrs. Mott had the girls setting up all the food on a long table under the patio. In addition to the barbeque, there were also salads, a baked macaroni dish, spicy chicken wings, sticky ribs, corn on the cob and warm bread rolls. For dessert, there were the pies Hot Pie's mother had baked, a fruit salad, ice cream, and Mrs. Mott had even baked a cake for Arya.

Everyone sang her a Happy Birthday, which had gotten her surprisingly emotional, then she'd had to kiss the nearest boy because she'd touched the bottom of the cake when she'd cut it. Toby Mott did not stop blushing all night after Arya had planted one on his cheek. After they'd eaten, Arya had requested that Beric, Gendry and Jon sing a song for all of them. Allyria and the others had then insisted on it, and Gendry had gone and fetched his acoustic guitar, while Arya's new guitar, Needle, was christened by Jon.

Arya was on such a high that night, and she had Gendry to thank for it. None of it would have been possible if it hadn't been for him. She sought him out during a quiet moment when Jon was engrossed in conversation with Tom and Thoros, and the others were laughing at something inappropriate that Beric had said.

"Gendry." She sat next to him on the swing-seat he occupied, a little too forcefully, almost sending them into the dirt.
"Steady!" Gendry said, grabbing her to stop her from sliding off the seat.

"Whoops!" Arya laughed, and gripped his upper arm for balance. "Too much sugar in my system!"

"You had two slices of cake," he observed, "and a slice from all of the pies, and ice cream."

"All right, so I made a pig of myself," she said, still laughing. "It's all your fault, you know."

"My fault you've got the appetite of three grown men?"

"You know what I mean!" She pinched his arm.

"Ow!"

She hugged him tightly, wrapping her arms around his waist so hard he couldn't breathe, and pressing her face against his.

"Thank you, Gendry," she said into his ear, "thank you, so much."

He returned the pressure of her hug half a heartbeat later, and he let her go only when her hold began to loosen.

"You're welcome," he said, and cleared his throat. "I didn't get you anything though."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I didn't buy you a gift… I didn't know what to get you."

"You've given me the best gift, Gendry!" Arya put her hand on his arm. "It's so totally cheesy, and completely cliché, but you've given me memories tonight. You can't pay for stuff like that."

He smiled and shook his head. "You're right, that is way too cheesy."

"Tell anyone I said that, and you're dead. Got that?"

"Got it." Gendry was sitting so close to her that their knees touched, and he suddenly took hold of the hand she'd laid on his arm. "There is something I can give you,"

"What's that?"

He shrugged. "Just another memory,"

He pulled her in close.

"Gendry…" she said nervously.

"Don't freak out, Arya," he said, "it's just a kiss,"

He leaned down and kissed her. It was light, brief and warm, just on the corner of her mouth, and over all too soon. It was a sweet kiss, and yet it sent tendrils of something hot and promising in her veins.

"Happy Birthday, Arya." Gendry smiled down at her, and Arya could do nothing but blink at him.

Then he stood up and walked away.

She came back to herself only when Jon told her that it was getting late and that they should be
going. He'd already called their father to send the car around for them. It was a surprise to everyone when Eddard Stark himself came to collect them, and he spent a few minutes chatting to the stunned Mr. and Mrs. Mott, and thanking them for their generosity towards his daughter.

Gendry had shaken his hand and met his eyes without flinching, looking perfectly at ease when everyone else meeting her father seemed to start shaking. Eddard Stark had always had that effect on people. All except Gendry it seemed.

Arya had gone home, off-kilter due to Gendry's kiss, and yet still buzzing from everything else that had happened that night. She didn't think anything else could top her buzz at that moment.

And then she'd woken up on Friday morning – her actual birthday – and father had told her that she could take the day off school!
Hello peeps!

In case any of you missed the commotion at the student parking lot yesterday afternoon – the dashing Stark brothers, Jon and Robb, are in town! Sansa and Arya's big brothers are obviously here to celebrate their birthdays. I hear both brothers are currently single…!

Also with them is Theon Greyjoy, youngest son of shipping magnate, Balon Greyjoy (CEO of Kraken Shipping Lines). Theon has the reputation of being a bit of a ladies man, and with his roguish good looks, it's not hard to see why!

Rumor has it that Arya has already started celebrating early, and the weekend hasn't even arrived!

Arya, you're officially fourteen today – again, happy birthday!

Sansa – what's that handsome boyfriend of yours got planned for your birthday? Let's hope he knows how to treat you right!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

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"Tell me again why you and Sansa aren't speaking to each other?" Jon asked Arya as they followed Robb, Theon, Sansa and her friend Jeyne into the King's Landing Prep grounds.

It was Friday night, and they had all decided to come and watch the White Knights play against Qarth High School's varsity team, the Warlocks. Arya's friend Hot Pie would meet up with them later, while Gendry had called her earlier and apologized for not being able to make it. Apparently Beric was having a panic attack about the Battle of the Bands competition being three weeks away and had insisted on more rehearsals.

"Because her boyfriend is a first class douche-bag, and she's a stupid airhead who can't see it," his sister replied waspishly.

He and Arya had spent her birthday, and unexpected day off from school, just hanging out and catching up. They'd woken up late, had breakfast and Jon had spent the best part of the morning teaching her to play her new guitar. When Robb and Theon woke up at around noon, they'd gone to Trident's Bend and had lunch at The Inn of the Kneeling Man.

After lunch, they made a surprise visit to their father, and Eddard had shown them around the site of Stark Industries' Southern Division.

Arya had then received a text message from Hot Pie asking if she would be coming to the football game that night, and Jon, Robb and Theon had agreed they would all go with her.

Robb had then expressed his wish to meet Sansa's boyfriend, and called her up to see that it happen.
"This all started because of that fight you had with the guy?" Jon recalled. "You haven't spoken to her in weeks?"

"That's right, and I don't intend to speak to her while she's with him."

"Is he that bad?"

"See for yourself." Arya nodded ahead of them where Sansa had met up with a blonde boy, and an enormous guy with a horrible burn scar on his face.

"Whoa!" Jon exclaimed. "Who the hell is that?"

"That's Sandor Clegane, better known as the Hound. Also known as the asshole who beat up my friend."

Jon figured it was best that Arya not get anywhere near Sansa, Joffrey or this Hound at that moment, so he found a distraction for her.

"Hey, why don't you go and get us some hotdogs and soda, and find us some seats before they all fill up?" He dug into his pocket and handed her some money. "This won't take long."

Arya gave him a look. "Fine, but don't think I don't know what you're doing."

When she'd gone, Jon lengthened his strides and caught up with the others. Robb had insisted on meeting Joffrey before the game, and Theon had seconded this request. Now they all stood in the student lot as Sansa made the introductions. A bit of small talk ensued, but Jon could sense that Robb and Theon were itching to start laying into Joffrey Baratheon. Jon immediately understood what Arya had been telling him. The blonde-haired-green-eyed pretty boy had this cockiness and air of entitlement around him that just made you want to punch him in the face.

Jon held this urge in check. He had never been Sansa's favorite brother, but he cared about her as much as he cared about Arya. He didn't want to see her hurt.

"How old did you say you were?" Robb was asking Joffrey.


Jon was about to turn twenty, Robb had turned nineteen, and Theon was already twenty. All three of them stood just that much taller, and broader than Joffrey to make him look…uncomfortable.

Sansa also looked uncomfortable, and Jon almost felt bad for what he was about to take part in…almost.

He shot Robb a look. *Send Sansa and her friend away.*

"Sansa, why don't you and Jeyne go on ahead and find us some seats," Robb instructed her. "We won't be long."

"But…"

"Go on, Sansa," Robb said using a tone eerily like the one their father used when he meant business.

"Okay." Sansa obeyed, like the good girl she was.

"Thanks, Sansa. Arya's already gone ahead to buy hotdogs, too," Jon added.
The enormous, burned-faced guy stood a little ways behind Joffrey, wearing an expression that looked something like a smirk. He seemed to be finding Joffrey's discomfort amusing.

"So, you're actually two years older than Sansa. How long have you been dating? Sansa hasn't told us much about you," Robb said when Sansa was out of earshot.

Sansa hadn't told them anything. Full stop.

"Just a few weeks," Joffrey replied cautiously, "shortly after we met at the party that my parents held to welcome your family to the South."

"Oh? That wasn't that long ago…so, you wouldn't have had a chance to get to know each other all that well," Theon stated.

"Well, it's just a matter of time…" Joffrey shrugged.

"Sansa's a sweet girl," Jon declared, wearing a predatory smile. "Not like Arya,"

Joffrey's expression turned suspicious at the mention of Arya's name.

"Yes, she is sweet," Joffrey said, "my mother likes her."

"Everyone likes Sansa," Theon added, "it's hard not to."

"She's very pretty, too," Robb continued, "I can't imagine anyone not liking her…let alone anyone wanting to hurt her."

"She's also quite innocent, wouldn't you say, Robb?" Jon added. "I'd hate to see anyone try and take advantage of that, wouldn't you, Joffrey?"

"No, I wouldn't want that." Joffrey was starting to look annoyed, recognizing when he was being threatened. "Are you suggesting that--?"

"I wasn't suggesting anything. In fact it's a good thing she found you," Robb said, and Jon could see how much effort it took for his brother to say that without a hint of the derision he could see lying under his calm façade. "I'm sure you won't let anything like that happen to her."

"Of course he wouldn't." Theon smiled, clasping Joffrey around the shoulders. "He's a Baratheon! You will look after Sansa, won't you?"

"Well, yeah…" Joffrey responded.

Jon was not convinced, and neither were Robb or Theon. However, Sansa had chosen him, and there really wasn't much they could do about that.

"That's great to hear." Robb finally cracked a smile, and the tension left the group. "It was good to meet you, Joffrey…and you too, Sandor."

"Likewise," Sandor grunted.

"Yeah, nice meeting you all." Joffrey looked like he couldn't wait to bolt. "Now, if you'll excuse us, we need to get ready for the game."

"Good luck fellas," Jon said to them, "we'll catch you after the game."

Jon and the others waited until both guys were far from hearing before they burst out laughing.
"What a jerk." Robb shook his head. "Is he really Robert Baratheon's son?"

"Did you see the look on that big guy's face?" Jon said, "he looked like he was trying to stop himself from laughing!"

"Is that what that expression was?"

They eventually found Arya, Sansa and Jeyne in the stands. Jeyne had strategically seated herself between the sisters. Hot Pie had joined them by this time, and Jon sat next to Arya and relieved her of the hotdogs and soda she was holding for him.

"Hey, Sansa," Theon said, taking a seat beside her. "Joffrey seems like a nice boy…is he a good kisser?"

Sansa's face went a funny color at his question, bypassing red altogether and turning a shade of puce purple.

As they waited for the match to start, Jon thought of the kiss he'd witnessed Gendry giving Arya, and wondered if he should have had a similar chat with him, too.

Arya

Arya sat primly and uncomfortably in a black, strapless, peplum-skirted cocktail dress. Her hair was tucked into a constricting bun at the back of her head, as her mother had instructed her to do. She was also wearing heels. The dress and shoes were two of her new purchases, but she regretted the heels majorly. It was Saturday night, and as she had predicted, her parents had booked a fancy dinner in a fancy restaurant. What made it bearable was the fact Jon and Robb had promised that they would go somewhere fun afterwards. The catch was that Sansa had to come as well. Despite the blister forming on her little toe, Arya had to admit that the presence of her brothers had definitely made for an enjoyable evening so far.

Robb had spent most of the day with Sansa, while Jon and Theon had spent the day with Arya, Bran and Rickon, watching UFC replays and episodes of The Ultimate Fighter. The three of them were driving back North the following day, and were determined that Arya and Sansa had a good time while they were together. Robb had told her that they'd had to do some schedule shifting so that they could come down a few days earlier, but there was no way they could extend their stay.

It meant they wouldn't be able to stay for Sansa's actual birthday, so Robb, as Sansa's favorite, had made it up to her by buying her an extravagant amount of presents. His day out with her had involved stopping at her favorite high fashion boutiques.

He'd picked up a CC Skye bracelet for Arya while he'd been out, and she'd loved the design, but she ignored the fact Sansa had more than likely picked it out for her. She was wearing the gold chain and woven leather on her wrist at present, being the only accessory she had matched with the black dress.

"Your mother and I have gifts for both of you," their father announced shortly before dessert was to be served.

He then reached inside his jacket, and produced two identical blue jewelry boxes, in the distinctive Tiffany & Co hue.

"We hope you both like them," their mother smiled as she took one of the boxes.

The one her father held was given to Arya, and when she opened it she found a fine golden chain, at
the end of which a filigree butterfly dangled. Her grey eyes met her fathers, and the smile she gave him was tremulous.

"From the chrysalis of childhood, you've emerged a young lady, Arya," Father said to her softly, almost poetically.

*I'm not a child anymore,* she thought, *but I'm not a lady either.*

Sansa opened hers, to find a little bird…a golden dove, dangling from the end of an identical golden chain.

"Stay as sweet as you are, Sansa," Mother said to her, "happy birthday, girls!"

Arya and Sansa hugged and thanked their parents, and father had obliged and fastened their respective necklaces around their necks. Their parents had never bought them jewelry before, and Arya saw this as a sign that they finally saw them as young women.

After dessert had been eaten and cleared away, father had settled the bill and they headed out of the restaurant where valet had retrieved their cars. Their parents went home with Bran and Rickon in one car, while the rest of them piled into a Mercedes sedan that Robb had borrowed from their father so that they could all fit in. His Porche unfortunately, wasn't built to carry five.

"Where are we going?" Arya asked from the rear seat, between Theon and Jon.

Jon had tactfully pushed Sansa to the front passenger seat so that Arya wouldn't have to sit next to her.

"To this club we'd heard about," Robb replied, "apparently they have the best bands playing there."

"Awesome." Arya smiled, and then started hunting around for the bag she had stashed on the floor earlier that evening.

"What are you looking for?" Jon asked.

"Boots," she replied, "I'm not wearing these ankle-breakers a second longer."

The bag had been found, and with her characteristic swearing, Arya changed into her black boots with the Cuban heels, then promptly pulled out all the pins holding her hair up and shook it out, revealing the bright purple tips that had been tucked away.

"Ah, that's better!"

Robb took the Kingsroad Expressway, and Arya noticed a sign heading to Braavos.

"Are we going to Braavos?" Sansa voiced the question.

"Yes," Robb replied, "we're going to the Port at Braavos actually."

When they reached the Port, Arya noticed that the area was much like the trendy Trident's Bend, with restaurants, cafes and bars along the waterfront. The only difference being that the buildings at the Port were from an older era. Robb pulled into a car park in front of a large grey building with massive, carved wooden doors twelve feet high. One side of the door was white, and the other ebony.

The sign above the door read; *The House of Black and White.*
Arya gasped in recognition. Her heart rate increased, and her eyes were suddenly darting around just in case she caught a glimpse of a handsome boy with red and platinum streaked hair. She didn't know if she was anticipating running into him, or dreading it because she hadn't given him an answer. She followed her brothers, Theon and Sansa into the club, where they were led to a table towards the middle of the room.

Looking around, Arya saw that the décor was very much art-deco inspired, with lots of geometric patterns, angular lines and unusual curves. The color theme, as would be obvious, was black and white. There was a stage at the back of the room, which was currently occupied by the current act, and a dais on another stage on the opposite end of the room, upon which stood a gleaming white grand piano. *The House of Black and White* was originally a piano bar and was so named for the color of the instrument's keys.

A waif-like woman wearing a black and white dress came up to their table and smiled at the guys. At first glance she looked quite young, but Arya realized the woman had to be in her thirties and only looked young because of her small frame.

"What's your poison, sweethearts?" she asked the guys.

As her brothers ordered drinks, Arya watched the two guys and a girl trio on stage playing some new-age sounding music that had a hint of folksiness about it, and observed that the majority of the people in the crowd were young, and had a hipster feel about them. Their clothes were geek-chic, vintage-store one-offs, dressed down and minimalistic-fashionable.

"Maybe he won't be here tonight."

Arya didn't know how often *The Faceless Men* played at *The House of Black and White*, and wondered if she was winding herself up for nothing. What were the chances of her running into him that night? The trio on stage ended their set, and an emcee announced the next act.

"Ladies and gents, these guys don't need an introduction." A round of screaming followed this announcement. "But for those of you joining us here for the first time tonight, please give it up for *The Faceless Men!*"

More screaming from the crowd ensued, but Arya only heard the rushing of her blood in her ears.

*Chances are pretty freakin' high!* Jaqen was bound to see her, she knew it. The room wasn't so dark, and their table was almost directly in front of the stage that suddenly seemed way too close.

And he did.

Jaqen came onto the stage wearing that half-smile of his, looking ridiculously hot in torn jeans, scuffed boots and a white shirt under a grey pinstripe vest. His eyes had locked on her immediately, as though he'd known she was there all along. His smile widened, and he gave her in imperceptible nod, before he addressed the crowd in that sexy accent he had.

"Good evening to you all," he said into the microphone, "a man must introduce himself firstly, I am Jaqen H'ghar…"

Sansa's brows had risen, recognizing the name from the Gossip Spyder's post, and Arya could feel her sister's stare, but neither of them said a word.

"…this handsome man on my right is Ky on the bass," Jaqen continued, "the fat fellow behind me on the drums is Jorge, and on the keyboards is Izembaro."
"I heard these guys are awesome," Theon said.

"I heard that too," Jon said, turning to Arya, "and that guy was looking right at you, Arya."

"Was he?" she feigned ignorance, and kept her eyes on the stage.

"...Tonight, we will start by playing a new song that I wrote just two days ago. It's a funny song, and it is actually a true story." Jaqen was saying as he picked up his guitar. "A lovely girl took my phone number, but I'm almost embarrassed to say that I have not heard from her...and that was more than a week ago!" The crowd laughed. "It's titled, In Your Hands."

**OH MY FREAKING GOD!**

Arya wanted the ground to open up and swallow her whole.

The drummer counted them in, and Jaqen struck a chord. The song was up-tempo, indie-rock in feel and definitely cheeky with just a hint of self-deprecation. Jaqen had gone and written a song about her keeping him waiting.

"It's not every day that I expect, a girl like you to fall into my lap. I did not suspect, that I'd fall into your trap!"

He was teasing her, making fun of her in that buttery-golden, molten caramel voice of his. She almost groaned, but she didn't want him to stop singing. The crowd was really getting into it, and Jaqen sang the role of unlucky-in-love-fool to perfection. Arya snuck a look at Sansa, and found her sister smiling and cheering like every other person in the the crowd.

Jaqen got to the chorus, and he looked directly at Arya as he sang it.

"Must you be such a mystery? Girl, please tell me 'bout your plans, and put me out of my misery...Because my fate is in your hands..."

"I know how that feels!" Jon laughed. "I've been left hanging once or twice myself."

"Me, too." Robb cringed. "Not a nice feeling."

Arya got Jaqen's message loud and clear.

They sang another half-dozen songs, all of which Arya had heard before in the videos she'd found of them online. Jaqen's voice had sent goosebumps all along her spine and arms the entire time. By the time they were on their last song, she had an answer for him.

She dug her cell phone out of her clutch and began a new message for Jaqen.

"Start with one."

She pressed 'SEND'.

She clapped and cheered when they finished their set and as they downed their instruments. She watched him as he crossed the room to stand at the bar and order a drink from the waif in the black and white dress, and as he pulled his phone out of his pocket and read her message. His eyes met hers across the room, and he smiled. Arya then wondered what she would do if he decided to come and speak to her, with both her brothers and her sister present.

**Oh, hell no!** She wasn't going to risk that scenario. She grabbed her phone again and began to type madly.
"Big brothers and sister with me. Don't come over here!"

Across the room, she watched as Jaqen H'ghar threw back his head and laughed.

Sansa

King's Landing had been experiencing unseasonably warm weather for October. Winter was definitely on its way, Sansa could feel it in the early morning and evening air, but its chill seemed to take longer to get a grip in the South. Consequently, the day of her birthday saw temperatures warm enough to warrant a pleasant day at Narrow Sea Ocean Park, the only water amusement park in the South. Narrow Sea Ocean Park had numerous attractions, including wave pools, river rapid rides, looping tube rides, ridiculously high waterslides and even a pirate-themed mini-park for little children, to name a few.

She'd had a wonderful breakfast with her family, and enjoyed the last few hours with Robb and Jon before they hit the road to get back to their college in the North, promising to return at Thanksgiving. Arya had been upset to see Jon go, and she envied her relationship with their brother. While she did favor Robb, their goodbye had not ended in tears.

Theon, she was happy to see depart.

Sansa could have happily gotten violent with him for that dig he'd made about Joffrey on the night that the two had met.

"Joffrey seems like a nice boy…is he a good kisser?" Theon had asked.

She hadn't wanted to compare Theon's and Joffrey's kiss, but that question had made her think about it. If she were honest with herself, the truth was that she actually couldn't tell the difference, except Theon had tasted like bourbon, and Joff usually of mint chewing gum. Neither were sloppy kissers, at least not the sloppy as described to her by Randa anyway, but there was nothing remarkable about either of their kisses.

He's gone now, let it go.

Shortly after her brothers and Theon had departed, Joffrey and her friends had then picked her up from Chateau Meagor, and they'd all driven to Narrow Sea Ocean Park. Much to her surprise, Sandor had turned up by himself. Together with Trant, Randa, Mya, her boyfriend Lothor, and Jeyne, they made one loud, laughing and giggling party. They settled themselves around a patch of grass by one of the main pools, laying out towels on the ground, and commandeering the available plastic sun-loungers nearby. Sansa draped her towel over one of the plastic sun-loungers and made room for Joffrey who'd sat down beside her.

"Do you need to go to the change rooms first?" he asked her, "I need you to put sunblock on my back."

"No, I'm wearing my bikini underneath," she replied.

"Bikini, huh?" Joffrey slid closer to her and tugged on the sleeve of her midriff-top to reveal the color of her straps. "Green…can't wait to see you in it!"

Sansa wished he'd lowered his voice. The Hound sat on his towel on the ground near them, and though he looked like he wasn't listening, she'd prefer he didn't overhear anything she deemed should be between her and Joffrey alone.
"I can't wait to get in the water!" Randa exclaimed, and promptly lifted her sleeveless top up and over her head, revealing a bright pink halter bikini top.

"Me, too!" Mya agreed.

"I haven't been here in so long!" Jeyne said, taking the sun-lounger beside Sansa.

For a few minutes, the boys – except Sandor who was silent, as always – joked around and pretended not to be ogling the girls with them as they took off various layers of clothing to reveal the bikinis and swimsuits they wore. The cheerleaders, as expected, were toned and terrific, with Mya drawing gazes in her red one-piece with cutout sides. Jeyne wore a sporty, black and neon green two-piece with boy-leg shorts, revealing she had a taut figure under the conservative clothes she wore at school.

Sansa was the last to undress, and she removed her denim shorts first. Four pairs of male eyes immediately landed on the curve of her bottom. She then lifted her top over her head, and the same four pairs travelled upwards to land on the C cups she was so proud of. Her halter-top bikini, and the matching hipster bottoms were of a deep emerald green that complimented her fair skin tones and auburn hair perfectly. She currently wore her hair in a long braid to keep it off her face.

"Oh, Sansa," Jeyne exclaimed, "make sure you use plenty of sunblock, you don't want to burn!"

The guys stopped gawking, and Joffrey handed her the bottle of sunblock lotion.

"Here, help me with this."

Joffrey peeled off his t-shirt and sat in front of her in just his board shorts. Obediently, Sansa squeezed lotion into her palms and warmed it up before rubbing it into Joffrey's back. It was then that she caught sight of the Hound starting to take his shirt off.

Oh, gosh...don't look!

Yet she did. He was facing away from her, and she stared first at the rippling muscles across his back, and when he turned around, she lowered her eyes to make it not so obvious that she was drinking in the perfection that was the hard planes of his chest and abdominal muscles. He wore plain black board shorts that hung low on his tapered waist, showing a small amount of the V that disappeared below the waistband.

Her hands worked across Joffrey's back, and he was no slouch when it came to exercise so the muscles under her fingers were taut, but she couldn't help thinking that the muscles across the Hound's back would be broader, and firmer still.

She finished with Joffrey, and she then began to apply lotion on herself, allowing Joffrey to return the favor and let him rub lotion into her back. The entire time, she continued to watch Sandor as he rubbed sunblock into his own naturally tanned skin. She really was a sucker for perfect pecs and abs, and not even her own boyfriend's best friend was off limits to her hungry eyes.

The girls had then pulled Sansa to her feet, and then they had sought one thrill after another, going on just about all the waterslides, and riding inflatable tubes over man-made rapids.

"I dare you to go down Everest Drop," Joffrey said to Sandor at one point.

*Everest Drop* was the tallest waterslide in the park at twelve stories high, with a near vertical drop at the top and boasting ridiculous speeds that made the idea of riding it crazy. She'd seen the twisting panels of translucent fiberglass, and Sansa's heart had palpitated just thinking about it. There was no
"I dare you to go down with me," Sandor replied.

Joffrey wasn't about to lose face in front of everyone, and he agreed. Sansa and the others had waited at the foot of the slide while Joff and Sandor climbed to the top, and Sansa held her breath as she watched them both plummet from the enclosed capsules. She was hooting and hollering with the girls when they reached the bottom, and Sansa saw something that might have been a grin on Sandor's face.

They went back to their towels for a break, and Sansa allowed Joffrey to pull her beside him on the lounger. She was having a fantastic time, and didn't think anything could spoil it.

"Sansa, I've got my parents' riverfront guest house ready for us tonight," Joffrey said to her.

"Really? For dinner, right?"

"Sure, I'll have dinner ready for us when we get there," Joff replied, "but I actually meant we have the place to ourselves…the whole night."

"Oh?"

*Oh!* The penny dropped, and Sansa tensed up. She panicked, and said the first thing that came to her mind.

"No, I don't think so. *Oh dear, that came out badly.*"

"What do you mean, no?" Joffrey demanded.

His whole demeanor changed with her response. He'd been all smiles and laughs before, and now he was rapidly becoming sullen.

"I'm sorry, Joffrey." Sansa tried again. "I know you must have gone to some trouble to arrange the guest house and all…but I'll have to go home after dinner. I can't stay...later."

"I thought you wanted to be with me." He took both her arms and pulled her to him, unmindful of the fact their friends were only several feet away from them.

"I do, Joffrey," she said, "please. I don't want to talk about this here."

He ignored her. "Is it your curfew? I told you, you don't have to worry about that. Your father is friends with mine. They won't question why you're with me."

It wasn't that, Sansa thought. It had everything to do with why he wanted her to stay the whole night. He hadn't spelled it out, but she could guess.

"What are you afraid of, Sansa?" Joffrey took her chin in his hand, and ran the pad of his thumb across her bottom lip.

"I'm not afraid," she lied, "I just need…more time."

"You don't trust me, do you?" His fingers tightened and bit into her skin, before he thrust her aside. He got up, and Sansa stood up with him.

"Of course I do!" Sansa was consciously aware that Joffrey's agitated stance was attracting the
glances of Randa, Jeyne and the Hound. "I'm sorry I disappointed you, Joffrey."

She reached out to tentatively touch his hand, and he shrugged her off. Sansa flinched at his physical rebuke.

"Next time, then," he bit out, but his voice was heavy with disappointment, and something else that she couldn't identify, but recognized as something she should be wary of in future. He stalked away from her.

His attitude, and consequently the rest of the afternoon went downhill from there. It did not go unnoticed by anyone in the group. She didn't understand why Joffrey was behaving so badly towards her. It seemed a bit of an overreaction, in her opinion. She couldn't believe that her birthday would deteriorate so quickly, especially with such a promising start. Perhaps he'd really been looking forward to spending time with her, and she was misreading the situation altogether?

"Are we still having dinner at the guest house?" Sansa asked him quietly when their friends weren't within earshot.

"Forget about it." Joffrey shrugged. "I've lost my appetite."

Jeyne and Randa sensed that something wasn't quite right, and they did their best to distract her for the rest of the afternoon, but Sansa's earlier high had all but disappeared, and the smile she flashed around had none of the sparkle it had before. Being a Sunday and knowing they had school the next day, they all decided it was time to head home at about half-past-four. In the change rooms, she showered quickly and changed into a pretty floral printed dress, and a light sweater. Her hair had been drying in the sun, and now it hung in its natural waves down her back.

It was at least an hour's drive back into King's Landing, and Sansa wasn't looking forward to a silent ride in the car with Joffrey. She hugged the girls goodbye and thanked them for a fantastic day, and also for the beauty salon gift vouchers they'd given her, and turned to find Joffrey speaking with the Hound.

"Don't worry, Sansa." Jeyne saw her concern. "I'm sure whatever it is, you'll work it out,"

"Thanks, Jeyne." Sansa smiled at her. "I'll see you at school tomorrow."

"Okay, and don't forget we have choir practice afterschool."

Jeyne got in the car with Randa, Mya and Lothor who was driving, and Sansa waved as they drove away. Sansa walked back to where Joffrey was standing by his car. The Hound stood nearby, scowling, while Trant kicked at a stone on the ground.

"I'm heading out to Lannisport with Trant," Joff announced, his voice cool. "Hound will take you home."

"What? You're leaving without me?" Sansa could not believe what she had just heard.

"I'm going to try and salvage the rest of my evening." Joffrey stated. "I'll see you at school."

Without another word, let alone a kiss goodbye, Joffrey and Trant got into his Mercedes and drove away, leaving a stunned and disbelieving Sansa alone with Sandor Clegane.

That did not just happen, she thought. He didn't just abandon me, on my birthday. For a moment, she just stood there in the emptying car park, staring in the direction Joffrey's car had disappeared. She was hurt, confused, and getting angry. How dare he? She thought. How dare he behave like a
This was more than merely spoiling Joffrey's plans for the evening. There was something she wasn't understanding…something she wasn't seeing.

"We should get going," came the rasp of the Hound's voice behind her, and she spun around to face him.

He looked annoyed, and she didn't blame him. She'd be annoyed too if she'd just been told to drive someone else's girlfriend home. It was the second time Joffrey had done this, and both times Sandor had accepted…or obeyed, she wasn't sure.

"I'm sorry," was all she could say.

He snorted, and unlocked his Mustang.

"Get in," he said, and slid behind the wheel.

Sansa opened her own door and got in beside him, and didn't dwell on what would have happened if Sandor had refused to take her home. The engine started with a loud rumble, and music blared from the stereo. He turned the volume down, before he pulled out of the car park and began the long drive back to King's Landing. She didn't recognize the music coming from the iPod on the dock attached to his car stereo, but she knew that the iPod was definitely hers. Sandor hadn't spoken to her since the day she'd tried to give him back his iPod. She'd had it almost a week and meant to give it back to him sooner, but had never got around to it. She'd finally found him at his locker and asked him to switch them back.

"Don't want it back," he'd rasped, "think I'll keep the one I've got."

"But, why?" she'd asked, "you don't listen to any of the stuff I listen to."

Of course, she'd checked out his playlist the moment she'd realized whose it belonged to, and their tastes in music couldn't have been more different.

Sandor had given her a mocking, lopsided smile, "Seems it's grown on me."

He'd walked away, and hadn't said a word to her since. That had been four days ago. It was odd, but the guy was strange all around, and she hadn't pressed it. His iPod was new, and the exact same color and generation as hers, so she used it. She'd ended up leaving all of his music on it, and just added her own. He had an eclectic taste in music. His most-played list included Jimi Hendrix and Lenny Kravitz. This didn't surprise her. The guy drove a restored Mustang after all. What surprised her was that he also listened to the likes of Rage Against The Machine and Disturbed.

She wondered if he'd really kept all of her music because it had grown on him.

After about half an hour sitting in silence, Sansa grew tired of brooding. It was unfair of Joffrey to do this to her, especially on her birthday. Regardless of how disappointed he was with her, he shouldn't have abandoned her. The clock on Sandor's dash told her it had just gone five p.m. and her parents would not be expecting her home until nine. She had gotten an extended curfew because it was her birthday. It seemed a waste to go home early, and have to face a smirking Arya who'd had a ball during her own birthday celebrations.

"I don't want to go home yet," she suddenly said, "it's still early."

"I can't drive you around all night, little bird," Sandor said.

"I'm not asking you to drive around." Why is he calling me that?
"Then where do you want me to bring you?" he demanded, "it's past five, and I'm starving."

She didn't know where she wanted to go. She just knew she didn't want to go home, and she didn't want to be alone. She knew she was forcing herself on the Hound, but at that moment, even his company was better than being on her own.

I've gone crazy.

"So, go and get something to eat," she said, "just take me with you, wherever it is you're going."

"Damn it, Sansa," he growled.

"Please? I don't care where...just let me come with you."

He was silent for a moment, and she hoped she hadn't pushed him too far. She didn't even know if he considered her a friend.

"Suit yourself," he finally said.

He took the exit back onto Kingsroad Expressway. Jimi Hendrix began to play over the stereo and Sansa recognized it as Little Wing. It seemed she and Sandor now had identical playlists on their swapped iPods.

"Well she's walking through the clouds ...With a circus mind that's running round..." Jimi began to sing.

Is that what I've been doing? She wondered, walking around with my head in the clouds where Joffrey is concerned?

Jimi continued to sing about a girl with moonbeams and fairytales in her head, and a thousand smiles to give.

"Take anything you want from me, anything..."

Is that what Joffrey thinks? That he can just take whatever he wants from me, and that I'd let him? Sansa figured she was probably misconstruing everything about Jimi Hendrix's song, but at that moment, that's what she was hearing.

She wasn't paying attention to where Sandor was driving, so it didn't surprise her that she didn't recognize their surroundings. What did surprise her was where they were. She saw a sign with the name of the suburb they'd just entered.

"River's Edge," she said, "Flea Bottom?"

Sandor shot her a look. "Said you didn't care, remember?"

"I don't," she hastened to say, "what's here?"

"Only the best place to get lemon cakes." he replied, "and real homemade pasta."

"Lemon cakes..." Sansa turned to face him. Did he know that they were her favorite?

"The best lemon cakes," he stated, "just because people around here don't live in mansions, doesn't mean they don't know how to appreciate good food. I'd say the people here eat almost as well as we do at the other end of the river, only they don't pay as much for a meal."
He pulled into an underground, secured car park, and Sansa waited as he locked his car and made sure the alarm was armed. Then she kept a step behind him as he led her to the elevator. He'd shrugged a black hoodie over his white t-shirt, and the effect of the bulky fabric was just to make him look larger and more menacing than he already was. She was glad of it, when they were out on the street and people began to clear a path for him immediately.

They walked past a bodega where a group of guys stood smoking, looking every bit like thugs she'd seen in those bad gangsta movies Arya had made her watch. She instinctively stepped closer to Sandor. He noticed, and glanced at the guys, making sure they saw his burned face.

"They'd be idiots to try anything around me," he growled.

Sansa looked up at him warily. "These lemon cakes better be worth the risk of getting mugged."

He let out a rough sort of sound that might have been a chuckle. "Don't worry about a few hood rats. I'll chase them off if they get too close."

With fingertips at her back, he led her down the street. Sansa noticed that the path had started to incline and realized they were actually on the cliffs overlooking the mouth of the river where it emptied out into the ocean.

"Come on, this way." The pressure from Sandor's fingertips increased.

Sansa turned her head in the direction he was leading her, and found a steep alleyway that had been cut into the face of the cliff, with steps winding up to only he knew where.

"This is Serpentine Alley," Sandor said for her benefit. "Get moving."

As they began to climb, Sansa saw that every now and then, they would reach a landing that lead off to a doorway or another alley.

"What's behind the doors?" She turned to him. "Where do the other alleys lead?"

"King's Landing's best kept secrets," he replied, "little cake stores, restaurants, coffee and tea houses. You won't find food like this around Trident's Bend, or even around Harrenhal."

Looking into the doorways they passed and through glass window fronts, Sansa could see that most of the signs were displayed in both English, and other languages and scripts unfamiliar to her. The interiors and décors were all bright, exotic and vibrant, with the most enticing smells drifting from the entryways.

"Most of these places are owned by migrant families, and are one of a kind," Sandor said.

Sansa gave him a rare, genuine smile. Not the smile she gave people because it was expected, or because she was being polite, but a smile born of simple joy and appreciation. She loved discovering little hidden gems that no one but the locals knew about. The abrupt end to her day with Joffrey had taken the most unexpected of turns, and in the most unexpected company.

"Where are we going?" she asked when it seemed they'd passed all the little doorways and alleyways leading from Serpentine Alley.

"The top," he replied, "you like pretty views, don't you?"

She nodded, stunned that he'd remembered. It seemed a long time ago since that night she'd first spoken him in the drawing room at The Red Keep. Sansa reached the final step, and waited for
Sandor to show her where to go next. She was currently facing a stone wall, and there was a breeze coming from her left. Wordlessly, his fingertips again on the small of her back, he led her down the stone corridor and out into the open air.

"Oh, my…!"

Sansa's gasp was lost to the wind as she took in the view of the indigo ocean beyond, the stone cliffs below her, and the multicolored mish-mash of Flea Bottom's dwellings sprawled along the banks of the river. The sun was low on the horizon, just about to set, and its orange-gold light bathed everything in a surreal glow.

"This is beautiful, Sandor!" She smiled at him, and he just shrugged and looked as though he didn’t care. He'd probably seen this view many times.

She stepped towards the stone safety wall and placed her hands on the sun-warmed railing to take a better look. They were the only two people there, and she was glad of it, but at the same time thought it a shame that not many others would see this view, simply because it happened to be in Flea Bottom. Beauty really could be found in the most unexpected places, she thought, and she stole a glance at Sandor. She knew he probably did not intend anything of the kind, but he had just gifted her with something very special.

She would never have seen this, if not for him. She would never have had a reason to come to Flea Bottom. Heaven forbid her mother ever found out.

"Can we stay to watch the sunset?" she asked him. "You're not in a rush, right? Oh, but you said you were starving–"

"It's fine. Stay." He still looked bored, but at least he wasn't scowling.

In silence, Sansa watched as the sun disappeared into the inky horizon, and as the last remnants of orange sunlight faded into black. The streetlights below came to life, and the houses by the riverside began to twinkle as lights filtered from doorways and windows. For a few moments, she thought of nothing but the view in front of her, and heard nothing but the ocean and the wind buffeting her face. Then the silence and darkness stretched overlong, and she became conscious of the silent and even darker figure of Sandor Clegane standing guard behind her. She turned to face him, and found that he was staring at her.

"What is it?"

"It's getting cold. We should get back down," was all he said.

Dim LED lights now lit the steps along Serpentine Alley, and Sansa momentarily froze on the spot when she realized how steep the descent really was.

"Want me to go first?" he asked, and at her nod, he stepped in front of her. "Mind your feet."

The descent wasn't as bad as she initially thought, and having the expanse of Sandor's broad back in front of her certainly helped. About a third of the way down the alley, he turned into one of the smaller lanes and led her into a small restaurant that had been dug into the cliff, like a cave. It was a family owned trattoria, simply and comfortably furnished with wooden tables and chairs, white tablecloths and unpretentious tableware. She assumed all of the cafes and restaurants on Serpentine Alley would all be like Aladdin's caves.

"Hound!" A man in his thirties greeted Sandor at the door with a smile. "You're back again! Just your usual table?"
Sandor moved further into the doorway, revealing Sansa behind him. The man's smile widened in surprise.

"Ah…table for two!"

Sandor nodded silently, while Sansa offered the man a smile as he led them to a table in a corner. The room was small, and the remaining tables nearby were all occupied.

"I'll bring the bread, and tell mama to have two meals ready," he said, before he wandered off into the kitchen.

"Mama! Sandor is here…" he continued the conversation with his mother in Italian.

As the place was small, Sansa was able to hear his mother's responses in the kitchen behind the little counter. She understood a fair amount of Italian, having lived there with her family for eight weeks once when she was about ten, and also thanks to the lessons she'd had at Miss Mordane's.

"…What do you mean he's with a girl? Two years he's been eating here and he's always alone!"

"I'm telling you the truth, mama," insisted the man, "he's here with a girl…a very beautiful girl!"

"I have to see this for myself," said mama, "hand me the bread."

Moments later, she stood smiling at Sansa's shoulder with a basket of bread and a dish of balsamic vinegar and olive oil. Sansa was blushing at the smile the older woman gave her, and she longed to tell her that this wasn't a date and that she and Sandor were friends, but she didn't know how to do that without giving away that she'd been eavesdropping and had understood every word.

"Too long Sandor has been eating alone," she muttered to herself in Italian, before she spoke again in English to tell them that evening's menu.

Traditional trattorias had no set menu, with the meals served purely dependent on the whim of the cook and seasonal produce available. Mama served a selection of antipasti to begin with, bringing them a plate of cured hams, cheeses, artichokes and other preserved vegetables. For the main meal, they were served hand rolled pasta with a beef ragout so tender it melted in the mouth.

Every now and then, Sansa would catch Mama, or her son Antonio, looking over at them. Sandor ignored them or did not notice. She thought that maybe he was used to people looking at him, and he'd learned not to pay attention to their stares. They'd said that the Hound always came alone, and she found that sad. It upset her more, when she combined it with what she knew of him, and his past. She'd thought that getting to know him would mean she would understand him better, but the opposite seemed to be the case with him.

The more she learned, the less she knew. He didn't say much throughout their meal, not that she'd expected conversation from him. She'd forced her company on him, and while he'd found it in himself to be nice to her so far, she didn't want to push his patience by trying to draw him into conversation he didn't want.

The cave-room was illuminated only by a few sconces affixed to the stone walls, and in the dimness, she found it almost easy, and not so awkward to look at Sandor's face. She'd known him a month, and in that month she'd learned to stop flinching every time she saw his scars.

"Leave room for dessert," he suddenly said, eyeing her nearly empty plate.

"I _always_ have room for dessert," she returned, and finished off her ragout.
He made a face, and she was shocked to think he was actually smiling at her. The burned side of his face didn't look any better for it, but his unburned side was made handsome. And she stared.

"Let's go," he said when they'd finished, and got up. "We have to go further down the Serpentine to get lemon cakes."

Sansa made to reach for her purse to pay for her share, after all they weren't on a date, but he stopped her.

"It's your birthday. Put that away," he growled softly.

She thanked him, and waited as he paid their bill.

"We'll see you again, Hound," Antonio said, "and you as well, bella!"

Sansa was aware of Mama's observant eyes watching her closely as they exited the trattoria, and she impulsively reached for Sandor's arm, humoring the older woman. Mama's smile became warmer at this seeming act of affection on Sansa's part.

Sandor had tensed at her touch, but he didn't pull away.

"Are you really that afraid of heights?" he asked, mistaking the reason she had taken his arm.

She had a healthy respect for heights, but she didn't think it an outright fear. Yet she was holding onto him, so she went with it, having no other excuse for her impulsiveness.

"Just cautious," she replied, with genuine embarrassment, as they began to descend the steep alleyway again.

He took her to a little cake shop full of the most amazing and mouthwatering cupcakes, slices, gateaux and tortes she'd ever seen. How Sandor had ever come across this place was anyone's guess. The décor was quaint, with tea and coffee being served in old fashioned and mismatched china. It was exactly her kind of place.

She grinned as the lemon cakes were placed in front of them. Sansa had asked for tea as well, while Sandor asked for coffee.

"Mmm!" Sansa's noise of pleasure at her first taste of the lemony goodness couldn't be helped, and she noticed the corner of Sandor's mouth twitching. "It's so good, you were right! This is the best lemon cake I've ever had!"

"It's just cake," he grunted.

"You don't understand," she said around a second spoonful of cake. "Lemon cakes are my all-time, last-meal-on-earth, favorite food ever."

"Really?"

"Yes." She gave him a look under her lashes. "I...I thought someone might have told you."

Though she couldn't recall telling anyone, and only her family knew of her particular culinary obsession.

Sandor shrugged. "Lucky guess."

At length, Sansa relaxed, and with her belly full of food and her limbs loosened with warm lemony
tea, she asked Sandor the question that had been bugging her all afternoon.

"Why did Joffrey really get mad at me today? I know I disappointed him, but I don't understand why he just…left me."
He stared at her, incredulous. "You're asking me?"

"You're his friend," she pointed out.

The scowl that had been absent from his features for most the evening suddenly returned, and she instantly regretted bringing up the topic of Joffrey, but she couldn't take it back now.

"Joffrey hates not getting his way," he stated.

"Did he tell you what happened?"

Sandor nodded warily.

"Why did he get so upset?"

She was making him uncomfortable, she could tell by the way he was shifting in his seat, but she needed to know the answer.

"You really don't know?"

"I wouldn't be asking if I did."

"How can you be so stup–" He stopped himself. "You said yes to dinner, but what did you say no to?"

Sansa went crimson red, appalled and mortified. "You know about that? Does he tell you everything?"

"You asked, okay?" He reminded her. "Well, that's the answer."

*Joffrey said he'd wait until I was ready.*

"Is he going to stay angry with me for long?"

He was still looking at her like she was crazy, and she supposed she was.

"I don't want to talk about this," he growled, an obvious warning for her to drop the topic.

"You know him best, what should I do?" she insisted.

He swore under his breath, quietly, but she caught most of the filth anyway. He looked at her, and she saw his fists clench.

"Look. In another reality, I'd be telling you to save yourself some pain and give him what he wants…but that would be the worst advice I could give you right now," he rasped darkly.

He let out another expletive, and he leaned forward in his chair. His expression was now guarded, and angry, and had taken on a ferocious quality.

"You want my real advice, Sansa?"

"Yes, that's what I've been asking."
"No, you're asking me to give you the advice you want to hear," he corrected her, "sorry to disappoint you, little bird, but I won't lie to you."

"Then be honest," she whispered.

"My advice is not to give him what he wants," he hissed, "not if you doubt yourself, or him. Don't give him anything you don't want to give him. Do you understand me?"

She went even redder in understanding.

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked, uncertain about his motives. "He's your friend."

"Maybe," he snorted. "But I'm not the one walking around with butterflies and fairytales in my head."

She didn't like the sound of that. He agreed with Hendrix, apparently.

"Do you really want to be with him?" Sandor demanded. "Answer me."

"Yes," Sansa replied automatically, but there was no confidence in her voice.

Sandor fixed her with a hard, piercing stare, and his grey eyes were unfathomable.

"Think about what you just said, Sansa, but don't lie to yourself," he rasped, "and, it'd be best if you didn't mention this conversation to Joffrey."

He became silent again, but Sansa did not find it uncomfortable this time.

He took her home, and before he drove away, she turned back to him and leaned in through his window.

"Thank you, Sandor," she said.

"For what?"

"For letting me be your friend."

"What?" He looked incredulous.

"It's true," she pressed, despite her nerves. "What you did for me tonight, only a friend would have done something like that. Thank you."

He stared at her for a few long heartbeats, and then he finally nodded.

"Friends."

She smiled at him. "Good night, Sandor. See you at school tomorrow."

"Yeah, goodnight."

Sansa made to walk into her house.

"Little bird," he called out.

She turned back to him. "Yes?"

"Happy birthday."
Episode 9 "This Funny Feeling"

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! This episode took some time to write, so sorry for keeping you waiting. The 'Birthday Girls' double episode took a lot out of me, and I had to eat lots of ice cream to get my energy back!

P.S there a bit of business jargon at the very end of this chapter, so if you don't understand it, don't worry...the really important bits you will understand just fine.

Gossip Spyder

Good morning King's Landing peeps! I hope you've all recovered from the weekend. I know that the Starks have definitely had an eventful few days!

The Stark siblings, along with Theon Greyjoy, were spotted at hipster club The House of Black & White on Saturday night, where The Faceless Men were playing. Were you there checking out the caliber of the guys that your friends Gendry 'The Bull' Waters and Beric Dondarrion are up against, Arya? Or, just checking out Jaqen H'ghar?

Joffrey Baratheon was also spotted at nightclub hotspot Lannisport, minus Sansa Stark on Sunday night – correct me if I'm wrong peeps, but wasn't that Sansa's actual birthday? What's going on you two? I hope everything's okay?

In other news about the Baratheon family, I hear congratulations are in order for Myrcella Baratheon – did you all forget about Joffrey's freshman sister? You know, she's this pretty blonde thing with curls, kinda shy and hangs around the performing arts building? Anyway, I've been told she auditioned for, and got accepted into the Dorne Academy of Dance. I hear she will be leaving for Europe shortly. Well done, Myrcella!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

Arya

She'd said yes.

Arya lay on her bed staring at the ceiling, thinking about Jaqen H'ghar, while her stomach knotted itself up in anticipation, and also a certain amount of nervousness. She was going on a date with a boy for the first time. She'd been out with boys before, but not like this. This wouldn't be like going out with Gendry or Hot Pie. They were her friends and there'd been no expectations for her to be anything other than who she was.

Going on a date with a boy meant something else…something more. It meant she could become someone's girlfriend. Jaqen's girlfriend.

Arya picked up her pillow, held it over her face and screamed. Aaaaargh! When she removed her
pillow, she found Bran standing in the doorway, wearing an amused smile on his face.

"You okay there?" he asked.

"Go away, Bran!" She threw her pillow at him, which he dodged.

"So, you don't want help with your math homework then?" he queried.

Arya groaned. "Yes, I need help!"

_In more ways than one_, she thought.

She rolled off her bed and grabbed her notebook and math textbook. She shoved the algebra equations under Bran's nose, and watched in amazement as her twelve year old brother found $x$ and $y$ in about a minute.

"You're a genius," she stated, studying the symbols he'd written down on the notebook, though it may as well have been hieroglyphs.

"So, I've been told." Bran yawned. "Can you follow what I've done?"

At her blank expression, Bran sighed and spent the next hour breaking down the equation and the steps she would need to follow to get the right answer. Bran was used to this routine. Both his older sisters had asked him for help with homework and projects numerous times in the past, and his patience seemed never-ending.

"Get it now?"

"Noooo!" Arya dropped her head onto her folded arms.

"Uh…this isn't about algebra, is it?" Bran questioned. "It's to do with why you were screaming into your pillow."

"You don't need to be a genius to work that out," Arya muttered, her voice muffled by her arm.

"No, but I was trying to be a tactful brother and not bring it up," he pointed out, "Sansa was doing the same thing earlier."

"Screaming into her pillow?" Arya looked up at this news. "Do you know why?"

He looked at her like she was crazy. "I know better than to ask."

"I hope she and that dimwit boyfriend of hers had a fight," Arya spat.

Bran raised his brows, in an expression that reminded her of Robb. "If we're done with your homework, I'm gonna leave now."

"No, stay." Arya took a breath and looked into Bran's blue eyes. "A boy asked me out, and I said yes."

Bran immediately looked uncomfortable. "Are you sure you want to talk to me about this?"

She wasn't, but Bran was smart and mature for his years. He was far from being a normal twelve year old boy. Even though she was older, she had never felt like his big sister. Especially not when he'd always stood taller than her, and not when he could converse with their father and Robb about the state of the stock market.
"You're going to talk to me about it, regardless." Bran settled back into his seat, realizing he was about to sail into uncharted waters with Arya. "What's the matter?"

"He's older,"

"How much older?"

"He's eighteen I think, so four years older, and he's a senior."

"Okay…that's not ancient." Arya had thought the same thing. "What else?"

"He's probably way more experienced,"

"I really don't see what advise I can give you," Bran said, "I'm twelve."

Arya sighed. She'd made such a big deal about not being a child anymore, and here she was seeking advice from a twelve year old, and suddenly feeling very much like a little girl.

"Nothing that I tell you gets repeated to anyone, okay?" she said to him fiercely.

"That's a given." Bran's eyes widened. "I know you can choke me out."

"Bran…"

"Sorry." He looked sheepish. "Okay, just spit it out. What's the issue? Don't you like this guy?"

"I do! I do like him," Arya admitted for the first time, "he's really good-looking, and he's a talented musician, and he seems like a really nice guy."

"But?"

"I can't figure out why he wants to go out with me, and I'm afraid I'll screw it up somehow."

"And?" he prompted.

"And then there's Gendry." Arya rubbed her hand over her face in a manner similar to their father. "He kissed me the other night."

"Oh?" Bran said, ears perking up at the scent of a potential love triangle. "Does he like you?"

"I don't know."

"Do you like him, too?"

"I don't know," Arya replied, but I liked the way it felt when he kissed me.

"I'm not sure what else to say to you, Arya." Bran sighed. "I repeat, I'm twelve, and I know nothing about dating."

"But you know psychology and human behavior, right? Don't you read those kinds of books in your spare time for fun?" Arya got up from her desk, just to throw herself back onto her bed. "Bran, I wouldn't be talking to you if there were anyone else! I don't want to talk to Mom because the thought of me dating freaks her out. I'm definitely not talking to Sansa, and Jon would just get all weird on me."

"And you think this isn't weirding me out?"
"Fine then, don't help me." Arya expected him to leave the room then, but he didn't.

With another sigh, Bran moved from the desk and sat down on the bed beside her.

"Okay, I do read those kinds of books, but it doesn't mean I understand everything in them. So, I guess all I can do is just to ask you a bunch of questions, and maybe it'll help you think things through."

Sitting up, Arya nodded. "Thanks, Bran."

"Why do you think you'll screw things up with this senior guy?"

"Because I've never dated, and I haven't got a clue what I'm doing."

"But he realizes you've just turned fourteen, right?"

"Yes, he knows that all too well," Arya replied, remembering the conversation she'd had with him at the juice bar.

"Is he a smart guy?"

"I think so."

"Then maybe you should give him some credit," Bran suggested, "maybe he already knows this, and he'll take things slowly."

Arya's mouth dropped a little at the logic behind Bran's words, remembering more of her conversation with Jaqen.

"A little girl becomes a young woman."

"I wasn't a little girl...not when you met me."

"And I was always aware...though, you mistook my meaning."

"What was your meaning, then?"

"Just that you are young and inexperienced...but I do not see you as a child."

Jaqen had already acknowledged her inexperience. Perhaps Bran was onto something! She smiled at her brother.

"You're good at this, keep going!"

"Okay," he said, encouraged. "You said before that you didn't know why he wanted to go out with you. Um...well, I guess only he would know the answer to that, so maybe you could just ask him."

"Would he give me an honest answer?"

"If he's a decent guy, he will," Bran said simply.

"Good point."

"So, onto your friend Gendry." Bran scratched his head. "You said he kissed you, but you don't know if he likes you, or if you like him...hmmm."

"It was just a peck, really," Arya said, "a quick one, and he kissed me because it was my birthday."
"Oh." Bran scratched his head again. "Did he ever do anything before to make you think he might like you? How does he act around you?"

"Um...He's never made a move on me, if that's what you mean. Mostly, he just got kind of protective, the way Jon gets."

"Oh," Bran said again, "has anything happened since he kissed you? Does he treat you any differently?"

Arya hadn't noticed anything different in Gendry's behavior since the night he kissed her. Although, they hadn't really spent much time together over the week, as Gendry had been going to practice with Beric and the band pretty much every day after school in preparation for the competition.

"I haven't noticed any change," she finally said.

"Okay, so have you ever thought of dating him?" Bran prompted.

"No," Arya replied, "I haven't thought of him like that."

"Could you think about him in that way?"

Arya shrugged, but inwardly, she realized it wouldn't be hard to see him that way. After all, Gendry was hot, and he was thoughtful and sweet...when he wasn't being stupid.

"It...it would make things different," she admitted, "he's my friend, and I don't think I want that to change."

"Then, I think we've reached some kind of resolution," Bran stated.

"Which is?"

"From what you've just told me, it sounds like you're into this senior,"

"What about Gendry?"

Bran shrugged. "You haven't told me anything to suggest that he might want to be more than friends, and maybe the kiss he gave you was platonic."

"So, it might have just been me who felt something?"

"Maybe." Bran started looking uncomfortable again. "In any case, you just said you didn't want things to change between you and Gendry. To me, that means you don't want to date him."

"Are you always so logical?"

"I have to be. I have no experience," Bran then looked at Arya sharply. "Arya, please don't make any decisions based only on what I've just said."

"Of course, I won't," she said.

"Good." Bran stood up. "Anyway, I think I'll leave now before this gets any weirder."

As Bran left her room, Arya questioned her wisdom in discussing such a personal matter with her younger brother. When it came down to it, she was as inexperienced as Bran when it came to relationships. Given the turmoil inside her head, she had to admit that Bran's objective and logical insight did help to put things into perspective for her. Without a doubt, she was crushing on Jaqen
H'ghar, and the thought of going on a date with him was making her giddy. He hadn't told her when or where as yet, but she knew he wasn't the type to leave a girl hanging – unlike what she'd done to him.

At the same time, the memory of her reaction to Gendry's kiss was confusing her. Perhaps she was just making a big deal out of it because he was the first boy, outside of her family, to ever kiss her.

He was a good friend, probably her best friend, if she really thought about it. She didn't find it easy to make friends, and if she lost Gendry's friendship – the thought upset her, so she made herself push it out of her mind.

Her phone rang, making her jump, and Jaqen's name appeared on the display. Arya's heart suddenly began to skip, and her hand shook as she answered the call.

"Hello," she said, way too breathily for her liking.

"Hey there, lovely girl," Jaqen's molten caramel voice travelled over her, making her skin tingle from head to toe. "How are you?"

"I'm great." Arya sat up against her pillows. "And you?"

"Very well," he replied, "I hope I haven't called you at a busy time?"

"No, actually I was just finishing some homework." She released a breath. "I…uh, I was expecting that you'd call."

"I expected you might have been." He chuckled. "I hope I did not keep you waiting long!"

Arya heard the teasing note in his voice, and she was glad he couldn't see her blushing. "Not at all," "Lovely girl," Jaqen began, "I called because I wanted to see if you are free this Saturday?"

So soon, she thought, but she'd been expected that, too.

"I am, yes," she replied,

"Perfect. Is 10 a.m. too early?"

"That sounds fine," she replied, "will you be coming to pick me up?"

"Of course,"

"I suppose you already know where I live, right?"

"You suppose correctly,"

"Okay, then." She licked her suddenly dry lips. "I guess I'll see you this Saturday, at ten."

"Just so," Jaqen murmured, and Arya imagined that half-smile gracing his lips. "I look forward seeing you, sweet girl."

Sansa

She lay on her stomach with her face buried into her pillow, screaming into it. She took a breath, and then screamed again. She didn't know what she was going to do about Joffrey. He'd been
apologizing to her all week so far for behaving so badly towards her, and for having ditched her on her birthday. She'd gone to school on Monday fully prepared to stay mad at him, but he'd found her first, spouting apologies and regrets and carrying a bouquet of flowers. He'd brought her flowers everyday that week so far, in an attempt to get back into her good graces. Joffrey had done this in public, within view of everyone, and Sansa had felt obliged to appear to forgive him.

"Aww..." Jeyne and the cheerleaders had said, "how can you stay mad after such a public apology?"

None of the words she's wanted to say to him ever made it past her lips. She'd wanted to tell him off for ruining her birthday, and for palming her off to Sandor. But she hadn't. Thanks to Sandor, her birthday hadn't been ruined. A part of her did not regret that Joffrey had abandoned her, and it was this part that was causing her bewilderment. Was it wrong that she had ended up having a great time with her boyfriend's best friend?

Try as she might, she couldn't imagine that she would have enjoyed herself as much if the dinner Joffrey had planned had gone ahead. She also tried imagining that it had been Joffrey who had taken her to Mama and Antonio's trattoria, but she couldn't picture it, and in any case Joffrey wouldn't be caught dead slumming it in Flea Bottom.

Having had a few days to think back on it, she couldn't believe she'd forced her company on the Hound, or that he'd let her tag along. I really must have been out of my mind, Sansa thought. She certainly hadn't forgotten who he was, or the rumors about what he'd supposedly done, but at the time, her anger with Joffrey had eclipsed the wariness she normally felt around Sandor. I am still wary of him, aren't I?

Sansa pictured Sandor's large intimidating form in her mind, as well as his face that both attracted and repelled her. He remained no less intimidating, but she no longer felt the fear she'd been carrying since the rumors about him supposedly beating up Arya's friend had surfaced. She still didn't know if there was any truth to those rumors, but the more time she spent around him, the less likely it seemed that he would hurt someone without reason or provocation.

They were supposed to be friends now.

Sansa made a face at that. Her definition of friend was clearly different to his. Sandor hadn't said more than a handful of words to her at school during the week. The scowl was back on his face, although it appeared he didn't scowl at her quite so much as he had before.

She found it hard to believe that the Sandor she saw at school around Joff and the rest of his football teammates was the same guy that had taken her to Serpentine Alley and eaten lemon cakes with her, and given her advice about Joffrey.

Sansa sighed and rolled over so that she could switch off her bedside lamp. She tried to go to sleep, but her indecision about her relationship with Joffrey made it impossible for her mind to rest. As Sandor had told her, she didn't mention their conversation to Joffrey, or the fact she'd had dinner with Sandor for that matter. Not that Joffrey had asked her about how she'd spent the rest of her birthday. He didn't want to talk about that day at all, and that bothered her.

Jeyne and Randa had asked what had happened, especially after they'd seen the Gossip Spyder's post, but Sansa had just assured them that it was a small misunderstanding and that everything was fine. She didn't tell them about going to Serpentine Alley with Sandor either. She didn't think they would believe her anyway.

She must have fallen asleep eventually, but when her alarm went off at seven o'clock the following
morning she was still tired, and far from a chirpy mood. Luckily, it was Friday, and the weekend was just around the corner. It was also lucky that Arya had already gone to school with her friend Hot Pie, and Sansa had her father to herself during the car ride to school.

"I understand that you and your sister are still not on speaking terms," her father said, "is that correct?"

Sansa winced. "That's correct, father. It's not going to change anytime soon."

"Hmm." Eddard gave his oldest daughter a sideways glance, and fixed his eyes back on the road. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but whatever, or whoever this feud is about, I hope it's worth the price of your relationship with your sister."

Those words from her father had made her feel a whole lot worse, and seeing Joffrey waiting for her at the gate with yet more flowers did nothing to improve her frame of mind.

"Thanks, Joffrey. They're beautiful." Sansa accepted the flowers politely along with his kiss.

"I'm glad you like them," he said.

"Hey, is your sister here already?" Sansa asked him, "I was hoping to congratulate her personally about getting into the Dorne Academy of Dance."

"Yeah, she's at the performing arts building, where she always is." He sounded indifferent.

"Aren't you proud of her?" She wondered at his lack of enthusiasm. "Dorne Academy is right up there with The Jiulliard School."

Joffrey shrugged. "She's just dancing, it's not like she's doing anything useful."

Sansa chose to keep her comment to herself. She hated to ask him what he thought of her singing in the choir.

"She'll be leaving for Europe soon. Won't you miss her?"

"Maybe, I guess." He shrugged again. "All I know is my mother and little brother have been blubbering since they found out that Myrcella had been accepted. Mother's planning a going away party for her."

"Well, that sounds nice," Sansa said, glad that at least one of Myrcella's brothers would miss her. "I'll have to make sure I see her at lunch."

"Suit yourself."

He walked her to her locker, as he'd done all week, before he left for his homeroom class. Sansa left the flowers in her locker and sighed. She'd been dating him a few weeks, and he'd never been this attentive to her before. She wondered if the Gossip Spyder's post questioning the state of their relationship had anything to do with his new devotion to her.

Sansa went to her morning classes, English and Social studies, and it felt like the longest morning ever. Then there was a twenty minute mid-morning break which passed in the blink of an eye for her. Her next classes were Math and P.E, and by the time she'd changed out of her gym gear back into her normal clothes, she'd had enough.

She went to the cafeteria for lunch and grabbed a sandwich, but when she headed out to the quad
and saw that Joffrey, Sandor and the others were already there, she decided she didn't have the energy to paste a smile on her face anymore. So Sansa turned back around and went to find Myrcella Baratheon. The freshman was notoriously shy, and the fact she'd gotten into a performing arts school seemed completely at odds with the girl's personality, and yet Sansa knew from experience that being on a stage often brought out the quietest of people from their shells.

"Hi, Sansa!" Myrcella beamed at her when she saw her.

"Hi, Myrcella!" Sansa liked Joffrey's sister, as the girl had always been lovely towards her and seemed genuinely happy that Sansa was dating her brother. "I wanted to congratulate you on getting into the Dorne Academy, Joffrey didn't say anything to me about it and I had to find out from the Gossip Spyder."

Myrcella made a face. "Joffrey's never understood why I dance, so that doesn't surprise me."

"I wish I could see you dance before you go," Sansa said wistfully.

"Well, you're in luck." Myrcella beamed. "We're doing a lunch-time workshop today, so you're just in time, if you'd like to stay and watch."

Sansa stayed and watched and saw for herself Myrcella's talent. She had a moment of regret then that she hadn't gotten to know Joffrey's sister sooner.

"My mom's throwing a going away party for me, and I'd really like it if you'll be there," Myrcella said after the workshop.

"Of course I'll be there," Sansa replied, and not just because Joffrey would insist on her going.

Sansa had History and Spanish to look forward to after lunch, but as she was heading to her History class, her feet took her in an entirely different direction.

She was skipping classes for the afternoon, she decided. Now, where should I go? She found herself back at the now empty quad. It was a nice day out, and she wouldn't have minded staying outside to enjoy the sunshine, but someone would see her and she'd get into trouble. She was currently standing by a pressed metal picnic bench under a tree, one of the tables furthest from the main entrance. Sansa then recognized which tree she was under, and an undeniably crazy thought popped into her head.

She'd seen Arya hiding in the branches of this tree some weeks before. How hard could it be? Sansa wondered. She hadn't climbed a tree since she was probably six years old – before she realized that ladies didn't climb trees. She made sure that her tote bag was zipped, before she climbed onto the pressed metal picnic table. She got a firm grip on the lowest branches that she could reach, then hauled herself up, with only a little bit of effort. Not looking down, she kept climbing into the dense branches, until she found a perch that looked secure enough for her to sit on. Surprisingly, with her back pressed against the trunk of the tree, it was reasonably comfortable.

Wrapping her leg and elbow around nearby branches, she took out her – and she considered it hers now – iPod and selected her favorite chill-out list. Unless someone had seen her climb it to begin with, no one would know she was hidden amongst the leaves. No one would find her there, unless she called out to them. Perhaps Arya had had the right idea. She'd sit here and enjoy the afternoon and come down just before classes ended for the day, so as not to risk anyone witnessing her climbing down from the tree. She smiled to herself.

Sansa had not planned on enjoying her quiet time a little too much, so much in fact that she forgot the time. She was snapped out of her chilled-out state only when she heard the loud pinging of the
school bell signaling the end of school.

"Oh…shit!" Sansa rarely swore, but she did then. *Crap!*

She would now have to wait until all the students had filed out of the school building before she could even attempt to come back down. In the meantime, she hoped people didn't dawdle or linger too long in the quad. The *White Knights* were on a bye so they didn't have a game that night, but Joffrey would be expecting to go out as they didn't often have Friday nights free. He would go looking for her soon, she thought. She had to wait a good fifteen minutes before she felt it was safe to attempt to try to get down. She hadn't seen a student pass through the quad in some minutes. Sansa tucked her iPod back into her bag and unhooked her elbow from around the branch…and looked down.

*Bad idea!*

She knew it had definitely been a bad idea the second she looked down and realized just how high up she'd climbed. Her muscles locked up, and her fingernails dug into the branch deeper.

And then she heard male voices approaching.

"Where the hell could she be?" asked a guy that was unmistakably Joffrey, "I texted Myrcella and she said Sansa had definitely been with her at lunch."

"Have you texted Sansa?" came the deep, rasping voice of Sandor Clegane.

"Oh, yeah," Joff laughed, "why didn't I think of that."

*Oh, no!* Sansa thought, and seconds later she heard the muffled chimes of her message tone coming from her bag. *I hope they didn't hear that!*

As quietly as she could, Sansa snuck her phone from her bag, and sent a reply back to Joffrey's; "*Where are you?*

"Bathroom. Meet you at the student lot."

*Go! Please, go!*

"She'll meet us at the lot. Coming, Hound?" Joff turned to Sandor.

"I'll catch up. I forgot something at my locker."

She heard Joff's footsteps on the pavement, and she caught a flash of his blond head through the leaves as well, and yet Sandor made no move to head back inside the building.

Instead, he sauntered towards the tree where she was clinging for her life.

"So, you've sprouted wings have you, little bird?" he said to no one, not bothering to look up, and just loud enough for her to hear.

*Shit!* Sansa thought, *he heard my phone,* but still she didn't speak.

"You can come down now, he's gone," he continued, finally looking up. "How'd you get up so high?"

She was wondering the same thing, but she only managed to make a noise like a squeak, and she wobbled precariously on her perch.
"Come on, get down before you break that pretty little neck of yours," he rasped, sounding amused. She didn't move, she couldn't, and she just looked at him helplessly.

He scowled then. "You're stuck, aren't you?"

She nodded quickly and looked away in embarrassment as her face flamed almost the same shade as her hair.

Sandor Clegane was suddenly laughing. "Ah, you're a stupid little bird!"

He stepped closer to the base of the tree and looking up, he gave her what might have been a look of encouragement, but more resembled a snarl.

"Throw your bag down first," he instructed, and he set it down on the picnic table when she'd dropped it into his hands "Now move slowly, one foot first, then your arm. Grab that branch beneath you."

"I can't," she managed to say, "I'll fall."

"Then I'll catch you if that happens," he replied, in a tone that didn't encourage her trust at all. "Move it, little bird, I haven't got all day and you don't want to keep Joffrey waiting too long."

She stewed a second longer, before she did as he told her and slowly moved her leg, feeling for the branch below her.

"That's it...now your left hand," Sandor instructed.

Inch by inch, Sansa lowered herself down, and thought she was doing well...until she caught a glimpse of the ground which still seemed miles below her and she froze again. In reality she probably wasn't more than eight feet off the ground.

"For fuck's sake!" Sandor growled, "Jump, I'll catch you."

"No! I'll break an ankle or something!" she cried in alarm, watching as the burned side of his mouth twitched in annoyance.

"Should have thought of that before you climbed the damned tree. Why would someone who's afraid of heights climb a fucking tree?" He held his arms up toward her, and with his spectacular height advantage, safety was suddenly much closer. "Jump."

Sansa remembered how she'd grabbed his arm at Serpentine Alley, and he'd believed it was because she was afraid of heights. Maybe she was, after all.

"You won't let me fall?" she said uncertainly, even as she released her grip on a branch to reach for one of his outstretched hands.

"Not if I can help it."

He caught her hand, and Sansa closed her eyes as she leapt from the branch, her momentum sending her crashing right into his chest as he tugged on her hand. His other arm caught her around her waist. She felt nothing but hard muscle under her palms, and her breasts flattened against the front of him as she slid down his torso.

Relief rushed through her when she felt solid ground under her legs, and she sagged against him for a second. She was safe.
She then opened her eyes as a funny feeling set her stomach quivering, and she stared at the grey cotton that covered his chest, trying to figure out what it meant. Then she remembered in whose arms she was in and pulled away.

She looked up at him, face flaming again. "Thank you."

He snorted. "Stupid little bird."

She ignored his comment. "You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"Why the hell were you up in the tree to begin with?"

"I…I just…"

She couldn't think of any reason that didn't sound stupid, but he must have seen something in her look, because he relented.

"Fine, no one will hear it from me."

"Thank you," she said again.

"Run along now," Sandor rasped, "don't keep your boyfriend waiting."

Jaqen drove his red Jeep Wrangler up to the gates of Chateau Maegor and found Arya already there, waiting for him. She was wearing a dress of dark blue cotton, with short sleeves and a short hemline. He almost expected to see her wearing sneakers or boots, but he was pleasantly surprised to see she'd worn some kind of black-leather sandals, ornamented with silver studs and buckled at her ankles.

Her purple-tipped hair was hanging loose upon her shoulders, and a leather cuff enclosed one of her wrists, while a small messenger bag was dangling off her arm. She looked perfect, in Jaqen's opinion. Pretty, without being cutesy like a lot of girls her age seemed to dress, and without trying too hard.

He quickly got out of his car and opened her door for her, much to her surprise. He smiled at her. He would do things properly today.

"Good morning," he greeted her.

"Hi Jaqen,"

She returned, smiling at him, causing his stomach to flutter. She was checking him out, just as he had done to her. He wore denim jeans and a sky blue, ribbed cotton long-sleeve shirt that he wore with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. He kept fit by swimming, rock-climbing and hiking, and he could tell that she appreciated his tall and lean physique as much as he appreciated her petite proportions.

For some weeks now, he had been wondering how it would feel to hold Arya in his arms properly. The memory of how she had fallen into his lap that first time they had met would often replay in his mind, and he imagined that he would be able to wrap his arms around her without a problem. She was so small, and this triggered all kinds of protective instincts in him.

On closer inspection of her, he found that she was wearing a gold butterfly pendant around her neck
"That's beautiful," he said, gesturing to it as she stepped up into the Wrangler's passenger seat.

"Thanks," she said, "my father gave it to me for my birthday."

Jaqen closed the door after her and went back around to slide himself behind the wheel.

"That's right, I never did get to wish you a happy birthday," he said as he began to drive. "Many happy returns, Arya."

"Thanks," she said again, glancing at him. "Has anyone ever told you that you don't talk like a normal teenager?"

"That is because I am not a normal teenager," he replied simply, "and, I have an accent."

She laughed. "Trust me, it's not the accent!"

"No?"

"No, Jaqen," she repeated, and he decided he liked how she said his name, softening the 'J' sound. "Sometimes you just speak like someone from another time."

"Is that bad?" He gave her a quick, questioning glance.

She shrugged. "I… I like it, actually."

His stomach began to flutter again. *I wonder what else you might like about me, sweet girl.* He would enjoy finding out, and if she would let him, he would very much like to show her what he liked about her.

"Where are we going?" she asked him.

"We are going to the Narrow Sea Wildlife Park & Aquarium," Jaqen replied, and took the exit onto the Kingsroad Expressway.

"Really? Wow!" Arya all but twisted in her seat. "I like sea lions, so we have to see the sea lions!"

"Then we will." He grinned at her.

The prospect of seeing sea lions had excited her, and consequently seemed also to put her at ease. Jaqen knew that she was inexperienced at dating, even if he hadn't read the Gossip Spyder's posts to confirm it. Arya had just turned fourteen, and he was mindful of that. He was eighteen, and he'd dated his fair share of girls since he was about thirteen. Sometimes he had been the one to pursue them, other times it was he that had been pursued, and almost always the girl would be the same age or only a year or two younger.

He had seen Arya the moment she had walked into The Hollow to watch the auditions, and had observed her quietly from across the room. The chatter around her had started almost as soon as she had arrived, and he looked because he'd been curious about the Starks. At first, he'd seen only a young freshman girl with a pretty face. He'd then found her enthusiasm and the expressions on her face as she'd cheered for her friend Gendry amusing to behold, so he'd kept watching. She'd neared his table as she'd watched the tie-breaker round, and he'd been able to observe her features at fairly close range.

He'd been watching as well, when he'd noticed someone run into her and as she'd fallen, which was
how he'd been able to reach her so quickly to pull her into him. His protective instinct had been ticking even then. She'd turned her face up to him and her gray eyes had locked with his own hazel eyes, and at that moment it hadn't mattered that she was a freshman. He would have tried to ask her for her number that first day, if only she'd shown him the slightest bit of interest. However, she'd barely been civil to him, especially after he'd refused to let her go immediately. He'd been thankful for every encounter with Arya that Fate had seen fit to grant him, but the price it seemed, was that Jaqen would have to work hard for Arya's favor.

Jaqen kept conversation light as he drove to their destination, and he found out little things about her, like her favorite color (purple) and the kinds of foods she preferred. The kind of things one expected to learn on a first date. They reached Narrow Sea Wildlife Park & Aquarium, and Jaqen paid their admission fee. They spent some time wondering around the tropical fish aquariums, where he asked her about her family, and she told him about her brothers and only sister.

"You saw my older brothers at the House of Black & White the other night," Arya began, "Jon's the dark haired one who looks like me, he's the eldest though technically he's my half-brother…"

"Half-brother?" Jaqen asked.

Arya sighed. "Yes. My father took him in after Jon's mother died. Apparently my father was dating a woman back when he was still in college, and they were supposed to have broken up when he got together with my mother. My parents had a whirlwind romance and married soon after they met. Jon's mother apparently called my father just after the wedding and told him she'd had Jon, but that she was ill and wanted my father to take Jon after she was gone."

"That surely must have come a surprise to your father." Jaqen observed the wistful expression on her face.

"And for my mother," Arya agreed. "Imagine, she was pregnant with Robb, when she was told she was going to be step-mother to her husband's child by a woman she'd never heard about. Father, dearest dad of mine, hadn't bothered telling mother about his ex-girlfriend before they got married."

"How was your brother's relationship with your mother?"

"Unpleasant, I'm embarrassed to say." Arya sighed. "My mother is on the committee of about a dozen charities, and yet she's never been charitable to Jon. I think she takes her resentment out on Jon, because she can't take it out on my father."

"That is regrettable…and yet I envy your brother."

"Oh?"

"It is true," Jaqen said, "your father took him in, against the wishes of his wife, and gave him his name and his love. He also has brothers and sisters like you who clearly adore him."

"Jon's the best brother." Arya smiled. "Don't get me wrong, Robb's awesome, but he knows that he'll never get me the same way Jon does. Did I tell you that Jon bought me a guitar for my birthday?"

"You didn't, but Syrio told me about your Hummingbird that you call Needle."

"He told you? Well, I guess I should call him about booking some guitar lessons."

"How about taking some lessons with me?"

She gaped at him. "Oh, I don't think that's such a good idea."
"No?" Jaqen felt a little wounded by her comment. "Why is that?"

"Because, I wouldn't learn anything!" Arya's cheeks turned pink. "…such a distraction!"

Jaqen laughed, and Arya bounded ahead of him to go and look at the penguin enclosures. He followed after her, and when caught up with her he now felt confident enough to take her hand in his. She didn't pull her hand away, but twined her fingers with his instead.

"What about you?" she asked him as they watched little Adelie penguins dive into the water. "What's your family like?"

"Well, my family consists of just my aunt, Umma I call her, and my uncle Otto. They raised me. I cannot remember my parents."

"I'm sorry." She looked up at him. "What happened?"

"We were in a car accident when I was a toddler, I survived and they didn't. My mother was Umma's sister, and I went to live with Umma and my uncle after the accident. Despite the rocky start to my life, I did have a happy childhood. Uncle Otto taught music at an academy back home, and as soon as I was old enough he put different instruments in my hands. Ten years ago, we had the opportunity to immigrate here, so we did. Uncle and Umma took over the running of the House of Black & White, and the rest is history."

"Your family owns the House of Black & White?" Arya raised her brows.

"Yes." He smiled at her shocked expression. "What is it, sweet girl?"

"Do you play there every weekend?"

"Almost every weekend," he admitted, "believe me though, Uncle Otto would not let me onto that stage if I were not good at what I do."

"I believe you. I've seen you play, remember?" Arya blushed again. "What possessed you to write that song about me, Jaqen H'ghar?"

"Ah, that song…I never actually intended for you to hear that," he admitted sheepishly.

"That's not how it seemed." She pouted. "Go on, I'm waiting for an explanation."

"Lovely girl, you kept a man waiting for over a week!" Jaqen squeezed her fingers and pulled her to his side. "I wrote it to release some anxiety, its' how I express myself best."

"Anxiety? Jaqen, I really am sorry for keeping you waiting so long for an answer."

"It does not matter now." He gazed down at her. "As long as you are not sorry for saying yes."

She squeezed his fingers back. "No, I'm not sorry."

They saw the sea otter exhibit next, and the dolphin show, and then lastly the sea lions that Arya had been longing to see. Jaqen took pictures of her getting to touch one, and when they'd seen enough, they ate a late lunch at a bistro by the marina. Jaqen had meant to keep their first date strictly during daylight hours, just to make sure Arya was at ease. She'd always seemed unusually jumpy around him before, but so far she'd shown none of the reservations she'd had the previous times they'd met.

They went for a walk around the marina, and Arya continued to let him hold her hand. Jaqen wondered about kissing her, but he was encouraged by how well the day had played out, and
something told him that she wouldn't pull away if he tried. He pulled her to a stop when they reached a fairly secluded section of the jetty they were walking along, and he leaned against the wooden railing, looking down into her face. Her breathing changed, and the hand he held suddenly grew clammy.

*She knows what I am about to do.*

"You're going to kiss me, aren't you?" she asked quietly.

Jaqen nodded. "If you would let me."

She took a second to decide. Then she looked up at him, and her grey doe-eyes told him that she wanted him to. She stepped closer to him.

Without a word, and hoping that his fingers didn't tremble, Jaqen pulled her to him by the hand he already held. He raised his other hand to her face and tilted her chin with his fingers, then he lowered his head, seeing her close her eyes just before he placed his lips firmly over hers.

She sighed against his lips, and Jaqen increased the pressure of his kiss just enough to cause her to part her lips. He flicked out his tongue briefly, enough to taste her lips.

*Hold back,* he told himself, *don't frighten her.*

With a small groan, he lifted his head from hers, and he was glad that he hadn't insisted on more. She was flushed, and her eyes were suddenly wide open. She licked her lips then, and Jaqen met her eyes.

"Next time, Jaqen," she began, her voice breathy. "Next time, I get to choose what we do on our date."

He smiled at her. "Just so."

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**Eddard**

"What do you know of it, Ned?" Robert glared at him from across the large, leather-topped mahogany desk in Robert's office. "What has that blasted bean-counter been saying?"

"Petyr Baelish hasn't told me anything I'm not already aware of, Robert," Ned replied, "and though you might dislike the man, you can't deny that he is an excellent accountant."

"Just get to the point, Ned," Robert bit out, "I haven't got all fucking day!"

"How much in debt are you to Tywin Lannister?"

"That's got nothing to do with this joint-venture, so I don't understand why my debt to my fucking father-in-law has anything to do with it."

"Baratheon Incorporated and Stark Industries are the two largest privately owned steel manufacturing companies in the country, in case you forgot, and I know for a fact that Tywin has a seat on your Board of Directors."

"Get to the point, Ned." Robert's face was getting redder, and his extra chin wobbled.

"This joint-venture stands to make you a lot of money personally, not just the company," Ned stated. "How much does Tywin stand to make? Are you doing all of this just to make his money back? I
want to know how much you really owe the Lannisters!"

"What the hell does it matter?" Robert demanded. "You stand to make a fortune out of this too!"

"I have money, Robert. I didn't need to do this," Ned said, "I agreed to go into this venture with you because I wanted to help you. The least you can do is tell me the truth."

"Fine, I'll tell you the whole mess of it, but you're not going to like it."

Ned paced the floor in front of Robert's desk as his oldest friend told him of things he already knew; that Robert's company had been suffering from cash-flow problems for some time, and in the past Robert had loaned the company money, but then his own cash had started to run low, and he'd gone to his father-in-law to borrow the money. Sometimes the company would do well and he'd recoup everything, only to have to sink money in again the next month.

The company's books would only show money coming in as a loan from the Director, but not where the Director was getting that money from.

"This joint-venture is a cash cow, Ned," Robert said, "if all goes to plan, this could answer my immediate cash-flow issues, while it will give Baratheon Incorporated the chance to recover, and a chance for Petyr Baelish to get finances back in order. Not to mention, it'll get Tywin out of my hair!"

"That's a hell of a list of things you want to get out of this, Robert," Ned said darkly, "there's a lot at stake here."

"I know..." Robert sighed, "which is why I think we need a third partner."

Ned stared at him silently for a long moment, thinking about what he'd just said. A third partner.

"You've already got someone in mind, haven't you?"

"I have, and I know you might not like it."

"In as much as we're being honest here," Ned said, "humor me, and pretend I'm going to be understanding about this. Who is it?"

"Mace Tyrell."

"Right."

"Told you that you wouldn't like it."

Ned sighed. "Can we re-schedule this for the morning? I've had a gutful."

"Fine," Robert agreed, then he leaned back in his seat. "I've got a question for you, in as much as we are being honest today."

"What is it?"

"I want you to tell me what you know about my boy." Robert turned and gave him a wearied look.

"Joffrey?" Ned frowned.

"No, Ned." Robert shook his head. "My real son... Gendry Waters."
Episode 10 "Troubled Waters"

Gossip Spyder

Well, hello everyone!

It definitely looks like those rumors around Arya Stark and Braavos Academy senior, and The Faceless Men frontman, Jaqen H'ghar are proving to be true – the two were spotted together at the Narrow Sea Wildlife Park & Aquarium on the weekend…holding hands! What do we think, peeps? Are they definitely dating, or just testing the waters? See the pictures for yourself!

The countdown to the Battle of The Bands will begin soon! I here there are going to be some pretty spectacular bands entering this year. In addition to our own Brotherhood Without Banners and The Faceless Men, the current list of entrants on the organizers website includes all-girl punk rockers the Silent Sisters, and a new entrant calling themselves Wildlings. I have a feeling this year's comp will be epic!

Okay, now for something serious and totally different to what I normally post - the headline on this morning’s King's Landing Herald News read that there was some trouble surrounding the Baratheon Inc. & Stark Ind. joint-venture – I don't understand all of what was said, but I'm only mentioning it here because most of us at this school have parents employed at Baratheon Inc. There was something about possible losses of jobs at Baratheon Inc. – let's hope this is only a minor setback and that this will all be sorted out soon!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

Gendry

Today's the day, he decided. I'll ask her first thing when I see her today.

It was Monday morning, and he was well rested, and though he thoroughly enjoyed being in the band, he was glad he didn't have band practice that afternoon. Much as he liked Beric, the guy could be a total fanatical pain when it came to his music. He wanted to spend some time with Arya. He'd been too caught up with band stuff and preparing for the Battle that he'd barely seen or spoken to her over the past week. He sent her a text message asking her if she wanted a ride to school, before he went to shower and get ready. He was expecting a text back from her saying yes, so he was surprised when she replied that she already had a ride, and that she'd see him at school. Slightly disappointed that he'd have to wait a bit longer to see her, he finished dressing and fixing his hair.

Thinking about what he was going to do, he couldn't help but grow nervous. He'd been surprised at how easy, and how natural it had felt to kiss her. The look on her face when he'd pulled back had been promising as well. He'd have acted much sooner, but he'd been psyching himself up all week, and planning what he'd possibly do if she said yes…and what he'd do if she said no. In the end, he had to take the risk. He was certain that Arya liked him enough to at least give him a chance. If not, he was sure they could go back to being friends.

His phone buzzed, and thinking it was Arya changing her mind, he quickly picked it up to read the text message. It was from Hot Pie.
"Dude, u seen da Spyder's post dis morning yet?"

So Gendry opened a browser on his smart phone, and logged onto the Gossip Spyder's site. What he found there made all the blood in his veins go cold first, then hot, in anger and disappointment.

_No_, he thought. _This can't be right_. He saw the photos, and another wave of disappointment, and now jealousy washed over him. It was there, plain for him and everyone to see. Arya was holding hands with Jaqen H'ghar. They had been at the _Aquarium_, and there was no denying that it had been a date.

_I'm too late._

Gendry felt so stupid. The Gossip Spyder had been right all these weeks. There was a reason Jaqen and Arya were constantly being spotted together, but he'd believed Arya when she'd denied her involvement with Jaqen. Why had she lied? Why didn't she just tell him the truth about Jaqen?

_Because she knows I don't like the guy._ Well, he wasn't going to like Jaqen any better, especially now. _I shouldn't have waited! I should have asked her out earlier! I should have been the one holding her hand!_ 

He suddenly didn't feel like going to school. He didn't want to have to look at Arya. He didn't know if he could stand to. He paced back and forth, slamming his fist into his palm, wishing he could slam his fist into Jaqen H'ghar instead. He should have known. _He should have known!_

Edric had tried to warn him about Jaqen.

"Girls are constantly throwing themselves at him, and Arya won't be any different," the blonde drummer had said.

The statement hadn't meant much to him at the time, but now he wished he'd given it more thought. _And what would you have done about it?_ Gendry sat on the edge of his bed for some time, trying to gain control of his disappointment and anger, and overall sense of loss. _How does that saying go, he wondered, you can't lose what you never had?_

He sneered cynically. That was a completely bogus sentiment. If anyone would know about loss, it was him. Much of his childhood, before coming to live with the Motts, had been spent being sad about the loss of one thing or another. He knew very well, that not having possessed something did not equate to not knowing what you've missed, or what you've lost.

He'd never had a father, so he'd watched the other boys in his elementary class participate in father-son sports events at school, and watched the other kids make Father's Day cards. He'd felt that loss clear enough. He could barely remember his mother, and he'd never had a real family life so he'd watched school friends go home to their families and sit around a table at meal times, and listen as kids talked about family holidays over summer or Christmas. He'd felt that loss, too. He'd never known his father's name, and as soon as he was old enough to start questioning who he was and where'd he'd come from, he understood that part of his identity would be lost to him.

Gendry was used to dealing with loss, and he hadn't forgotten how either.

He sighed, ran a hand through his hair and stood up. He'd go to school.

Calm again, some logic crept back into his brain.

"Think Gendry," he said to himself, "you don't know for sure what's going on."
He needed to speak with Arya, and find out what the deal was with her and Jaqen. He needed to find out how serious things were between them, and whether he'd really lost her before he even had her. He forced himself to look at the photo of Arya and Jaqen again. Seeing the happy expression on Arya's face, and the more than pleased look on Jaqen's, Gendry steeled himself. If he had to, he'd figure out how to deal with losing Arya to Jaqen H'ghar.

He reached school, and to his dismay, the talk amongst the girls in his homeroom class was all about Arya Stark and the *uber-sexy* Braavos Academy senior she was dating.

"How did she manage to snag him?" a girl in front of Gendry asked her friend beside her, "I mean, she's a freshman?"

"Freshman or not, she's a little hottie," said her friend, "have you seen her recently?"

Gendry must have made a noise, because one of them turned around and noticed him.

"Gendry, you're Arya's friend, right?"

"Right," he'd replied, wincing inwardly at the word *friend*.

"As her friend…" There was that word again. "…Would you know how long she's been seeing Jaqen?"

"No," he bit out, and it rankled that he didn't.

"I just remembered!" the other girl suddenly said, "your band and Jaqen's are going to be competing against each other! Who'll Arya be cheering for? You, her friend? Or, Jaqen her boyfriend?"

*You, her friend.* Gendry swore that if either girl said the word friend again, he was liable to do something he'd regret. Thankfully, the bell rang for first period and he was saved from anymore questions about Arya. Hot Pie had looked at him curiously, and Gendry could tell the guy had questions of his own about his distant behavior, but Hot Pie wisely kept them to himself.

At lunch time, Arya and Hot Pie were already at their usual picnic bench at the quad when Gendry walked through the cafeteria doors. Arya looked gorgeous, and Gendry stopped for a moment just so he could watch her, uninterrupted.

She was wearing her new tighter fitting jeans, and a flowing, dark purple blouse. Her hair had been caught up with clips behind her ears, and it looked like she was wearing pink lipgloss as well, which was something he'd never seen her do. *Who are you dressing up for, Arya?* He wondered angrily.

With a nervousness he'd never felt around Arya before, Gendry walked over as casually as he could and sat down on the bench opposite her.

"Hey, how are you?" she asked him, and the smile she gave him caused a pain in his chest.

"Fine," he replied, "you?"

"I'm great, thanks."

"How was your weekend?" he asked, unable to stop a trace of bitterness from creeping into his voice.

"My weekend was great," Arya replied, sounding cautious.

"Yeah? Anything exciting happen?" he prompted, "anything you want to share with us?"
Arya eyed him warily, seeing something in his stormy blue eyes and the line of his jaw that suddenly set her on edge.

"Is there something in particular you want to ask me, Gendry?"

"Only if there's something you want to tell me," he replied.

From the look on her face, she knew exactly what he was talking about. Gendry never meant to come across aggressive, but now that his aggression had come to surface, he didn't know how to reign it back in.

Arya glared at him, the question 'how dare you?' obvious in her eyes but remaining unsaid.

"No," she finally said, her voice calm but he heard the indignation all the same. "There's nothing you need to know."

That's how it's going to be, Gendry thought. He couldn't sit there any longer.

"I need to see Beric about something."

Without looking at Arya, he stood up and left.

He didn't contact her, or speak to her at school for the rest of the week.

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**Eddard**

Ned was sitting in his study at Chateau Maegor, drinking a 25 year-old, Laphroaig single malt from a cut crystal tumbler. It was reasonably early in the day for him to be drinking, and he had a mountain of paperwork to go through, but he couldn't concentrate. He'd hoped the whiskey would calm him, as it usually did, but it wasn't helping him at that moment. He took another swallow. *Maybe I just need to drink more.*

Someone had leaked the issues Robert Baratheon was having with his company to the papers, and sure enough, everything had been blown out of proportion. Robert's PR team were now in repair mode, but Ned feared that the damage had already been done. There was now too much talk about Robert's company downsizing and jobs being cut, and there was speculation about why the joint-venture was taking place in the first instance. Some smart analyst had worked out that Stark Industries was getting involved in order to bail Baratheon Incorporated out of trouble. It was too close to the truth for Ned's liking.

Apart from work, the other issue on his mind concerned the conversation he'd had with Robert about Gendry Waters.

"I want you to tell me what you know about my boy," Robert had said to him.

Not thinking, he'd immediately thought the man was referring to Joffrey.

"No, Ned. My real son...Gendry Waters."

Ned had taken half a second to recover from his surprise. "I don't believe I know what you're talking about."

"Ah...come off it, Ned!" Robert had scoffed, "I know you've been asking questions."

Still, Ned had acknowledged nothing. He would hear the truth of the matter, as Robert saw fit to tell
"I know that look." Robert had sobered up. "It means I won't get anything out of you. So fine, I'll do the talking. The boy is mine, there's no denying it...just look at him. He's more my son than Joffrey is."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean exactly what you think I'm saying," Robert had ground out, "Cersei is a lying, cheating whore and I'm willing to bet what's left of my fortune that my kids, are not my kids."

"You don't know for sure?"

"Nah." Robert had shaken his head. "But I could, easily. We're not in medieval times, Ned. We've got tests for that these days." The big man had then let out a loud sigh. "But what would be the point? I'm the only father these kids know, and besides, I'm not much better than that bitch I married. After all, Gendry is about the same age as Joffrey. Do the math...I would have screwed that boy's mother around the time I married that Lannister bitch."

Ned had remained in stunned silence.

"I should have seen it earlier, Ned. The kids take nothing after me...Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen all have that typical Lannister look about them, you know? Blonde hair and green eyes." Robert then let out a harsh laugh. "Cersei may as well have fucked Jaime, that arrogant twin brother of hers!"

Ned had winced at Robert's crudeness.

"What are you going to do?" he'd asked instead.

"Nothing, other than what I've already done for the boy," Robert replied, his manner suggesting it a foregone conclusion that Ned knew everything about Gendry's inheritance. "Cersei can keep fucking whoever she wants, and I'll do the same, as I always have."

"You're not going to divorce her?"

"Divorce?" Robert had laughed. "Cersei would love that, but I'm not about to start doing anything she might actually want! Besides, being married means I have a legitimate reason for ditching scheming gold-diggers."

You haven't got that much gold left to dig for. Ned had bitten back his retort.

"And the kids?" Ned had said instead, unable to bring himself to say, your kids.

"Can remain oblivious." Robert had shrugged. "I know I'm not any kind of father, but at least they can have my name...whatever its worth. No one else needs to know about this, Ned. Did you know that the girl, Myrcella, has just been offered a place at some posh European dance school?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"Well, Cersei's throwing a farewell party for her this weekend," Robert informed him, "your daughter's coming."

"Is she? She hasn't told me about it."

"Don't worry, she'll be safe." Robert waved his arm dismissively. "Anyway, the point I was trying to make was that the kids are better off not knowing."
Ned had thought the same thing.

Robert had then sighed, and Ned had given him a questioning look.

"I've made a lot of mistakes in my time, Ned. I probably shouldn't have ignored that woman when she'd told me she was pregnant with my kid."

"You knew about Gendry? The whole time?"

"No," Robert had corrected him. "I didn't know about Gendry, per se. I knew he might have existed, I just didn't know for sure until recently."

"When? Why did you decide to seek him out?"

"I had a heart attack," Robert announced, "or at least I thought I was having a heart attack…turns out it was just a bad case of indigestion!"

Ned had not found this amusing. "You are too fat, and you drink too much."

"Don't you start that with me!"

"Just get on with it."

"Don't judge me for my gluttony or my drinking…I am married to Cersei Lannister." Robert had rubbed a hand over his face, before continuing his story. "After I thought I was going to die, I got to thinking of the things I'd told myself I'd do before I actually died."

"You have a bucket list?" Ned had scoffed.

"Turns out I do, and finding out if I did have a kid by that waitress was on the list."

Ned had found Robert's tale incredible, but perhaps a near-death experience could be blamed for the sudden awaking of the man's conscience.

"I wish I could meet the boy, Ned," Robert had said, wearing a somber expression on his face that Ned hadn't seen since the day his sister, Lyanna, had died. "I'd like to speak to him, and see how he turned out."

Ned decided he'd share a little of what he'd learned about Gendry with Robert.

"He's a good kid, Robert," he volunteered, "he's polite, generous and thoughtful. I've met him."

"You have? How? When?"

"He's friends with my youngest daughter."

Robert had stared at him a moment. "Polite, generous and thoughtful you say?"

"Yes, Robert." Ned had smiled wanly. "He's nothing like you."

"Thank fucking Christ for that!"

Ned shook himself from his memory and finished his glass of whiskey. Shaking his head at the task that now lay before him, he sat down at his desk and took out the dossier he'd been supplied by Robert's assistant.
He spread the documents out on the desk and picked up the thickest of the pile. With another sigh, he flipped the cover and began to read Mace Tyrell's proposal.

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**Sandor**

It was getting harder to be around her. Sandor admitted that to himself. It was proving more difficult to be near her, and not want to act on his instincts to rip her out of Joffrey's arms. *Friends*, she'd said. She wanted to be his friend. *Well, fuck that.* He didn't want her friendship. He wanted more than that. He wanted something he never thought he'd ever come to want...something he couldn't bring himself to name. But there was something he knew clear enough.

He wanted Sansa Stark.

He'd wanted her from the moment he'd met her, although he'd been refusing to acknowledge it for weeks. But now, his body wouldn't let him deny it. Not since the night he'd taken her to Serpentine Alley, and after her stupid tree climbing incident – or more accurately, what happened when she'd jumped into his arms. He'd been so pissed off with Joffrey for off-loading his girlfriend onto him that day. Mostly because he hadn't wanted to be alone in the car with her, not after watching her parade around half-naked most of the day. Yet he had also been ridiculously pleased that she wasn't going home with Joffrey, and that the jerk's seduction plans had been shot to pieces.

Sansa had been visibly upset when she'd gotten into his car, and the silence had been uncomfortable, so it had come as a massive shock when she'd said she didn't want to go home yet...and then she'd begged him to take her with him. He'd sworn at her, because part of him had known that she didn't want to be alone on her birthday, and she just happened to be stuck with him. While another part of him – his ego or his cock, he didn't care – had been all too happy to be spending time with a hot girl.

He had been hungry, he hadn't lied about that, and he'd have been happy with a couple of Big Mac's, but he knew he couldn't just take Sansa to McDonald's. He also didn't want the risk of anyone seeing them together, and word of it getting to the Gossip Spyder. Flea Bottom had seemed like his safest bet. His favorite place was the *trattoria*, and he remembered the cake house his mother used to take him to, thinking Sansa might like the quirkily decorated café. Lemon cakes had been his mother's favorite and she always used to say that the cake house on Serpentine Alley served the best she'd ever had. He'd said the same thing to Sansa off the top of his head...turned out lemon cakes were her all-time, last-meal-on-earth, favorite food ever.

He wasn't certain what had made him take her to the cliff-top lookout, or how he'd even remembered that she liked looking at views, but wherever his inspiration had come from, he'd never been more thankful for it. He'd watched her silently, observed her profile, committing it to memory.

She'd clutched at his arm as well, and while the feeling of her hand on his bicep had surprised him, he'd relished it as well. He could still remember the warmth of her fingers through his sleeve, and the citrusy scent of her hair.

And then for whatever reason known only to her, Sansa had climbed up a tree and gotten herself stuck. At first, he hadn't been sure that he'd heard a cell phone chiming in the quad that afternoon. Only by sheer luck had he been looking towards the tree when a breeze had rustled the leaves and he'd seen a flash of red hair among the branches. He'd been amused, exasperated and a little worried when he'd seen just how high she had climbed, especially considering her fear of heights. He'd thought for a moment that he would have had to climb the tree himself in order to get her down, and he hadn't relished that idea. He was six-six and over two hundred pounds, and he doubted those branches would have held his weight. Luckily Sansa had moved on her own.
He'd held out his hands to her, and warm tingles had shot up his arm when she'd taken his hand. The tingles had then spread through his whole body the moment she'd jumped into his arms. He'd held her against him, and felt her breasts against his chest, while one of her hands gripped his shoulder. Then she'd leaned on him, and he'd wished he could keep her in his arms. Then he'd felt himself go hard, and he was glad she had pulled away when she had, before she could notice his reaction to her nearness.

He wanted Sansa Stark.

Sandor slammed the door of his locker, and the loud metallic clang covered the sound of the sigh that he released. He turned in the direction of the quad, and ran into Joffrey on his way. He barely acknowledged the blonde jerk, but fell into step with him regardless.

"Something's up with Sansa," Joffrey muttered without preamble, and Sandor turned to look at him.

"What do you mean?"

"She's been acting strangely," Joffrey said, frowning. "She doesn't want me touching her."

"Really?" Sandor tried not to sound too interested.

"She was mad at me about her birthday and shit, but I got her flowers and said sorry and all that..."He made a face. "That Theon Greyjoy's been posting stuff up on her Facebook."

"Like what?"

"Photos of them together, from back when they were still up North, and recent ones from when he and the Stark brothers visited...look." Joffrey took out his phone and logged onto his Facebook account, then shoved the phone into Sandor's hands when he'd found what he was after.

There was an album full of photos of various Stark family events and outings. Sandor's eyes immediately sought out Sansa, and he wasn't surprised to find that even as a little girl, Sansa was very pretty. There was another album of the recent snaps taken during their visit. One photo was just of Theon and Sansa, with Theon standing behind Sansa, his arms around her waist. Sansa's smile was sweet enough, but didn't reach her eyes. It was tagged, 'With birthday girl number 1 at House of Black & White'.

"Hey sexy, great seeing you again...I'll be missing you!" Theon had posted to Sansa.

Underneath was a comment from Robb Stark. "I can see this post Theon...I know where you live. I dare you to call her sexy again!"

Underneath that was another comment from Theon. "Sansa is sexy sexy SEXY!"

"Idiots," Arya Stark had written beneath that.

Sandor scowled.

"Maybe she's cheating on me with Greyjoy," Joffrey stated.

"He's hundreds of miles away," Sandor reminded him.

"Maybe it's someone else then," Joffrey shrugged, but his mouth had thinned. "She'd better not be sneaking around behind my back."

Sandor knew Joffrey well enough to know that Joffrey's behaviour was driven by his need to
possess. Sansa was his toy, and no one got to play with her but him.

"How could she be?" Sandor asked with carefully, "you're always with her."

"True, and the only other guy she's ever alone with is you," Joffrey added, "and you scare her, so I know she'll never go for you."

Sandor's scowl darkened.

"Take a look at this other photo." Joffrey showed him an image of Sansa and Theon, with the caption reading 'party at winterfell', dated during the summer just gone. Theon had tagged Sansa in the photo, under which he'd written; "Hey sexy, thanks for making summer so memorable..."

They approached the picnic table where all their friends were sitting, and Joffrey said something that Sandor couldn't catch when he spotted Sansa.

"...think I'll just ask her straight out," was what he did hear Joffrey say, and before he could do anything to stop him, Joffrey was stalking over towards Sansa.

Sandor watched with apprehension. He could see what was coming, and he wished he had some way of warning her, but this had nothing to do with him. He would keep out of it.

"What's going on between you and Theon Greyjoy?" Joffrey asked her, and immediately, Sansa's face went red.

*Interesting*, Sandor thought upon seeing Sansa's reaction.

"What do you mean?" Sansa asked, eyes wary and guarded.

"What's with all these messages on Facebook? He always refers to you as sexy."

"That's just Theon, being Theon," Sansa said.

"What happened last summer, Sansa?"

"Nothing!" she replied, eyes wide.

*She's lying*, Sandor frowned.

"Why does he keep saying he misses you?"

"Because, maybe he does," Sansa conceded, "he's like Robb to me, Joffrey. I don't understand why you're being like this."

Everyone at their table was now watching them avidly, waiting for whatever would come next. Sandor could feel everyone's discomfort, in addition to Sansa's mortification at this public altercation.

"He shouldn't be touching you like that," Joffrey said.

Sandor agreed.

"Only I should be touching you that way!" Joffrey hissed.

Sandor did not agree.

"It means nothing, Joffrey!" Sansa insisted, "please, can we talk about this somewhere else?"
Sansa grabbed hold of Joffrey's arm and pulled him away from the immediate surrounding group of tables where every student within earshot was listening and watching, and Sansa eventually led Joffrey behind a tree on the edge of the quad.

Maneuvering himself, Sandor was able to observe Joffrey's agitated actions as he ranted at Sansa, and as Sansa's face became stressed and apologetic as she sought to contain Joffrey's temper.

Sandor hoped that she said the right things to appease the blond jerk. For her own good, he sincerely hoped she did.

"What do you think she's saying?" a feminine voice asked him.

Sandor looked down and found Jeyne Poole at his elbow, looking over at Joffrey and Sansa with genuine worry on her face. Jeyne never usually spoke to him, but the sophomore's concern for Sansa appeared to be greater than her fear of him.

"I don't know." Sandor frowned. "You should probably stick around though, to make sure she's okay."

Sansa was again holding onto Joffrey's arm, and she looked to be pleading with him. Joffrey looked like he was resisting, and Sansa's lips continued to move. Gradually, Sandor watched Joffrey's stance relax. Whatever pretty words Sansa was saying to him appeared to be working.

"Do you know anything, Jeyne?" he asked quietly, not expecting an honest answer. "What's with Sansa and Theon?"

Jeyne glanced up at him warily, and Sandor could see she was resisting the urge to flinch when he met her eyes.

"There's nothing," she replied, "not on her part, anyway."

Jeyne probably expected him to tell Joffrey, but Sandor had no intention of doing so. It didn't surprise him to know that Theon Greyjoy may be interested in Sansa. He was sure plenty of guys were interested.

He turned back to where Joffrey and Sansa were standing behind the tree, and found that Joffrey now had his arms possessively around Sansa, and was kissing her. Something about the way Sansa was standing in the blonde's arms looked awkward, and Sandor felt the now familiar urge to rip her out of Joffrey's arms.

"Oh, look. They made up," he sneered, then he looked at Jeyne. "See that she's okay, will you?"

Without waiting for her to respond, he got up and walked away, and didn't see the curious expression on Jeyne's face as she watched him leave.

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Sansa

The Baratheon's had booked out several function rooms at the exclusive Hook Restaurant at Aegon's High Hill. A luncheon was being held for Myrcella's farewell, but Sansa could see that most of the guests in attendance were adults, friends and acquaintances of the Baratheons and Lannisters. An invitation had been extended to her parents, but they had declined on account of a prior engagement her father had committed to.

The dress code was smart casual, and almost all the men present wore nice shirts and jackets with
tailored trousers, while the women wore tea-dresses and shifts. Sansa was wearing a pastel green fit-and-flare dress that skimmed her knees and cinched in at her waist. Her hair, she had worn into a loose twist at the base of her head, and kitten heels on her feet.

Myrcella did have some of her school friends present, and all the girls wore teary expressions at the fact Myrcella was going to be away indefinitely. The Dorne Academy had officially accepted her for one year, but there was a strong possibility she would be invited to extend her studies. As it turned out, Myrcella was flying out that evening, and Sansa learned that Myrcella's parents had assigned a personal bodyguard to accompany her, and watch out for her while she was away.

In all honesty, Sansa had not wanted to come to the party at all, especially after the fight she'd had with Joffrey the day prior, but she'd made a promise to Myrcella to be there. It had taken a sickening amount of sweet-talking to get Joffrey to calm down, and when she'd gotten home that night, the first thing she'd done was unsubscribe from Theon's posts on Facebook to try and limit what Joffrey would find on her wall.

She'd been frightened of the look in Joffrey's eyes that day, and she'd been shaking the entire time she'd been trying to calm him down. He had a temper on him, and she had the inexplicable fear that he could lash out at any moment. She hadn't liked it one bit, and she feared having to see the face of Joffrey's jealousy again. She damned Theon Greyjoy to hell for causing trouble for her, even from hundreds of miles away. She now sighed, and focused her attention on the present.

Sansa had met a number of the Baratheon and Lannister family members before, but she'd never really had the opportunity to speak with many of them previously. She now found herself standing in front of two, markedly different and evidently Lannister men. Both had the same golden-blond hair, but one was tall, and the other dwarf-size. The shorter one was holding out a flute of pink lemonade to Sansa.

"Thank you," she said as she accepted the glass from him, and hid her surprise at his appearance.

"You're welcome, Miss Stark," he said, "I don't believe we've met. Please allow me to introduce myself, I am Tyrion Lannister."

She'd recognized him even before he'd spoken his name. Joffrey had told her about his Uncle Tyrion, the dwarf. The other man beside him was Jaime Lannister, who stood as tall and muscular as Joffrey. Sansa found it uncanny how much Joffrey resembled his Uncle Jaime, and wondered if Joffrey would grow up to be half as graceful and elegant as the man in front of her.

"It's nice to meet you," Sansa said to Tyrion.

"I hear you're the young lady that's captured Joffrey's heart." Jaime smiled, and Sansa flushed. "We Lannister men have always had impeccable taste in women, and it's good to see Joffrey has inherited our discerning eye for beauty."

"I also see where he gets his talent for flattery," Sansa heard herself say.

Both men laughed, and Sansa was surprised to see that Tyrion's prominent brows, as characterized those with his kind of dwarfism, and his mismatched black and green eyes, did not seem so unattractive when he smiled.

"And you have wit to go with your charm," said Tyrion.

"She must get that from her mother," said a third voice that Sansa did not recognize.

"Ah, Baelish. I don't believe you've met Ned Stark's eldest daughter," Jaime said to the newcomer.
Sansa turned to find a man in his forties with dark hair distinguished by streaks of silver throughout. He was lean in build and of a height with her, and sported a trimmed goatee. The man reached out to take her free hand as Jaime introduced her.

"This is Sansa Stark,"

"Petyr Baelish, at your service." Petyr placed a light kiss on the back of Sansa's hand, and she fought the instinct to snatch her hand away. "You're just as beautiful as your mother."

"Oh, you know my mother?" Sansa asked.

"I did." Petyr smiled at her. "I knew her when she was still known as Catelyn Tully."

"You're an old friend then." Sansa returned his smile politely. "I will let my mother know that I met you, Mr. Baelish."

"Yes, do send her my regards, and do call me Petyr, please. Although I hope I will get to meet with your mother in person soon."

"Petyr works for our brother-in-law," Tyrion supplied, "he's the Chief Financial Officer at Baratheon Incorporated."

Sansa remembered something she'd heard in the news, and for a moment she became her father's daughter.

"So you're Mr. Baratheon's accountant," she began, "I heard rumors that Baratheon Incorporated is in some financial trouble, is there any truth to what's in the news?"

Tyrion and Jaime seemed surprised at her question. Petyr looked mildly amused.

"What rumors would they be?" Petyr asked, and Sansa sensed that he was humoring her, and this annoyed her.

"The rumors that there could be jobs lost, and that without my father's help, Mr. Baratheon's company would be in a lot of trouble."

Petyr regarded her with new eyes, and Tyrion gave him a nudge. "Answer her, she asked a valid question."

"You don't need to concern yourself with what you hear in the news, my dear." Petyr smiled at her again. "You're young, and shouldn't be worrying about these things."

"Perhaps, but it interests me," Sansa insisted.

"She means to have an answer, Baelish." Jaime grinned, enjoying the accountant's apparent discomfiture at being questioned by a teenage girl.

Petyr Baelish tilted his head slightly, and his eyes narrowed. "You're not at all what I expected of Catelyn Tully's daughter,"

Sansa didn't know where her boldness came from, but she disliked this Petyr Baelish, and his condescending tone was grating on her nerves.

"Don't forget." She smiled sweetly, eyes flashing. "I'm Eddard Stark's daughter, too."

Again, Tyrion and Jaime Lannister were brought to laughter once they had recovered from their
shock.

"You are a gem, Sansa Stark!" Tyrion acknowledged. "If ever you decide to follow your father into business, I'd bet you'll be some force to reckon with."

Sansa never did get her answer from Petry Baelish. Joffrey found her at that moment, and took her by the arm.

"Come, Sansa," he said, "you don't want to be stuck with these boring uncles of mine."

"Let's hope we shall get another chance to speak with you again, Sansa," Jaime said, "Joffrey, don't you let this girl go."

Sansa nodded at them as Joffrey led her away, and headed towards the outdoor area overlooking the bay. Sandor Clegane was there, wearing tailored black pants and a dark grey shirt with black pinstripes that he wore with the sleeves rolled to his elbows, exposing muscular forearms. He'd also left the top two buttons of his shirt undone, and Sansa could see the hollow at the base of his neck. His hair, as usual, was combed over the burned side of his face, but he'd made some attempt to keep it tamed with some hair product. Sandor was the most casually dressed of the teenage boys there, including Joffrey, but to Sansa he was the one that was the most striking to look at. He'd given her a nod when she'd first seen him, but other than that he'd made no attempt to speak to her.

Myrcella and her friends soon joined them, and Sansa enjoyed the best part of the afternoon talking to her about what she was looking forward to the most about Dorne Academy.

"Meeting Trystane Martell!" Myrcella replied excitedly. "He's their resident prodigy, seventeen years old, with black hair and olive skin…!"

Sansa smiled and listened, completely unaware of the brooding, grey-eyed stare of her silent watcher.

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Sandor

They'd finally bid farewell to Myrcella Baratheon, who had just been driven away in a limousine headed towards the airport accompanied Arys Oakhart, a member of Robert Baratheon's security team now re-assigned as Myrcella's bodyguard. Some of the guests had already left, but there were still a good many of them that weren't quite ready yet to part with the Baratheon's unlimited bar tab. It was while he was contemplating excusing himself to go home that he happened to notice Mr. Santagar, head of Robert Baratheon's security, and the manager of the restaurant approaching Robert's table. He observed the anxious expression on the manager's face as he spoke.

"I don't care…just get rid of them!" Robert snapped, waving them away.

Moments later, Sandor observed Jaime and Tyrion Lannister, along with Renly Baratheon approach Robert and his wife Cersei. Jaime leaned in and said something in Robert's ear. Robert was scowling when Jaime pulled back.

"So, call the fucking police if you want!" Robert hissed.

"You need to get your guests out of here now!" Jaime hissed back, his voice calm but urgent.

"Robert, listen to him," Cersei spoke up, "if anything should happen…"

"Stay out of it, woman!"
"You need to do something, Robert," Tyrion urged.

Robert looked at the dwarf a moment, before he nodded.

"Renly, go and tell the kids to come inside," he instructed his brother. "Jaime and Tyrion, come with me."

Robert stood up from the table and left the function room, followed by his brothers-in-law. Clearly, something was wrong. Sandor followed them into the main restaurant area, and through the panoramic glass windows at the front of the room, he immediately saw the problem. A crowd had begun to gather in the parking lot. Some of them were carrying placards and signs bearing the words 'SAVE OUR JOBS'.

This is bad, Sandor thought, realizing that the crowd outside were disgruntled Baratheon Incorporated employees. Sandor could hear a man's voice in the air, tinny and amplified as it was through a megaphone.

"…Answer us this question, Mr. Baratheon? How do you justify flaunting your wealth about with extravagant displays such as this party, knowing that you could be laying off hundreds of employees?"

There was a roar from the crowd at this, and the voice continued.

"Come out and speak to us, Mr. Baratheon! See the faces of the people who work for you! See the faces of the people who would lose their jobs and the means to support their families if you cut our jobs!"

The other restaurant patrons began to leave, at the urging of the restaurant staff.

We should be getting out of here as well. Why weren't the Baratheons organizing for them to leave?

"They're blocking the driveway exits," he heard one of Robert's security guys saying.

"But they're letting the other patrons pass," said someone else.

"Because they're only here for Robert," the first guy returned.

"Clegane." Sandor turned and found Renly motioning to him. "Get back in here and help me count heads."

Sandor followed as he was ordered. Some of Myrcella's friends were still present, and the fourteen year old girls were starting to look scared. He saw Tommen, who now sat with Cersei. He saw Joffrey pacing the floor…but there was no sign of Sansa.

"Has anyone seen my daughter?" asked a middle-aged woman.

"Calm down, Mrs. Stokeworth, we'll find your daughter," Renly answered the woman.

There were shouts now coming from outside, and everyone inside the room lifted their heads to listen. It was a picket-line war cry.

"What do we want?"

"Job security!"

"When do we want it?"
"Now!"

Sandor witnessed the man called Petyr Baelish storming after Robert Baratheon, and the two disappeared down the hall.

"…You must go out there and say something to these people, Robert!" Petyr was saying to him.

The chanting outside grew louder, and the voice on the megaphone began to lead the crowd in a new chant.

"One, two, three, four! We know what we're out here for!"

"Five, six, seven, eight! Come on Baratheon, play it straight!"

Tyrion Lannister came back into the room and did a quick survey of its occupants, before his eyes landed on his nephew.

"Joffrey," he called out to him, "where's Sansa?"

"I don't know," Joffrey replied, "she went for a walk in the gardens with some girl earlier."

"You need to find her," Tyrion said.

"Joffrey's not leaving this room," Cersei declared, "get Greenfield to find her."

Sandor could have throttled Joffrey's ice-blondie bitch of a mother.

"My daughter's missing! Has anyone seen her?" cried the woman, Mrs. Stokeworth.

Sandor swore under his breath. Sansa could be anywhere on the grounds, where a rapidly angering mob was still continuing to grow in numbers.

"Baratheon you're rich and rude, we don't like your attitude!"

"Lies and tricks will not divide, workers standing side by side!"

"They say cut back, we say fight back!"

Cersei stood up and walked towards the door, running into Robert and Petyr Baelish who were making their way in.

"How the hell did your workers union find out we were going to be here today?" she demanded angrily.

"I don't fucking know!" Robert replied just as angrily. "Now, I'm going outside to speak to them. I want you to get people ready to leave. When Jaime gives you the word, get our guests out of here!"

Sansa, where are you?

Sandor would find her himself.

As Robert headed towards the restaurant doors, where the agitated looking restaurant manager was waiting for him, Sandor made his way to a rear exit. He'd barely made it out the door when he heard the unmistakable sound of smashing glass.

And then people began shouting.
And then there was screaming…

"Santagar! Greenfield!" Jaime Lannister ran past. "Get Robert! It's turned into a riot!"

Sandor slipped out of the door just as another pane of glass was smashed to pieces. Evidently, Robert had said something that angered the protestors.

He was encouraged to see that the rear gardens were empty, and Sandor cut across flower beds in order to reach the path Sansa would most likely have taken. If she wasn't in the rose garden, he didn't know where else she would be, and he was taking a huge risk. His long strides ate up the path when he reached it, and he cursed when he realized just how expansive the gardens were, but he found her eventually. Sansa was on the other side of the garden hiding in the hedges, cut off from the exit by the rioting mob that had sprawled out onto the lawn. There was an older girl with her, and both of them looked scared.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!"

The noises and shouts from the parking lot were getting louder. The restaurant was being smashed up, and in the distance Sandor could hear sirens as well. The police had been called.

"Watch out!"

There were feminine screams across the garden, and Sandor saw that someone had fallen into the garden bed near Sansa and the other girl. If he didn't do something soon, they would get caught up in the riot. People were now picking up and throwing things in the direction of the restaurant, and at the people attempting to flee the scene. Adrenaline suddenly kicked into his veins, and Sandor found himself barreling through the mob. He was a linebacker for a reason, and he reached the hedge where Sansa was hiding, relatively unscathed.

"Sandor?" Sansa stared at him incredulously. "What's going on? Why are the protestors attacking?"

He shook his head, he didn't have time to answer her questions.

"We have to move," he growled at the two girls. "You both do as I tell you, got it?"

Sansa nodded, then tilted her head towards the girl with her. "This is Lollys Stokeworth."

He didn't fucking care who she was, so long as she did as he told her.

"We're going to head for the other side of the parking lot, and with any luck the Baratheon's will have cars ready," he barked at them, "when I tell you to run, you run, and you don't stop until you see the Baratheons or Lannisters!"

He grabbed both girls by an elbow, and he waited for the mob to stop heaving just enough so they could make a run for it.

"Now! Run!" He pulled them roughly with him, half leading, half dragging them along.

He felt hands grabbing at him, and he instinctively tried to use his massive bulk to shield Sansa and the Stokeworth girl. They were halfway through the crowd, when he heard a sharp scream and a tug on his arm.

He looked down and saw that Sansa had fallen…and there was blood on her face.

"Sansa!" he shouted, then he looked at the Stokeworth girl. "Run, you dumb half-wit! Run!"
The girl ran, but Sandor didn't check to see if she made it. His sole concern now was getting Sansa to safety. Hands were grabbing at him again, and at Sansa, and Sandor shoved and growled like a rabid dog.

"Get your hands off me!" he shouted.

Then he hauled Sansa against him, and used his other arm like a battering ram, fighting his way through the maddened crowd. He felt a sharp sting on his bicep as he collided with someone holding a placard, but he ignored the pain.

"CLEGANE!"

Sandor turned at the sound of his name and found Tyrion Lannister and Renly Baratheon waving at him from behind a dumpster.

"You found her!" Tyrion exclaimed in relief. "Let's go, Renly's car is just through there."

Sansa continued to clutch at him, her eyes wide with shock as Renly and Tyrion led them through another flower bed, and into a waiting car on the street beyond.

"Where's everyone else?" Sandor asked when Renly finally pulled away from the scene.

"Got out through the delivery dock," Tyrion replied from the front passenger seat.

"Nice of them to wait," Sandor remarked darkly.

Neither Tyrion or Renly replied.

"Where's Joffrey?"

"With his mother," Renly said, "Cersei insisted he stay with her."

Sandor didn't say what all three of them were thinking. Sansa didn't have to hear that no one had been sent to find her and make sure she was safe. Why had Renly and Tyrion stuck around?

"I saw you go through the rear door," Renly replied, as though sensing Sandor's thought. "I figured you'd gone after her."

How he'd figured that, Sandor didn't care to find out. He was just thankful that the guy had stayed behind. Of the dwarf, he couldn't speak for. In truth, he would have expected the dwarf to be among the first to flee, given his stumpy legs and all, but Tyrion Lannister had surprised him. The uncle that Joffrey always poked fun at had guts.

Sansa shifted against him. They were seated along the rear seat, and she refused to let go of the grip she had on his shirt. Sandor didn't want her anywhere but where she was currently, tucked under his arm…an arm that was bleeding. _When did I get cut?_

"Are you all right, my dear?" Tyrion directed the question at Sansa.

She nodded. "He…he rescued me."

Tyrion gave her a gentle smile, then shot Sandor a look. "Well done, Clegane."

_I didn't do it for you_, he thought, before he glanced down at his little bird.
Arya

Her phone buzzed, and she glanced at the name that popped up on the screen with some surprise before she answered the incoming call.

"Gendry…hello," she greeted him.

"Hey," he said, "are you busy? We need to talk."

"Okay," she said, "let's talk."

"In person," he sighed. "Can I come over?"

Arya sat up. Gendry wanted to come over.

"Sure,"

"I'll see you in twenty."

When he hung up, she rolled off her bed, where she'd been for most of Saturday afternoon listening to music and reading a magazine. She went to the bathroom, freshened up and dragged a brush through her hair. Then she looked down and found she was wearing pajama shorts and a faded t-shirt that had once belonged to Jon. Swearing, and feeling inexplicably nervous, she changed into jeans and a nicer tee before going downstairs to wait for Gendry to arrive. She hadn't spoken to him, or even seen him for longer than two seconds over the week, and she had a good idea about what he wanted to speak about. She couldn't believe how angrily Gendry had reacted to her date with Jaqen. She'd suspected that he wouldn't be happy about it, given that he had told her from that start that he didn't like Jaqen, but the outright hostility she'd sensed was unexpected, and entirely uncalled for.

Arya opened the door before Gendry had even got out of his car, and she greeted him with a careful smile.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," he returned.

"Come in." She stepped aside and led him into the wide foyer of Chateau Maegor.

Gendry looked around him, noting the expensive looking décor, and the artworks on the walls.

"Nice place," he said.

Arya shrugged and led him into the currently uninhabited TV room.

"How've you been?" she asked him, sitting down on the couch.

"Busy. First heats of the competition are in less than a fortnight, and Beric's going absolutely mental," Gendry replied.

"That doesn't surprise me," she commented, then got down to business. "Gendry, you said you wanted to talk."

"Right, yeah." He fidgeted with his jeans, and Arya knew he was beyond nervous. "Arya, look. About what happened on Monday…I know I shouldn't have acted that way."

"No, you shouldn't have," she agreed with him. "So, why did you act like a jerk?"
Gendry winced. "I guess…I guess I got caught by surprise by the Spyder's post."

"And?"

"I was angry that you didn't tell me the truth about…you and him."

It was Arya's turn to wince. "About that, yeah…I knew you wouldn't like it if I dated Jaqen."

"You knew that?"

"Well, yeah," she said, "you kept warning me to be careful and be wary of him, every chance you could."

Gendry made a face, remembering. "Okay, I guess I did."

They sat in uncomfortable silence for some moments, before Gendry asked her another question.

"How serious is it, between you two?"

Arya shrugged. "I don't know…it's only been one date, and he's busy preparing for the competition as well."

She and Jaqen had swapped text messages everyday during the week, but they'd had only one brief phone conversation, and it was just so Jaqen could apologize for his busy schedule and to assure her that he most definitely wanted to go on a second date.

"Could it get serious?"

"I don't know, Gendry." Arya sighed. "I'm new to dating, and you know that."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Why are you so curious anyway?"

Gendry shifted in his chair again, and he seemed to be trying to find the right response, but he never got the chance to speak.

At that moment, they were interrupted by a loud banging on the front door.

Arya jumped up at the urgency behind the knocks. "I'd better get that,"

She'd only just pulled open the door when a giant bear of a man barreled through it, followed by a younger man who looked the spitting image of Gendry Waters – but it was the girl leaning on his arm that had her gasping.

"Sansa!" Arya cried in alarm.

"Ned!" the big man called out. "Ned, I need to talk to you!"

Arya recognized this man as Robert Baratheon. The younger man, Arya was startled to identify as Renly Baratheon.

At the sound of the Robert's bellows, both her mother and father rushed to the door.

"Oh, my God!" her mother cried, seeing the state that Sansa had arrived in.

"What the hell happened, Robert?" her father all but snarled.
Sansa’s dress had spots of blood on it, her hair was disheveled and there was a bandage on her left temple.

What the fuck?

"Have you watched the news, Ned?" Robert asked. "If not, you need to watch it. It's on all the local channels, and it'll be nationwide shortly, if it isn't already."

The expression on her father's face grew dark.

"Cat, take Sansa upstairs now, and put her to bed. Arya, go find Bran and Rickon and tell them to go to their rooms."

Gendry chose that moment to walk out into the foyer as well, and there was a collective gasp from everyone but Ned. Arya, Robert and Catelyn stared back and forth between Gendry and Renly, while the two young men eyed each other warily.

Whoa! Arya's jaw dropped. She'd always thought Gendry reminded her of someone she'd met before, but seeing them side by side, their resemblance to each other was beyond uncanny.

Ned cleared his throat. "Gendry, I'm sorry to have to cut your visit short, but something has happened."

"I understand, sir." Gendry nodded, then looked to Arya. "I'll see you at school."

"Okay," she said, and mouthed sorry to him.

He gave her another nod, then let himself out of the already opened door. Robert and Renly stared after him.

"Catelyn," Ned said.

Catelyn immediately took charge of the silent, and apparently shaken Sansa and led her upstairs.

"Arya, please go and find your brothers."

Arya moved to obey, but as she exited the foyer, she overheard Renly Baratheon speak to his brother.

"So, it's true then?"

"You will keep your mouth shut, if you know what's good for you," Robert snarled.

"The resemblance is remarkable, don't you think?" Renly continued.

"Shut your trap, before I shut it for good!"

Arya heard nothing more, but after she'd herded her brothers up to their rooms, she found herself sitting in front of her computer pulling up Facebook photos of Gendry and Renly.

She sat there, looking at their photos side by side for a long time.
Oh, where do I even begin to start! What an eventful few days we've had! It's never a dull day if your last name is Stark or Baratheon!

First there was the lover's quarrel between Sansa and Joffrey that pretty much half the school population witnessed in the quad the other day. Joffrey, jealousy does not become you… It looked like poor Sansa was scared of your temper, too. I heard from a number of sources that you were accusing Sansa of cheating on you! ...Luckily you kissed and made up in the end!

Then there was the farewell party for Myrcella Baratheon – you can check out the photos taken at Hook Restaurant before everything went bad…no need to go into detail about happened later that day – the news has been saturated with accounts of the worker's demonstration-turned-riot …tsk tsk!

Sansa Stark has also been spotted trying to conceal a discreet bandage on her temple under her bangs. I haven't been able to confirm the cause of her injury, but don't worry Sansa – a little bandage does nothing to take away from that gorgeous face of yours!

This morning's news headlines have also confirmed that a deal has been struck between Robert Baratheon, Ned Stark and Mace Tyrell, CEO of Reach & Marches Holdings Pty Ltd, who has agreed to invest in the joint venture – hopefully this will now stop those nasty talks about job losses at Baratheon Incorporated!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

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Sansa

She was doing her best to keep calm. She had come to realize a few things after the events of the riot, and now her stomach was tying itself in knots as she decided what to do next. She had an important choice to make, and she was nervous. Sansa shut her locker door and walked to her first class. The large, hulking figure of Sandor Clegane caught her eye as he crossed the hall in front of her, and she slowed her steps so that she could watch him as he rummaged inside his locker.

He was wearing denim jeans in a darker wash that suggested it was new. He also wore a dark blue V-neck shirt under his white wool letterman jacket. Her stomach fluttered, and her heart rate sped up. She watched the muscles move across his broad chest, and remembered what it had felt like to be held against him, tucked under the curve of his muscular arm…Safe. He'd found her. Rescued her.

The crowd of angry Baratheon Incorporated employees and their furious faces flashed in her mind, and some of the fright she'd felt at the time re-emerged, before she quickly pushed it away. She'd asked Lollys Stokeworth to go for a walk in the gardens with her because she'd noticed that the older girl had sat in a corner by herself, if she wasn't at her mother's side, the whole afternoon. She'd felt sorry for her, so she'd asked her to come along. The stroll in the flower gardens had been pleasant to start with, even if Lollys hadn't been particularly talkative. Then she'd heard noises, and voices from beyond the garden boundary. It wasn't until they'd heard the voice on the megaphone that they'd decided it was time to head back to the restaurant. They hadn't noticed just how far they had walked, and by the time Sansa had realized that something was very wrong, it had been too late and she and
Lollys had found themselves unable to get back to the restaurant.

The crowd of protestors had blocked their exit, and Sansa had been unable to coax Lollys Stokeworth to attempt to cross the picket line. So Sansa had had no choice but to stay with the blubbery girl. Then the chanting had started and the noises got louder. Then there were angry shouts which had been followed by the sounds of things crashing and breaking. All Sansa had been able to do was pull herself and Lollys behind a hedge and find whatever cover they could as the angry mob spilled into the lawn area.

She'd been gone a long time, and she hoped Joffrey would notice and come looking for her, but he never did. It had been such a shock, and a relief when she'd seen the Hound fighting his way through the mob towards them. He'd looked so frightening, and she didn't think to question him when he started ordering them around. She'd just known that he would get them out of there. They'd been in the middle of the heaving crowd when something had struck her in the face, and she'd tripped. The look in the Hound's eyes when he'd seen the blood had made her shiver, and then something seemed to come over him, making him truly terrifying.

He'd shouted at Lollys to run, before he'd picked her up and pulled her to him, yelling and shoving at anyone that got too close. Joffrey's uncles, Tyrion and Renly had appeared and then Sandor had bundled her into a dark car before getting in beside her. Not that she'd given him much choice to be parted from her side at that moment, she remembered. She'd clung to him, so tightly that when he had finally convinced her to release his shirt, the fabric around his chest had been creased and crumpled.

Renly had taken them back to The Red Keep, and there Sansa had seen Lollys reunited with her mother, before Tyrion had started shouting for Robert Baratheon, and she'd been whisked away from Sandor's side to have the cut on her head seen to, while he'd gone to tend to the cut on his arm. Robert Baratheon's eyes had gone wide at the sight of her, and then he'd been barking orders at Renly to make sure she never left his sight.

_Finally remembered whose daughter I am?_ She'd thought with a bitterness that had surprised her, even through her frazzled mind. Her eyes had then sought to try and find Joffrey, but no one could or would tell her where her boyfriend was. Once she'd been patched up, Robert and Renly Baratheon had bundled her into another car, and taken her back to her family. She hadn't been given the chance to speak to Tyrion Lannister, or Sandor before they'd taken her away, and that upset her greatly.

By the time they had reached Chateau Maegor, her mind had shut off, and though she was standing quite calmly, and responding to questions asked of her, she hadn't been really there.

"She's in shock," Renly had said, "Ned will have your head."

"Keep your opinions to yourself!" Robert had snapped.

There'd been an awkward moment in the foyer when Arya had let them in and Robert Baratheon's yelling had brought her parents to the door, and she'd been vaguely aware of Renly's doppelganger, Gendry Waters, being present as well, before her mother had then led her upstairs to her bedroom.

Sansa remembered showering, and being put to bed, but she didn't sleep.

She'd heard the raised voices floating up the staircase from her father's study, and soon there was the sound of the front door slamming. Her father had come into her room, long enough to see that she was not harmed in any other way, other than the shallow cut on her temple.

"Robert's holding a press conference," he'd said to her mother, "don't wait up."
After he'd left, every cell phone and telephone in the house had begun to ring as their concerned friends and family enquired about their safety and well being.

Sansa had listened to her mother's one-sided conversation with whoever was on the other end of the phone, and learned that news of the workers demonstration riot had indeed been broadcast nationally, as well as locally. More cell phones had continued ringing, including hers, but she hadn't bothered to pick it up, though outside her bedroom she could hear that Arya and Bran had taken it upon themselves to silence the other phones and answer only calls from their immediate family.

The family had been well trained never to answer unknown calls, or talk to any member of the press.

Jon, Robb and Theon had been among the first to call, as were Sansa's grandfather Hoster Tully, and her uncle Benjen Stark. Only her family had been told that she had been present at the scene, and that she had been injured.

Sansa had lain awake in her bed for some time, before she had finally fallen sleep. She'd checked her missed calls and text messages first, however, and noted that Joffrey hadn't tried to contact her once. She'd woken up the next day with anger in her belly, and Sandor Clegane on her mind, but he wasn't the cause of her anger. She was angry with Joffrey, and it was that anger that was now making her contemplate her next action.

She wanted to break up with him. She was that furious with him.

Joffrey had called her eventually, on Sunday afternoon. He'd waited more than twenty-four hours before calling her to see if she was 'd apologized again, giving her some excuse about his mother and comforting his younger brother and how he just couldn't get away to find her. You should have tried! She'd wanted to scream at him. I'm your girlfriend! You're supposed to look out for me!

But she didn't yell or swear at him as she'd wanted to. She didn't want to waste her energy. She'd had enough of Joffrey's unpredictable mood swings, and his selfishness. She'd tolerated that kind of behavior from him before, but knowing that she had been wondering the gardens of the Hook Restaurant during a riot and doing nothing to find her and ensure her safety – that was inexcusable, and unforgiveable.

Being in Sandor's protective embrace had been the catalyst...No, she corrected herself. Being in Sandor's arms, when she should have been in Joffrey's, had been the convincing closing argument.

She didn't want to be with Joffrey any longer.

Joffrey should have been the one to find her and rescue her, but he hadn't. It had been his best friend who had come after her, which was shocking and confusing in itself. It was also the sight of his best friend now, who stood taller and broader than all the guys in the hall that had her palms sweating and her lips parting. The sight of him had always attracted and repelled her simultaneously. Sandor Clegane was eliciting the same responses in her now.

She wanted to run to him, and find some excuse to have him put his arms around her again. But at the same time, she wanted to run from him, turn around and flee because it scared her to realize just how much she wanted to do exactly that...be in his arms. She'd never felt like this with Joffrey.

Sandor shut his locker and Sansa ducked behind a bank of lockers before he could turn around and see her. Is this really happening? She asked herself. Am I really crushing on Sandor? Yes, she admitted. Did she want to date him? Did she want him as a boyfriend?

A funny, squeaking noise escaped her lips at the idea of dating Sandor Clegane, and her palms grew
clammier. *There's something you need to do first.* She thought, and peaked out from behind the locker to watch Sandor walk away.

*Firstly, break up with Joffrey.*

She allowed herself a little smile.

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**Gendry**

Arya had been watching him curiously the past few days. While normally, he would have enjoyed her attention, it was the reason behind her speculative glances that he did not like. It wasn’t like Arya to gasp, but hers had been the loudest that day in the foyer of Chateau Maegor. He’d seen Renly Baratheon before, but not up close, and he’d had to bite his tongue to keep from swearing in front of Arya's parents when he'd come face to face with the guy. His first reaction when he'd looked into the blue eyes that were just like his own had been; *what the fuck?* The next thought in his head had been; *could we be related?*

It wouldn't have been the first time he'd come across someone who looked like him and wondered if they were somehow related. It came with not knowing who his father was. Immediately after that was the thought; *I'd better not be fucking related to Joffrey Baratheon!* He'd taken a quick glance at Robert Baratheon, Joffrey's father, who'd looked just as stunned, before he'd left the premises.

He'd thought about it the entire ride back home idea that his father might be a Baratheon was too mind-boggling to fathom. Not to mention ridiculous. His mother had been a waitress at a diner. The likelihood of her having met and bedded a member of the rich, aristocratic Baratheon family was laughable. Arya had definitely noticed the resemblance, and she'd been asking not so subtle questions about his past since.

"Your mom never told you his name?"

"No,"

"Not once?"

"Never,"

"Did you ever ask her?"

"I never bothered, and by the time it mattered to me, it was too late to ask her."

"Do you have a copy of your birth certificate?"

"Father's name was left blank."

"Don't you want to know?"

"I've gone seventeen years without knowing," he'd pointed out, "and if finding out means that I'll somehow be related to Joffrey, I think I'm better off not knowing."

"Good point."

Though he wouldn't admit it to Arya, he had also been more than intrigued about his past after his run-in with Renly and Robert Baratheon. Arya's questioning had started to re-awaken his own curiosity to find out his father's identity. He wasn't completely stupid. He’d joined a few dots on his
own since coming into money. Someone out there knew who he was, who his father was, and how much money had been given to him. He just had to ask the right person.

He had found out the reason behind Ned Stark's asking him to leave, and the reason for the blood on Sansa's dress the moment he had reached home, finding his foster-parents in front of the television watching the news and footage of the worker's demonstration that had gotten out of hand. His father, as an employee at Baratheon Incorporated, had been concerned.

He'd sent Arya a text message immediately, asking if her sister was okay, and telling her to watch the news. She'd texted him back later that night to say the cut on Sansa's head was superficial and that she was okay. The next day, she'd texted him again to ask about his foster-father, who she knew worked for Robert Baratheon. And just like that, he was talking to her again.

He hadn't been able to stay away from her. He'd only been hurting himself, he thought bitterly. In some consolation, Arya had seemed upset that he'd been avoiding her the previous week.

"You ignored me," she'd said when she saw him at school on Monday, as blunt as ever. "For a week, Gendry."

"Yeah," he'd admitted, "I've apologized for what I said."

"You still didn't have to ignore me."

He'd given her a look at the whine in her voice. "Did you miss me?"

Her eyes had widened for a split second and she'd looked away, but when she met his eyes again, her expression had been defiant.

"You're an ass," she'd said, "but yeah, I did."

She'd fled down the hall immediately afterwards, and she never heard his sharp intake of breath. Gendry did not allow her answer to get his hopes up. After all, Jaqen H'ghar was still in the picture. He sighed. He'd never got around to telling her exactly why he'd acted like a jerk. And now the timing is all wrong. He couldn't possibly spill his heart and guts out to Arya when she was so concerned about her father, and the gossip around Sansa's injury and the riot. It would have been awkward enough before the worker's riot, when all she would have had to think about was him and Jaqen. She had too many things on her mind now, and Gendry didn't want to make things more difficult and complicated for her by telling her how he felt about her.

According to Hot Pie, Arya had blamed Gendry's behavior down to her dating a guy he didn't like. This was true enough, but only half the story. He was happy to let her keep thinking that for the meantime. He'd give her a few more days to deal with her family issues, and then he'd tell her. She'd told him that it wasn't serious with Jaqen. After all, it had just been the one date. That was little comfort however, every time her cell phone beeped alerting her to a new text message and he'd sit there with his fists clenched where Arya couldn't see them, wondering if the message was from him.

He sighed, and Arya looked up at him from where she sat beside him eating her lunch and reading a magazine. Gendry was thankful for the fact that every minute she spent at his side, meant a minute she wasn't with him.

"You keep sighing," Arya said.

"So?"
"Are you nervous about the competition, Gendry?"

Not the one you're referring to.

"Yeah, I guess."

Arya reached out and put her hand on his forearm, smiling at him gently. "Regardless of who wins, Gendry, I'm sure you'll do your best."

He could only nod, and look at her smile.

He didn't want to lose.

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Arya

Arya came home from school feeling like her head would explode. She had too many things on her mind, and she didn't know which one to deal with first. There was still way too much talk going around school about the riot, and what was happening between her father and Robert Baratheon's companies, and the Tyrell's. Plus, she'd had another run in with the Hound that afternoon as she was going to retrieve a forgotten text book from her locker. She'd smacked face first into his chest again, for the third time.

The asshole had made some crack about throwing herself at him again, so she'd punched him, and he'd howled in pain. How was she supposed to know he'd injured his arm? She'd almost apologized to him, too. Luckily she'd stopped herself in time.

"I'm home mother!" she called out when she entered the house, then went to her room when she heard her mother's acknowledgement.

Arya had come to the conclusion early on that she couldn't help her father. Her parents had been arguing in her father's study on and off over the past few days since Sansa had come home bleeding.

That night, after Sansa had been taken care of, Arya had watched wide eyed as replays of the riot appeared on TV, and as people she knew on Facebook shared links to news clips. Arya had received text messages from Gendry, Jaqen, Hot Pie and even from Beric on behalf of the rest of the guys.

Jon, Robb and Theon had called her as well when they hadn't been able to get through to Sansa, and she'd assured them that their sister was fine. Arya was upset that Sansa had been caught up in the riot in the first place, and her concern for Sansa was real, but Arya still could not bring herself to speak to her. From the conversation she'd overheard her sister talking about with one of her friends on the phone, it sounded like she blamed Joffrey for her injury.

Arya had not liked the sound of that, but Sansa could deal with her own problems. She wondered briefly, if there was any truth to the accusations Joffrey had been hurling at her in the quad the week before. At the time, Arya had watched in amusement, like everyone else, as Joffrey had accused Sansa of cheating on him with Theon Greyjoy of all people. Arya made a face, just thinking about Sansa and Theon together was wrong, wrong, wrong! In any case, Sansa was too polite and proper to ever cheat on anyone.

Her thoughts drifted to Gendry. She was concerned about him too. She was happy he'd stopped avoiding her. She hadn't noticed before how much she liked hanging around him, until he'd begun ignoring her. She hadn't lied to him when she'd admitted that she had missed him, even though he had probably asked as a joke.
She sighed. By no means had they resolved the reason he'd ignored her to begin with. Gendry may have apologized for being a jerk regarding the fact she'd gone on a date with Jaqen, but they were going to have to talk about that one day soon, especially if she was going to continue dating Jaqen. Whatever Gendry had against Jaqen, he would have to deal with it. For the meantime, both of them were choosing not to say anything about it.

Arya had stared at the photos of Renly and Gendry for a long time after they had left Chateau Maegor that night. The snippet of the conversation she'd overheard between Renly and Robert Baratheon had continued to bug her since.

"So, it's true then?"

"You will keep your mouth shut, if you know what's good for you."

"The resemblance is remarkable, don't you think?"

"Shut your trap, before I shut it for good!"

Indeed she couldn't get over how alike Gendry and Renly looked. Not only did their faces look alike, but they resembled each other in build too. They were both over six feet tall, and though Gendry did not play football, he had the same muscular frame as Renly. The one feature that really struck her, however, was the color of their eyes. They were the exact same shade of indigo blue... as was Robert Baratheon's.

No way, she had thought, even as the half-baked idea had formed in her mind. It can't be possible, can it? Gendry had told her that he didn't know who his father was, and Arya was not so innocent that she didn't know about how married men fooled around behind their wives backs. Was it possible that Gendry could somehow be a long-lost Baratheon? Perhaps Renly's younger half-brother? If it weren't for the four-year age gap between them, she would have sworn they'd been separated at birth.

She'd told him her theory of course, but he'd laughed at it. Even after he'd told her that he had also thought of the possibility of being related to the Baratheon's. She didn't know much about Gendry's past, she realized. He never talked about where he'd gone to school, or of his friends before he'd come to King's Landing. She'd tried to find out by asking him outright, but Gendry hadn't seemed all that interested in talking about himself.

She thought about how long she'd been friends with him, and was horrified to realize just how little she knew about him. She found herself on Facebook, checking out Gendry's profile again, and frowning when she saw that the most recent activity on his wall showed him accepting friend requests from girls... lots of girls.

"Hey Gendry! Looking forward to seeing you at the Battle of The Bands!" a girl posted.

"Can't wait to see that bull tattoo of yours!" wrote another girl.

Arya's frown deepened. She'd seen the bull tattoo on Gendry's arm before, and had even touched it. She wrinkled her nose when she thought of other girls doing the same thing. What did you expect? He's hot, he's got a tattoo and he's in a rock band, of course he's going to have heaps of female admirers. She still didn't like the idea, no matter how she rationalized it.

There was a post on his wall from a guy with curly blonde hair called Lommy Greenhands.

"Gendry, dude! Where've you been hiding? We haven't seen you at the pool hall in months! Come visit us when you can, we're there every afternoon in case you've forgotten!"
Arya clicked on Lommy's profile and was surprised to find his page open to 'friends of friends'. She spent a bit of time trying to find out what she could about Gendry's other friends, and it didn't take her long to find photos of a slightly younger Gendry with Lommy. In one photo, they were in a pool hall, and a neon sign on the wall behind Gendry's head read 'Lucky 8'.

After some Googling, she found the address for the only 'Lucky 8' in King's Landing. It was in Flea Bottom, and Arya scratched her head. What had Gendry been doing hanging around in Flea Bottom?

She would find out. She'd have to take a trip into Flea Bottom and check out the 'Lucky 8' herself, and if she was lucky, she'd run into Gendry's friend Lommy Greenhands.

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**Sandor**

He'd just come out of the building, carrying the sports bag with his football gear in it over his shoulder, when a small body came careening around the corner and smacked into his chest with so much force he dropped his bag. As he had the previous times it had happened, he caught her by the shoulders and steadied her, while she cursed at him.

"Why the fuck is your giant ass always in my way, jerk?" Arya sniped at him when she'd caught her balance.

"Why do you keep throwing yourself at me, little bitch?" he returned, "that's three times, now. I'm almost convinced you want me."

"When hell freezes over!" She hit him, and her small fist connected with his bicep, right on his still-healing cut.

Sandor couldn't hold back his snarl of pain or the expression on his face that went with it.

"Bitch!" He roughly pushed back his sleeve to show her the bandage on his arm. "That'd be right, you would know to hit where it hurts!"

"Oh, my gosh!" Arya's hand flew to her mouth. "I didn't know!"

The look of contriteness on her pretty face wiped the pain from his mind. Arya Stark looked like she was sorry. The situation was suddenly too bizarre and he found himself laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"You!" he barked, "you look like you actually care."

She hit him again, on his other arm this time.

"Fuck you, Hound!" she yelled at him, "I almost apologized!"

She shot him another glare, before continuing on her way.

He was still laughing when he picked up his dropped sports bag, and chuckling when he went down to the football field for training. He felt eyes on him, and he turned towards the auditorium to see Sansa and her friend Jeyne watching him from the entrance. He was certain she'd observed his most recent run-in with Arya. She had a clear view of the building he'd just exited.

Maybe it was a good thing for her to see him laughing, and not just yelling at her sister, he thought.
His slightly jovial mood was quickly forgotten when he got to the football field and saw Joffrey, replaced with the urge to tear something apart with his bare hands. Joffrey had called him the day after the riot, but it wasn't to ask him how he was. Joffrey did not care that Sandor had sustained an injury rescuing his girlfriend.

"My dwarf uncle tells me it was you who found Sansa,"

"What about it?" Sandor had known better than to show emotion.

"Why'd you go after her?" Joffrey had sounded suspicious.

Sandor had guarded his response. "Because, that's what friends do for their friends."

"Oh. Thanks." Joffrey misunderstood.

Sandor hadn't done it for him, either. But it was easier to let the blonde fool believe it.

He consoled himself with the knowledge that Sansa was angry with Joffrey, according to the gossiping cheerleaders he'd overheard talking at lunch.

"Sansa's still mad at me," Joffrey whined to him when Sandor stood next to him on the field.

"She'll get over it," he said.

"I don't know what else to do." Joffrey snorted. "She won't listen to me."

Because you're an ass.

"Do what you want." Sandor shrugged. "I don't care."

He was almost too happy when Coach Selmy put him into a different team from Joffrey for that afternoon's drills, and he consoled himself further by tackling the blonde jerk harder than necessary.

After practice ended, Sandor took his time showering and changing in the locker room. Joffrey hadn't wanted to wait, and he'd left while Sandor was still in the shower. Sandor hadn't wanted to hang around him anyway, not in his present mood. When he finally got out of the change rooms, almost all the guys had left, and no one bothered him as he turned to leave.

He was halfway down to the student parking lot when he noticed that students were only just exiting the auditorium, and Sansa was waving goodbye to Jeyne. He glanced at his watch, and figured choir practice must have run later than normal. He weighed his immediate options, and figured he had nothing to lose. He quickened his pace, and fell into step beside her when he'd caught up. She glanced at him, startled by his appearance.

"Hey," he said, "choir practice went into overtime?"

Sansa looked up at him and smiled. "Hi, yeah it did."

Sandor noted that she was wearing her hair down, and she'd tried to hide the small bandage she was still wearing on her temple with her fringe.

"How was training?" she asked him.

"As it always is," he replied, "Coach Selmy wasn't pleased about the cut on my arm, but he thinks I should still be able to play at this week's game."
Sansa's eyes flicked to the new bandage that was peeping out from under his sleeve. "Does it hurt?"

He shook his head. "No, not unless your sister's punching it."

Sansa made a face. "I'm sorry about Arya,"

"Don't be." He remembered his earlier encounter with Arya, and it made the corner of his mouth lift in a smile. "Can I give you a ride home?"

"Really?" Sansa had her phone in her hand. "I was just going to take a taxi."

"I'll take you home, you're on my way," he insisted.

"Okay." She smiled at him again, and he noted that she seemed nervous. "Thanks."

They walked in silence as he led her to his car, and once seated inside, he was surprised to hear Sansa ask him if he was hungry.

"Huh?"

"Do you…maybe want to grab a snack?" she repeated. "If you have time, that is."

He stared at her in surprise, aware that he was probably scowling as a result. Never in a million years would he have expected those words to come from her mouth, directed at him.

"You don't have to, if you don't want to," she was saying, "I just wanted to say thank you…for what you did for me."

He knew what she meant.

Sandor looked at her for a moment longer, before he gave a nod.

"Okay." He started the engine. "Where to?"

"Do you like pizza?"

His lip twitched.

"I'm a teenage guy," he pointed out, "of course I like pizza."

He drove them to his favorite pizza place. It wasn't in Flea Bottom, so he was taking a risk that someone would spot them together, but they weren't doing anything wrong. They were simply two friends grabbing a pizza after school. Except that there was nothing simple about it, because he was Sandor 'The Hound' Clegane, and she was Sansa Stark. The Hound was not known for socializing, and Sansa should not be seen with any guy outside of Joffrey's company. Fuck it, he thought. He wanted this. He wanted to be here with her.

The little pizzeria was a throwback to an era when black and white linoleum tiles were popular, and when red vinyl covered booths were all the rage. Sitting across the booth from her, Sandor decided his best course of action was to stay silent unless she spoke to him first. Silence was one of the mechanisms he employed when dealing with uncomfortable situations. The others were aggression, and defensiveness, and he would try to limit those reactions around her as much as he could help it.

They ordered a half-and-half pizza, and he learned her favorite topping was ham and pineapple, and she learned that he ate everything.
"Everything?" she asked.

"Everything," he repeated, "being the size I am, and having Gregor as a brother, I learned to eat whatever was in front of me."

"That's eating for sustenance," she said, "what about eating for pleasure?"

Sandor knew what she was talking about, it was why he liked going to the trattoria so much, but there were…other things, besides eating that he preferred to do for pleasure, but he couldn't very well say that to her.

"Pizza," he opted to say instead, indicating the remaining slices left on the table. "And beer."

"Typical." She clucked her tongue.

"And a serious mashed potato with truffle oil."

That made her look up. "Truffle oil?"

His burned lip twitched. "I might look like a Neanderthal, but I didn't grow up in a cave."

She giggled at that, and he decided he liked the sound. He could also see that his statement had made her thoughtful, and he could tell that she was curious about him. For a few moments, he allowed himself to pretend that he really was on a date with Sansa, and that he had every right to be enjoying the sound of her laughter. He pretended that she was sitting there with him, not because she was thanking him for rescuing her, but for no other reason than just wanting to be with him.

She asked him some more questions, and they talked about school, movies and TV shows they'd seen, and Sandor lapped up her attention. He didn't question whether her interest was genuine, or borne out of politeness. For the moment, it was enough that she was there, with him.

For the briefest instant, he let himself think that maybe…just maybe, there was a small chance she might be able to look past his scars and see him for himself, and he imagined that she felt for him the way he felt about her.

*What would it take for you to dump Joffrey?* He wondered, but his pragmatic self interjected, bringing him back to reality. *Even if she dumped that blonde prick, what makes you think she'll take you?*

"Thank you, Sandor," Sansa was saying, "I should have come to you right after…it was brave of you to come after me."

He gave her a curt nod in acknowledgement, thinking that reality truly had a nasty way of bringing one crashing back to earth.

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**Sansa**

She'd been cold around Joffrey the past few days, but it hadn't stopped him from planting kisses on her unresponsive lips. Only her unwillingness to create a public scene had kept her from pushing him away from her. Sansa had been hoping to speak with Randa about the best way to break up with a boy, but her present company meant she wouldn't get that chance.

The girls were talking about boys, and relationships and sex. The boys hadn't arrived at their usual table yet, and Randa, Mya and Ros were making the most of their absence to discuss the merits of
different penis shapes and sizes. The presence of Ros made her uncomfortable all of a sudden, as the busty cheerleader had never made a secret of her attraction for Sandor. Sansa felt a rush of dislike for the girl, although she had never done anything to her. It was because she did not want anyone else looking or thinking about Sandor in that regard.

Sansa and Jeyne had so far been sitting there dumbfounded. Although Sansa had read enough girly magazines to know that the male population really was so varied in size and shape, talking to girls with firsthand experience was quite another thing.

"Who do you think has the biggest cock on the team?" Ros suddenly asked.

"Ros!" Randa exclaimed. "What kind of question is that?"

"A good one," Ros replied, "and don't deny that each of you hasn't thought about it at least once!"

"She's right." Mya grinned wickedly. "My money's on the Hound."

Sansa gasped loudly while the girls laughed, and Jeyne pretended not to be listening.

"I don't want to hear it! I'll never be able to look him in the face again!" Jeyne cried.

"Come on," Mya continued, "the guy's huge! It's a safe bet that he's huge all over!"

"Does size really matter?" Jeyne asked.

"It's not the size it's how you use it," Mya said.

"How many ways are there to use it?" Sansa asked.

The girls laughed so hard at her question that Randa had to hold onto the table to keep herself upright.

"That's right, you're still a virgin," Mya said.

"How have you stayed a virgin with Joffrey as your boyfriend?" Ros wondered.

"Just say no?" Sansa offered.

The girls laughed again. The truth, Sansa realized, was that she'd never felt the desire to want to have sex with Joffrey.

"But you must have thought about it, right?"

"Sure, I guess." Sansa was starting to sweat.

"What do you think it would be like with Joffrey?"

"I really don't know…" Sansa was blushing now.

"Well, I'm not embarrassed to admit I've imagined what sex would be like with the Hound," Ros confessed.

There was more laughter and eye-rolling from the girls, but it was forced on Sansa's part.

"Me too." Mya made a face. "But don't you dare tell Lothor!"

"All right fine, me too," Randa owned up. "But in my defense, I'm a red-blooded female and the guy
with his shirt off is smoking hot!"

"Plus all that raw, latent aggression makes me think he'll be dynamite in bed!" Ros squealed.

Sansa was clenching her fists into the folds of her skirt now. She was uncomfortable about the topic of conversation, but also aware that she had been having similar thoughts about Sandor, and jealousy was prickling her belly at hearing the other girls talk about him this way.

"...I'm telling the truth," Jeyne was saying, "the guy intimidates me...I'm not going there!"

"What about you, Sansa?"

She couldn't believe it. Were they really asking her if she'd thought of Sandor in a sexual manner?

"No," she lied, "I'm with Joffrey. I'd never think about Sandor that way."

Her answer had come too quick, and too forcefully from her lips. Jeyne and Randa's eyes narrowed on her, so she licked her lips and felt she had to elaborate. Ros was watching her now too, and again Sansa was all too aware of how the older girl felt about Sandor. At the back of her mind was also the memory of Joffrey's temper, and his jealousy. She wouldn't risk any of this conversation getting back to Joffrey and have him find something to get angry about.

She had to break up with him as soon as possible.

"Really...I couldn't think of him like that! He's a friend, I think...and he kind of frightens me," she made herself say.

"Really?"

"I know he's Joffrey's friend, and I've tried to get to know him, but sometimes when he looks at me, I just want to run from him..."

"Does he scare you that much?" Randa asked with her brow raised, but her eyes were asking another question.

Sansa chose to ignore the question in the older girl's penetrative gaze.

"Sometimes," she chose instead to say, because that was the truth.

"You're just too perfect, aren't you?" Ros sighed. "You're too loyal to Joffrey, and he doesn't deserve you."

The conversation turned to something else, and Sansa breathed a sigh of relief. She agreed with Ros's last statement. Joffrey did not deserve her.

Sansa's phone beeped as a new text message was received. Similarly, a chorus of beeps and tones echoed through the quad as almost everyone received text messages simultaneously.

Like everyone around her, Sansa reached for her phone.

"It's an alert from the Gossip Spyder," Randa said, "wonder what goss just came in!"

Sansa selected the link from the text message, and read the post.

Her hand stilled, and her breath stuck in her throat as her blood grew colder with every word she read...
Okay everyone, you were warned from the very start that this pairing would happen at some point…that moment is here…*big deep breaths* …In the true spirit of Gossip Girl – our couples could always do with more drama!

This is a loooong chapter, so take your time – I may not be able to update for a while.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gossip Spyder

A little spy has let me know that a certain Stark sister was spotted far from home yesterday afternoon with a mystery guy. Joffrey, perhaps you should be worried about an unwelcome dog sniffing around your territory?

Sansa, how was that ham and pineapple pizza? I heard your male friend let you have a couple of slices before he inhaled the rest! Who is he, Sansa? We'd all like to know!

Stay tuned peeps! I sense trouble!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

Sandor

Sandor had just rounded the corner and was about to enter the quad when he heard girlish laughter floating towards him. He heard snatches of a conversation involving certain parts of a guy's anatomy and he was about to turn around to find another way to the quad when he recognized one of the voices as belonging to Sansa Stark. He paused just behind the wall of the building, where he couldn't be seen.

"Does size really matter?" a girl asked.

"It's not the size it's how you use it."

"How many ways are there to use it?" he heard Sansa ask.

She was met with peals of laughter. Sandor stood still, knowing he should back away immediately. He should not be eavesdropping on what was clearly a private conversation.

"That's right, you're still a virgin," someone said to Sansa.

"How have you stayed a virgin with Joffrey as your boyfriend?"

"Just say no?" came Sansa's reply.

*Back away now.* He told himself as Sansa's answer was met with more laughs. His feet did not
move.
"But you must have thought about it, right?"
"Sure, I guess."
"What do you think it would be like with Joffrey?"
"I really don't know…"
"Well, I'm not embarrassed to admit I've imagined what sex would be like with the Hound."
Sandor tilted his head. Had he heard that correctly? Who the hell said that?
"Me too…But don't you dare tell Lothor!"
"All right fine, me too! But in my defense I'm a red-blooded female and the guy with his shirt off is smoking hot!"
"Plus all that raw, latent aggression makes me think he'll be dynamite in bed!"
Seriously? Surely he'd heard it wrong. Was he being mocked?
"I'm telling the truth. The guy intimidates me…I'm not going there!" said another girl.
That's sound more like it. Whoever that girl was, she had sense.
"What about you, Sansa?"
Sandor's ears perked up. This he had to hear.
"No," he heard Sansa say. "I'm with Joffrey. I'd never think about Sandor that way."
He felt his stomach drop.
"Really…I couldn't think of him like that! He's a friend, I think…and he kind of frightens me." Sansa continued to speak.
"Really?" someone asked her.
"I know he's Joffrey's friend, and I've tried to get to know him, but sometimes when he looks at me, I just want to run from him…"
"Does he scare you that much?"
"Sometimes,"
Sandor felt her words like a kick in the guts.
Willing himself to move, he stepped away from the building and stalked off angrily, not wanting to hear anymore.
I'd never think about Sandor that way…He kind of frightens me…I just want to run from him…he frightens me…I want to run from him.
The words he had heard circled around and around in his head. Whatever friendship he'd imagined was forming with Sansa, whatever trust he imagined she had in him…it was all bullshit. Lies.
Was Sansa only being nice to him because he was Joffrey's friend? The thought created a fury inside him, and he punched a locker as he passed, causing the whole bank of them to rattle and people around him to jump. He would have been able to handle it if all she'd said was she'd never pictured herself having sex with him. He would have expected that, even. But she hadn't left it at that.

He didn't want to believe it. He'd thought she was better than that. She was the one who'd called him friend first. He'd been starting to believe it, too. And yet he'd heard the words straight from her mouth. He frightens me…I want to run from him.

There was no way in hell Sansa Stark could possibly feel for him what he was feeling for her.

His phone buzzed as he received a new text message, and he welcomed the distraction when he found it was an alert from the Gossip Spyder.

Until he read the content.

His blood froze in his veins.

"Fuck!" He punched another locker, sending some freshmen running.

Moments later, he saw Joffrey coming down the hall with Trant and Blount trailing after him. The situation suddenly became much worse.

Joffrey spotted him and stopped in front of him.

"Have you read it?" Joffrey demanded.

Sandor nodded warily.

"If I find out that little bitch has been seeing someone behind my back…or I find out who this fucker is, they'll both pay. But her, especially. She's mine until I say otherwise!" Joffrey snarled, before storming out into the quad.

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Arya

The text alert from the Gossip Spyder came at lunch time, and almost as one, all the students in the quad reached for their phones to see what had been posted. Arya, Gendry and Hot Pie all swore when they read the Gossip Spyder's alert, and immediately, the entire quad was abuzz with talking students.

"Shit!" Arya looked up from her phone and her eyes immediately landed on the table across the quad where her sister was suddenly looking very pale.

"It's not true though, is it?" Hot Pie asked, leaning in to speak into Arya's ear.

"Of course it's not," Arya replied immediately.

"How do you know?" Gendry asked cautiously.

"She's perfect Sansa, that's why," Arya answered, "it's not something she would do."

The cafeteria doors flew open just then, and Joffrey Baratheon burst through them, followed closely by the Hound, Trant and Blount.
"Sansa!" Joffrey bellowed loud and clear for every student in the quad to hear.

Arya narrowed her eyes. She didn't like this at all.

The look on Joffrey's face and the meanness in his eyes made her more than wary, and a quick glance at Sansa's face showed that she looked worried, and very upset. Sansa rushed to meet the blonde halfway, and immediately she began pulling him away from the quad.

"Not here, Joffrey, please!"

"Is this true?" Joffrey ignored her. "Have you been seeing someone behind my back? Who the fuck is he?"

Sansa's eyes seemed to flock over Joffrey's shoulder, but the only person there was Sandor Clegane. The big brute glared back at her, and Sansa paled even further.

"Of course I haven't Joffrey!"

"Then why the hell is the Spyder saying you are? Where were you yesterday afternoon?"

"I was at choir practice!" Sansa was getting more and more upset as every student turned to watch. "I went straight home afterwards, I swear!"

Arya inhaled sharply, and Gendry turned to her.

"What's the matter?" he asked her.

"She's lying," Arya whispered to him.

Sansa had not come home until close to seven p.m. the night before. Choir practice would have ended at about four-thirty.

"Then who was she with?" Hot Pie whispered.

Arya shrugged, and all three of them turned to watch as Sansa managed to convince Joffrey to stand at the tree on the other side of the quad, out of hearing distance, but still within sight. It was the same tree they had been arguing behind the previous week. Unlike the last time, Arya was not finding this argument funny. There was something about their expressions, and the way that they were standing that put her on edge. She stole a look at the Hound, then at the two girls who'd come to stand behind him, Jeyne Poole and a cheerleader called Miranda or Myranda. All of them wore serious expressions.

There was a sharp collective gasp, and Arya turned around to see that Joffrey had taken a grip of Sansa's wrists, holding them in front of her tightly.

"Jesus." Hot Pie shook his head.

Sansa didn't look to be making a sound, but Arya knew her better. There was a tightness to her sister's features that she recognized as a look of pain. Arya herself had put that her expression on her sister's face numerous times in the past.

"He's hurting her!" She found herself standing up, but Gendry's own hand was suddenly tight around her wrist.

She looked at him in shock. "Gendry, what are you doing?"
"If she screams, I'll let you go to her. I'll even come with you." He met her eyes, and his were as
determined as hers. "This is not your fight, Arya."

"But she needs help!"

"Perhaps, but you won't be helping her if you go over there and make a bigger scene," Gendry
pointed out. "In case you didn't notice, a scene is what she was trying to avoid."

Arya looked over at her sister and Joffrey again, and she saw that Sansa was talking very quickly,
and she'd somehow managed to twist her fingers into the front of Joffrey's shirt. She could tell that
Sansa was pleading, possibly begging. She hated seeing her sister doing that. She wanted nothing
more than to see her well rid of the loathsome blonde prick. But for whatever reason, Sansa was
choosing to stay with Joffrey. Stupid, stupid girl.

After a length of time, Joffrey released Sansa's wrist and Arya felt the tension lift. She watched as
Joffrey took her sister into his arms and as he kissed her. For the second time, Sansa had managed to
calm his temper, but Arya knew how easily Sansa bruised. Her wrists would definitely be purple by
the evening.

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Sansa

Sansa stood stiffly in Joffrey's arms clenching her eyes tight. She didn't want to cry in front of
everyone, and not in Joffrey's arms. It was the last place in the world that she wanted to be in, and
yet she was still there. She couldn't get herself away from him. She'd had her chance. She could have
broken up with him when he'd accused her of cheating, but she hadn't. It would have been the fastest
way to ensure people believed she had been cheating on him. Sansa Stark had honor, and she did not
cheat.

"Don't cry, Sansa," Joffrey said above her head, "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I know you didn't, Joffrey," she said flatly, but a tear rolled down her cheek nevertheless.

He had hurt her, and he'd meant to do it. She was certain of that.

Her forearms ached from where he'd gripped her, but it wasn't why she was tearing up. She was
disappointed in herself, and at her inability to rid herself of Joffrey Baratheon. She was disgusted at
the fact she'd once again resorted to pleading and cajoling him from his seething jealousy, until he
was calm again and convinced once more of her unswerving loyalty and affection. Now she was
going to have to pretend for a little while longer that nothing was wrong, just until the rumors of her
cheating on him died down. She never normally cared what people thought of her, but in this she felt
very strongly. She was determined that nobody would ever believe she was capable of being
unfaithful to anyone, including Joffrey.

It really shouldn't have come as a surprise to her that someone had spotted her and Sandor together.
Her red hair was a dead giveaway, and if it wasn't that, then Sandor's scars certainly would have.
Her first reaction upon reading the post was noticing that Sandor had not been named. That was
curious. Maybe he hadn't been recognized? He'd only been referred to as a mystery guy, and for that
she had been thankful. He wouldn't have to be dragged into her and Joffrey's crap, not if she could
avoid it. She'd mentally prepared herself for Joffrey's temper, so that when he'd barged through the
cafeteria doors, she'd somewhat been ready to face him.

What she hadn't been prepared for was the look on Sandor's face when she'd glanced at him over
Joffrey's shoulder. He had been furious, and that had shocked her. To think that his fury had been
directed at her had made her blanch. She didn't understand why he'd look at her like that. She hadn't done anything to cause that anger, and his name hadn't been mentioned in the post. No one would have to know that she had been with him at the pizzeria. No one would have to gossip about him.

So she had lied to Joffrey, lied about where she had been the previous afternoon. Denied every accusation he'd thrown at her, and made sure Sandor's name never came up. Then Joffrey had grabbed at her wrists, and a very real fear had swept over her at the expression she'd seen in Joffrey's eyes. He was strong, and he hadn't held back his strength.

"You have to believe me," she'd said to him just moments before, "why would I want anyone else, when I have you?"

"Then why would the Spyder say that you've been spotted with some other guy?"

"I don't know, Joff," she'd said, "maybe someone's jealous of us and wants to create problems between us?"

She'd pacified him, eventually, and now he stood with his arms around her, and kissing the side of her face.

"I don't like hurting you, Sansa," Joffrey whispered into her ear, and his fingers cut into her flesh slightly. "I just hate being made a fool of, do you know what I mean?"

Sansa stiffened at his words.

There was no mistaking them for anything other than the threat that it was.

"I know, Joffrey," she forced herself to say, "I'm sorry."

When they eventually made their way back to the table, Sansa was aware of all eyes hastily turning away from them. She was startled to find herself meeting Arya's eyes for a brief moment, and noted that Arya had a look of concern on her face. Sansa blinked and looked away. She was so close to being able to speak to her sister. She missed Arya. That was one more reason she had for wanting to break up with Joffrey as soon as possible. She wanted to be able to have a conversation with her sister again.

Reaching their table, Sansa noted immediately that Sandor had disappeared. She was unhappy that he'd fled, but also relieved he hadn't stuck around. It would have been hard to face his anger, and whatever had caused it. It would have been harder still, to be so close to the guy she really wanted to be with, knowing she'd promised to be faithful to someone she was coming to detest.

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**Arya**

After school, Arya watched as her sister got into a car with her friend Jeyne, glad that she wasn't with Joffrey. The guy needed time to cool off. She turned towards the football field where she could see the team beginning their training, and hoped for some kind of accident or injury to befall Joffrey Baratheon. That was quite evil of her to wish such a thing, but the jerk deserved it. She hadn't been able to shake the uneasiness she'd felt since witnessing their argument at lunch.

She released a breath. She wanted desperately to smack her sister across the head, grab her by her shoulders and shake her while yelling at her to wake up from whatever hold Joffrey seemed to have on her. Instead, she shook her head and told herself once again that there was nothing she could do.

Then she went in search of Hot Pie and convinced him to drop her off at Harrenhal Mall, as Gendry
had gone to band practice. From the mall she would catch a taxi to Flea Bottom, and hunt down Lommy Greenhands at the 'Lucky 8'.

Her phone rang as she was walking through the mall to reach the taxi ranks, and her lips curved into a smile when she saw who was calling.

"Hi, Jaqen," she said, "how are you?"

"I'm very well, lovely girl," he replied, and Arya let the sound of his voice rumble through her. "I just wanted to hear your voice."

"Really?"

"Truly." He laughed. "It's been over a week since I saw you, Arya. It really is quite inconvenient that you go to a different school."

"Are you telling me that you miss me?"

"Hmm," he hummed a noise of agreement. "I guess I am."

"Oh, I…" Her cheeks flushed pink, and she was grateful he couldn't see her.

"Sweet girl, don't feel obliged to have to say it back," he said gently.

"But, I do miss you," she blurted out, and it was true.

"Then I am very glad to hear it," Jaqen said with a laugh. "I'm very distracted these days, and my school work is suffering because of you."

"I don't believe that,"

"Not to mention my music…"

"Now I really don't believe that!"

"I'm serious! I've been trying to write lyrics for a new song, and all I can think of is trying to find lyrics that rhyme with Arya,"

She giggled. "And how's that working out?"

"Not very well," Jaqen admitted, "listen…Arya, how are ya, I'd like to get to know ya, got caught up in your mania, I'd do anything for ya."

Arya laughed so loudly that she attracted curious looks from passersby. "That's awful!"

"I told you," he sighed dramatically, "you're in my head constantly, and ruining my concentration."

"What can I do about it?" She sensed him turn serious again at her question.

"I know you have had a lot going on recently," he began, "but I was wondering if you had given more thought to our second date? When can I see you again? Perhaps you could give me something to look forward to?"

She knew Jaqen had a schedule busier than hers. After all, he was a performing artist, and he helped his aunt and uncle out at the House of Black & White, as well as still being in high school. He had a lot of commitments going on, and it appeared he was willing to make some kind of commitment to
her as well. Thinking about it caused butterflies in her stomach, realizing he was probably expecting her to make a similar commitment to him.

"How about this Saturday?" she asked.

"I have a gig in the evening, but I'm all yours until three in the afternoon."

"Then, would you like to have a late breakfast with me?" she suggested, "there's this pancake and waffle place I've been wanting to go to."

Arya had given their second date some thought, particularly after she'd told him she wanted to choose their next activity, but she hadn't gotten past the food part. However, it didn't seem to matter what she might have suggested, judging by Jaqen's response.

"I would go with you anywhere, Arya Stark," he said, "I just want to spend some time with you."

The guy certainly knew how to take a girl's breath away, she thought after ending the call. He'd told her he would pick her up on Saturday morning, and she'd smiled stupidly to herself as she walked towards the taxi ranks. Getting into the first available taxi, Arya pushed aside her growing excitement for her next date with Jaqen, in order to concentrate on playing amateur sleuth, and trying to find answers and clues about Gendry's past. Why is he so reluctant to talk about his past, anyway? She wondered.

The driver gave her a strange look when she gave him the address she wanted to go to, but nevertheless, he drove her there and took her money.

"Be careful, young lady," the man had said, before driving away.

Arya looked up and down the street. The sun had yet to set, and in the afternoon light she could see that the buildings were in various stages of disrepair. The styles of the buildings were old fashioned. On the way in she'd noted that the place had a ramshackle appearance about it, as though the structures and roads had been built outside the control of town planners, which was probably the case, given what she'd heard about the place.

Arya stared at the faded paintwork of the 'Lucky 8' pool hall, took a deep breath, and pushed through the glass doors. It was dim inside, and it took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the lack of light, but when they did, she noticed that most of the patrons were young men and teenage boys.

A good deal of them looked at her when she walked in, and most of them kept watching her as she made her way to the counter.

From what she could see, there was one main hall that had a dozen billiard tables arranged in three rows of four along the room. There were two flat screen TV's mounted up on the wall, both tuned to sports channels, and speakers tucked into recesses in the walls. Cool white, florescent lighting hung from the ceiling above each table, reflecting off the green felt and giving the whole place a greenish glow.

A middle-aged man behind the counter looked at Arya curiously, but his smile was kind enough.

"Can I help you, little lady?" he asked her.

Arya didn't like being called either little, or lady, and this man had called her both, but she returned his smile anyway.

"I'm looking for Lommy," she replied, "is he here?"
"Sure is." The man leaned back from the counter and shouted over the top of Arya's head. "Lommy! Get over here!"

The group of teenage boys at the very back of the hall looked their way, and a gangly, curly haired blonde dressed in ripped jeans and a t-shirt separated himself from the group. He eyed her curiously as he approached the counter.

"Yeah, Bruce?" Lommy looked from Arya to Bruce.

"This little lady here's looking for you," Bruce said, "I'll leave you to it."

Lommy gazed at Arya curiously, not bothering to hide his appraisal as he eyed her up and down. Arya did the same with him, guessing he was around Gendry's age.

"Do I know you?" he asked her, "you look familiar."

"No, you don't know me," she replied, unsure how to go about asking questions regarding Gendry without coming off all stalker-like.

"Why are you looking for me, then?" He turned back to his friends, who'd all stopped playing to watch Lommy speak to the pretty stranger. "I've got a game to finish."

"You know Gendry Waters, right?"

Lommy's eyes narrowed further. "Yeah, why?"

"I was hoping I could ask you some questions about him," she said.

"Are you his girlfriend?"

"No, I'm not."

"An ex-girlfriend?"

"No!" Arya snapped, "I'm just his friend, okay?"

"Have you seen Gendry recently?" Lommy wondered.

"Yes, just today at school."

"Well, when you see him next." Lommy gave her a look. "Smack him in the head for me and tell him he's a douchebag."

"What? Why?" Arya asked, surprised.

"Because we haven't seen him here since he moved away,"

"Moved away?" Arya was getting more questions than answers. "From where?"

"From River's Edge," Lommy replied, "he moved houses, and he transferred out of River's Edge High."

"Gendry used to live in River's Edge? Flea Bottom?" Arya exclaimed.

Lommy was now watching her carefully.

"Who are you?" Lommy demanded. "What's your name?"
"I'm not telling you my name," she replied.

She didn't know if the Gossip Spyder's eyes and ears reached as far as Flea Bottom.

"Then I'm not answering anymore questions." Lommy turned to leave.

Arya grabbed his shirt sleeve. "Wait,"

Lommy looked at her hand, and she let go of his shirt.

"Sorry," she said, "I'll play you,"

"What?"

"I'll play you," she repeated, and nodded towards a pool table. "Eight-ball. If I win, you answer all my questions about Gendry."

Lommy stared at her a moment, and Arya could see him trying to work out what her deal was.

"And if I win? What do I get out of this?"

"Fifty bucks," Arya replied, pulling out some notes from her pocket to show she had cash.

He grinned at her. "You're on!"

Lommy then led her toward the table where all his friends were still watching them, and he quickly brought them up to speed. The four teenage boys all laughed.

"You're kidding, right?" one of them said.

"She's doing this for dirt on Gendry?"

"This should be entertaining…"

Arya refused to acknowledge that she was nervous. She knew how to play pool. Her father had owned a billiard table back at Winterfell Manor, and she had watched the men in her family play countless games in the past. She'd had the best teacher in Uncle Benjen who'd taught her to play when she was ten years old. She had kept her skills sharp by playing against Robb and Jon, but it was from Theon that she had learnt the subtle art of hustling.

Arya had watched as his unsuspecting high-school buddies would come over, and Robb and Jon would watch as Theon would lose games on purpose to build up his opponent's confidence. Then someone would suggest they play for money, and that's when Theon would rob them blind. It was never about the money for Theon. For him, it was about manipulation.

Arya was about to attempt it for herself. Except she only had one game to pull it off. Someone handed her a cue stick, and the balls were setup on the table. They flipped a coin, and Lommy called heads to break. It was tails, and Arya lined up the cue ball and broke, sending sixteen balls scattering across the green felt. She determined striped balls. Breathing, she sank her first ball, picking the easiest shot. She selected the next easiest shot, and missed her second turn on purpose, fouling the shot.

Lommy and his friends smirked.

"This will be the easiest fifty bucks I ever made!" Lommy stated.
Crossing her fingers behind her back, Arya hoped she hadn’t underestimated the guy's skills. After all, she'd never seen him play, and she knew he played every day.

She baited him into becoming overconfident. "Go on, then. Show me how it's supposed to be done."

"All right." The blonde grinned.

He called some ridiculous shot, sending a ball bouncing off three sides of the table before sinking it into a middle pocket.

*Shit.*

"Do it again." She raised her brow in a challenge.

"Don't do it, Lommy," cautioned of his friends, "she's trying to get you to do something stupid."

Fortunately, Lommy ignored his friend's advice. He missed his second shot, misjudging the angle by a smidgen.

"Damn!" he swore.

Arya smiled at him, showing all of her little pointy teeth. "That's a shame,"

She approached the table, lined up the cue with her next object ball…and proceeded to clean up.

"Oh, shit!" Lommy's friends laughed as Arya sank ball after ball.

"Oh, noooo!" Lommy wailed helplessly.

"She played you!"

At last, Arya had nothing left but the eight ball to sink.

"Far right corner pocket," she called, and struck.

"You little weasel," Lommy said as the black eight ball fell into the pocket she'd called. "You hustled me,"

"Did not." Arya smirked. "You never asked if I knew how to play."

Shaking his head, Lommy held out his hand for her to take, and after only a second's hesitation, Arya shook it.

"Nice one," he said, "for a girl, you play like a dude."

"Thanks,"

"So, what name can I call you, since you won't give me your real name?"

"You can call me Weasel." She smiled.

He laughed, then introduced her to the rest of his friends. Arya patiently said hello to all of them, then asked if they were thirsty.

"I'm buying," she said, and received a chorus of 'hell yeah' in response.

She went back to the counter, and purchased several bottles of sodas as well as bags of chips and
chocolate bars from Bruce's snack selection for Lommy and his friends. Arya had belatedly remembered that these guys were Gendry's friends too. Now seated around a table overcrowded with junk food, Lommy couldn't hold back his own curiosity any longer.

"What is Gendry to you, Weasel?" he asked, "what do you want to know?"

Arya picked her words carefully. "He's a good friend of mine, though I haven't known him that long. He doesn't talk much about himself. That's why I'm here."

"You like him, don't you?"

"As a friend,"

"Sure, I believe you." Lommy rolled his eyes. "So, ask away. You won that game and that was the deal."

Arya licked her lips, and started with an easy one. "How long have you known Gendry?"

"Since we were in kindergarten," Lommy replied, "that's why I'm kinda annoyed at him for not coming to see us since the beginning of summer when he moved away."

"Did you know his mom?"

"I think I might have met her once, but she died a long time ago. Gendry's been living with foster families a long time, but he's been with the Motts the longest."

"And he really lived here, in Flea Bottom?"

"Sure did," Lommy replied, "the Motts rented an apartment about six blocks down."

Arya frowned.

"You go to King's Landing Prep, right?" Lommy asked, and she nodded. "So, you're from a rich family then. You've got money."

"I guess," she said, uncomfortable about the turn in the topic.

"You don't seem like a snob," Lommy stated.

"Should I be?"

"I expected you to be a snob," he said, "but you're not."

"Where are you going with this?"

Lommy mirrored her frown. "Gendry was one of us...and then he found out someone had left him some money, and now that he's rich it's like he's turned his back on us. He's turned into a snob."

Arya managed to swallow her gasp. *Gendry inherited money?*

"That doesn't sound like Gendry," she said instead.

Lommy shrugged. "Maybe what they say is true. Money changes people."

"I thought Mr. Mott must have been like a mid-level manager or something," Arya muttered, thinking about the grand house with the funny statues at the entrance.
"Mr. Mott works on the production floor, some kind of supervisor I think," Lommy said, "but he's definitely not a manager."

"So, you're saying Gendry paid for his foster-family's new house?"

"It seems that way." Lommy shrugged. "He didn't really stick around long enough to tell us the details."

Arya's brain was churning over the things she'd just learned. It wasn't the Mott's who were well-off, it was Gendry who had money. But who had bequeathed him that money in the first place?

"Did Gendry ever suspect who might have left him the money?"

Again, Lommy shrugged. "Gendry figured it had to be someone on his father's side. His mom had been a waitress, and his mom's parents had been long dead before he was born."

She sat in silence for some moments while Lommy tore into a bag of chips. Why would Gendry hide something like this? Why would he stop speaking to his friends whom he'd known since childhood? It didn't make sense.

"You know, Gendry's in a band again," she began, "they've entered the Battle of The Bands competition that starts next weekend."

"I know." Lommy nodded. "It's all over his Facebook wall. We were thinking of going, but I'm not sure he'd want us there,"

"Of course he would!"

"We'll think about it." Lommy indicated the other guys.

Bruce came up to their table then, and smiled at them. "How's everything, kids?"

"Great." Lommy smiled back. "Weasel here's asking us about Gendry,"

"Gendry, huh?" Bruce raised his brow. "Popular boy, that one. You're the second person that's come in here asking questions about him."

"I am?" Arya stared at the man, startled. "Who was the first person?"

"Some fellow. Came in a few weeks back, probably in his thirties, dark haired…Jordy something," Bruce rubbed his chin. "I know! His name was Johnny Castle!"

Johnny Castle? Arya wondered, and then her eyes widened in realization.

"Jory Cassel!"

"Yes, that's it." Bruce smiled.

Her mind was racing now, connecting the dots. If Jory had been asking questions about Gendry, it meant he was doing so under her father's instructions. She wasn't silly. She knew her father often conducted background searches on new acquaintances. Jory was good at his job, he definitely would have found something. Which meant her father would know everything there was to know about Gendry.

Now, how would she get Jory or her father to tell her what they knew?
Sandor

He stumbled into his car after football practice that afternoon, wondering how the hell he even made it through the session. The entire time, he'd wanted to rush at Joffrey and separate his head from his torso.

"Save your aggression for tomorrow night," Coach Selmy had said, reprimanding him for his excessive use of it during training.

He sat behind the steering wheel of his Mustang and just sat and stared ahead of him without seeing anything. He was too angry for allowing himself to believe that there could be anything between him and Sansa Stark. He'd let her get under his skin. He'd allowed himself to be taken in by her beautiful face, pretty smile and the sweet words that fell from her perfect lips. He'd mocked her once for her manners and her politeness and how she never seemed to say anything meaningful, only what other people wanted to hear. She hadn't changed in that regard, but he'd thought...he'd felt...that she was different with him.

He had been deluding himself.

Swearing, he started the engine and began to drive. Halfway home, he changed his mind and took the exit that would take him to Flea Bottom. He was hungry, and no offense to his housekeeper, but he was sick of her cooking. He needed a drink too, and it was easier to find a place in Flea Bottom that would serve him alcohol without asking for ID. Sandor parked his car in the secure underground garage and swapped his letterman jacket for the black leather bomber he kept in the back seat. He was aware that he already looked older than his eighteen years, but black leather seemed to add a few more years on him.

His first stop was at a small diner to grab a burger and fries. He wasn't completely out of his head that he'd drink on an empty stomach. After that, he walked past a pool hall and headed to the hole-in-the-wall bar he frequented every now and then. The man behind the bar looked him over when he sat himself down on the stool in front of him, but Sandor met the man's eyes without flinching, glaring back until the barman was forced to look away first.

"What'll it be?" the man asked him.

"Scotch and soda," Sandor said, pleased that his voice came out lower and raspier than normal.

A tumbler was placed in front of him, and Sandor finally allowed himself to get lost in his pity-party of one. It occurred to him as he drank, that he'd picked up the taste for alcohol during his association with Joffrey Baratheon and his family. Joffrey was a spoilt brat, and neither his mother nor father ever seemed to tell him no. If Joffrey had wanted a party, his parents would let him use one of the guest houses, and pay for everything, including the alcohol that always flowed freely.

Joffrey liked beer as much any guy, but because he had money, he had always supplied the best kind of beers. Sandor had drunk beers from all over the world as a result. The spirits and liqueurs he'd had were always the best money could buy.

Sandor had even learned to drink wine. Joffrey had made him come along when his Uncle Jaime had held a wine appreciation afternoon once, and he'd learned to tell the difference between cat piss, and a great vintage. He preferred reds to whites. It seems you prefer redheads now, too. He mused, annoyed. He'd picked up that habit from a fucking Baratheon as well.

Sandor hadn't expected to become best buddies with Sansa after sharing a pizza with her. He'd had a good time, and from the way she'd been smiling at him, he thought she'd been having fun too. He'd
thought she'd stopped being wary of him, particularly after the way she'd been clinging to him after he'd rescued her from the riot. But the things he'd heard her say proved otherwise. Whatever he might have expected, he wasn't prepared for her reminding him of exactly who, and what he was.

"He's a friend, I think…"

Meaning, she wasn't sure if he was? He'd put himself at risk to come after her during the riot. Hadn't he proven himself?

"He kind of frightens me…I know he's Joffrey's friend, and I've tried to get to know him, but sometimes when he looks at me, I just want to run from him…"

"Does he scare you that much?"

"Sometimes,"

After everything, she was still scared of him. He'd asked himself earlier whether Sansa was only being nice to him because he was Joffrey's friend. The answer to that was a resounding, yes.

Sansa accepted him into her life, because of Joffrey Baratheon. If Joffrey wasn't in the picture, there would never have been a reason for Sansa Stark to ever need speak to him. If she looked at him, at his scarred face, it was because her perfect manners stipulated that she do so. If she took him out for pizza to thank him, it was because she was being polite. Because he was Joffrey's friend.

As proof, he'd watched, along with every student that had been in the quad at lunch earlier that day, as Sansa had professed her faithfulness and loyalty to the blonde jerk. She'd even lied to Joffrey, denying ever going for pizza with anyone, to appease the guy's temper. Sandor had been prepared to face Joffrey's temper and own up to being the guy seen with Sansa, even though he hadn't been named, but before he'd been able to say anything, Sansa had already denied all of it. She'd kept him out of the whole thing, as though the conversations and the laughs and smiles they'd shared had never happened. It had hurt to have her disregard him so easily.

*She put you back in your place quick enough,* he told himself angrily. *Don't forget that you're Joffrey's loyal Hound.*

What the hell had he been thinking, allowing himself to daydream about having Sansa for himself?

"*I'm with Joffrey. I'd never think about Sandor that way.*"

That first sentence of hers had shattered that dream to pieces. So he'd watched as they'd argued under that tree, and he'd ignored his instinct to rush to her side when he'd seen Joffrey crushing her wrists. He'd just stood there and done nothing. Sansa had made her preference for Joffrey clear for all to see. She could deal with her bastard of a boyfriend by herself.

He determined to get over the redheaded bird as quickly as possible. Sandor finished his one drink, and watched the sports commentary on the TV over the bar as he waited for the alcohol to pass through his system. He couldn't get drunk, much as he'd like to. He had a football game the following day. By the time he walked out of the bar, night had well and truly fallen, and he walked back towards his car.

He'd just passed the pool hall and was about to cross the street when he noticed a commotion in the darkness.

"…Get your hands away from me, jerk!" said a feminine voice.
"Oh, come on!" Said a male voice.

"What part of no, don't you get?" the girl sounded young, and that made Sandor frown.

"Don't play hard to get, sweetheart!" said a second male voice.

"Don't you fucking touch me!"

Sandor paused in his step. The way the girl swore sounded familiar, and he turned into the narrow lane just in time to see a small feminine shape being grabbed by the larger figure of a guy. The girl threw a punch, which hit her attacker square in the jaw.

"I said, let go of me!" the girl yelped, breaking from the guy's grip.

She stepped into a dim puddle of light cast by a street lamp…and Sandor swore when he recognized her pretty face, and purple tipped hair.

He smelled trouble…with a capital 'A'.

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**Arya**

She stepped out of the 'Lucky 8' after saying goodbye to Lommy and the other boys. Bruce had called a taxi for her, and now she was waiting for it to arrive. That was when two young men came stumbling out of the bar across the road. The blinking sign at the door told her it was called the 'Crossroads Inn'. Arya tried to make herself inconspicuous as they neared her, but they'd already seen her. One of them was tall and bald, while the other was plain and ordinary looking.

"Look, Polliver…there's a pretty one," said the ordinary looking one.

The bald one gave her a drunk grin. "Hey pretty girl…haven't seen you around here before…"

Arya ignored them and pointedly looked away.

"Hey, I'm talking to you,"

She still didn't acknowledge him.

"Tickler, I think she's ignoring me,"

"That's cos you're ugly, Polliver," said the ordinary one, "let me try,"

Arya felt a hand on her elbow, and she stumbled away instinctively. "No! Get your hands away from me, jerk!"

"Oh, come on!" said the ordinary one as he stepped closer to her, backing her into a wall.

"What part of no, don't you get?"

"Don't play hard to get, sweetheart!" said the bald one.

"Don't you fucking touch me!" Arya screamed at him as he made to grab her.

His hands grasped her shoulders, and Arya reacted by swinging a punch at his face.

"You little cocksucker!"
"I said, let go of me!" She broke free.

That was when the one called Tickler advanced on her as well. "We only wanted to talk!"

Panic suddenly gripped her as she realized her predicament had just turned for the worse.

The Tickler was on her, and she grabbed at his wrists, twisting them in the way she remembered Jon showing her so that he would loosen his grip. When he did, she used all her might to bend it to an unnatural angle. He cried out in pain, and Arya shoved him as hard as she could to the ground. He pulled her down with him, and she landed with her knees on his stomach, winding him.

"Bitch!" he hissed.

Overcome with rage and panic, she smashed her fist into his nose, feeling it break with a sickening crunch, and hit him again in the jaw. Heavy hands landed on her shoulders.

"Leave him!" a rasping voice growled.

A muscular arm was hooked around her waist, and she was being lifted off the guy on the ground whose nose was now bleeding. Both of them were swearing and moaning in pain.

Arya kicked and clawed at the person holding her, trying to free herself.

"Stop it!" Her captor shook her. "It's me!"

She looked up. "You!"

Sandor Clegane glared down at her.

Arya looked at the lane behind them and found the bald guy crawling on the ground towards his friend with the bloody nose. The bald guy was bleeding as well, from a cut on his head.

"Did you do that?" she asked him.

"See anyone else around?" Sandor roughly set her on her feet, but he grabbed her elbow and started dragging her down the street. "Let's get out of here before someone calls the cops. Someone would have heard all that noise."

"What are you doing here?" she asked, half jogging to keep up with his long strides.

Her heart was still beating rapidly in her chest, and adrenaline was masking the pain in her hand, but she knew it would be throbbing soon.

"What are you doing here," Sandor returned, "on your own, at night?"

She'd just been assaulted, and though she'd been able to deal with one guy...there was no way she'd have been able to deal with two.

The Hound had saved her neck.

"Oh, God..." she squeaked, understanding just how much trouble she could have been in.

The Hound glanced at her briefly. "Are you okay?"

*Nothing happened. You're fine.* She told herself.
"I'm good." She was pleased when her voice came out steady. "Where are you taking me?"

"My car is parked this way," he replied, "I'm taking you home,"

"No. Drop me off at Harrenhal Mall. That's where I told my mother I'd be."

"Suit yourself."

He led her to a basement garage, and in the light Arya saw a streak of red on the bottom of Sandor's shirt.

"It's not my blood," he rasped when he saw her looking.

He unlocked the doors to his Mustang and ordered her to get into the passenger seat, before he walked around to the driver's side and pulled the door open. He didn't get in right away. Instead, he shrugged out of the leather jacket he wore and threw it onto the seat.

"Reach behind you and pass me that shirt, would you?"

Arya did as he instructed and reached for the white t-shirt on the rear seat, before handing it to him. She watched as he pulled off the bloodied shirt before throwing it into the back seat.

"You're fucking huge," she muttered, staring at his bared torso and taking in his massive shoulders and muscular chest.

She appreciated the impressive six-pack he sported, too. His arms were defined and corded with muscle, and she noted that his right bicep was still bandaged. *Shame about your face, but the rest of you is pretty hot.*

He caught her staring, but she didn't look away. "Just realized that, did you? Are you blind?"

He pulled on the clean shirt and tugged his leather jacket back on before finally getting behind the wheel. Momentarily, they were on the road heading towards Harrenhal Mall.

Arya sighed. *I probably should thank him.* She knew that she should, but getting her mouth to form the words proved quite difficult. Her brain was finding it very hard to make the connection that the Hound had done something worthy of her thankfulness. He turned his stereo on as the silence was uncomfortably. It seemed he didn't intend on having a conversation, which was fine by her. She had too many things on her mind anyway, and she was close to being overwhelmed.

Gendry. Jaqen. The Baratheons. Sansa. Father. Jory, and now the Hound. Too many names were going around in her head, and each one elicited a different emotion within her. She made a noise like something of a whimper, and the Hound glared at her sharply.

"You'd better not fucking cry," he snapped.

"I'm not!" she snapped back, returning his glare.

"You're an idiot," he said, "why didn't you just run?"

She didn't answer him. She hadn't been thinking. Looking back on it, she probably should have gone back inside the pool hall where she was reasonably safe with the proprietor, Bruce.

The Hound clicked his tongue. "You've got shit for brains…but you pack a punch for a little girl."
"I'm not a little girl!"

"You're little to me," he continued, "and you're a girl, so deal with it."

"Fuck you."

He barked a laugh. "You want to walk the rest of the way?"

"I didn't ask you to rescue me," she stated, "but you did, so now you have a duty to keep me safe."

That shut him up temporarily, and she heard him muttering something about losing his mind, and bloody Stark girls. Arya remembered the incident in the quad that afternoon.

"How are things between my sister and Joffrey?" she asked him.

"What do you mean?"

"After what happened today?" she reminded him. "The Spyder's post and the fight?"

"How should I know?" he remarked.

"You're around them every day," she pointed out, "aren't you Joff's best friend?"

"He's not my friend!" the Hound hissed out, surprising her, as though the words had been ripped out of his throat.

"Your Master, or whatever then," she went on, "you're his loyal Hound, right?"

"Drop it, little bitch," he snarled, "I'm warning you."

She stared at him, confused by the tone in his voice. "You're weird."

"Why don't you just ask your sister?" he asked.

"Because I'm not talking to her,"

"Why not?"

"Because," she snapped, "I hate her boyfriend."

Reaching for the controls on his stereo, she turned the music up, and didn't notice the glance Sandor threw her way. It was pop music that blared from the speakers, the mainstream Top-40 kind. Not asking his permission, Arya took his iPod from its console and started scrolling through it. Sandor didn't stop her.

"You've got all girly crap on here," she said, reading the names of the artists on his playlist. Who knew the Hound listened to Taylor Swift, and Pink, and Lady Gaga?

"Leave that alone," Sandor said with a sigh, "why do you want to go to Harrenhal Mall? Don't you have a seven p.m. curfew?"

"Past seven now, I'm in trouble already," she replied, not asking how he knew about her curfew.

It was then that Arya came across his most frequently played list, and found a song and an artist she wasn't expecting.
"What the hell?" she asked under her breath. How had he gotten hold of this? "Hound, why do you have…?"

She didn't finish her question. A light had snapped on in her head, and something the Gossip Spyder had posted that afternoon came to mind. Joffrey, perhaps you should be worried about an unwelcome dog sniffing around your territory? Arya bit the side of her lip and mulled over one word in particular; dog. Now she had in her hand an iPod apparently belonging to Sandor Clegane, containing a song she knew for a fact Sansa had sung and recorded purely for her private use, on his most-played list. It was strange as well how the playlist of artists…

"…Looks just like Sansa's playlist…" her voice trailed off, then she looked up at him accusingly. "It's you!"

"What?"

"You're the dog that's been sniffing around Joffrey's territory…Oh my God…the Spyder knows!"

She paled, then turned in her seat and started hitting him. "You asshole!"

"Stop it!" Sandor gripped the steering wheel tighter in one hand, while trying to deflect blows with the other. "Cut it out!"

"She was with you yesterday," she continued, "it was you she was having pizza with!"

"Quit hitting me!"

"Joffrey's going to kill her if he finds out!"

"Fuck! Arya, stop!" Sandor managed to catch a wrist.

"And you! You're his best friend!" She gasped dramatically. "What's he going to do when he finds out you're messing with his girl?"

"I'm not messing with her!" Sandor bellowed.

Arya stopped hitting him and sat back, mind whirring as she processed what she'd just learned. It was something in Sandor's tone as he'd shouted at her that had convinced her.

"But I'm right, aren't I? It was you Sansa was spotted with."

Sandor didn't reply, but Arya already knew.

"Why didn't the Spyder name you?"

Again, he didn't reply.

"What did you do?"

"I haven't done anything," he rasped, "I haven't touched her."

"But you want to." Arya made a face. "You like her."

"Mind your own damn business!"
"This is my business!"

"Since when? Why do you care all of a sudden?" he demanded. "Suddenly remembered she's your sister?"

She sneered. "Don't pretend you understand my relationship with my sister. All you need to know is I hate Joffrey, and Sansa doesn't deserve whatever punishment he'll give her if he ever finds out you've been sneaking around behind his back."

"I told you, I'm not sneaking around with her!"

"Does she like you, too?" Arya asked.

Sandor didn't reply.

"Oh…well…" Arya shifted uncomfortably.

"What?"

"She doesn't feel the same way, huh?"

"Just, shut the fuck up!"

She'd touched a nerve there, and though he was gruff, there was something about the set of his jaw that told her she was pushing too far. The Hound was far from Sansa's type, and it was obvious that he knew that as well. The contrasts between Sandor Clegane and Joffrey Baratheon were too many to count. She almost felt bad for him. Almost.

"Why were you having pizza with her anyway?" she asked, too curious for her own good.

She didn't think he would answer her, but after some minutes, he did. "She was thanking me."

"For what?"

"She didn't tell you?"

"I told you, we're not talking to each other."

He frowned, but kept his eyes on the road. "During the riots…she got trapped outside the restaurant with the mob. I got her out."

She hadn't expected that response. "You rescued her? The Baratheons never said…"

"Well, they wouldn't," Sandor sneered.

"Is that how your arm got injured?"

He nodded.

"And it was Sansa who told you about the seven p.m. curfew on a school night, as well?"

Again, he nodded.

They were silent as Sandor turned into one of Harrenhal Mall's parking lots, and he maneuvered his car to a parking space close to the entrance. Arya didn't get out, however. She just sat there mulling things over.
"You know, it's going to come out eventually that it was you," she said.

"More than likely," he agreed.

"Aren't you worried?" she pressed.

He shrugged.

"You should be," she insisted, "don't you care what'll happen to Sansa? Don't you care what people will say?"

"What do you suggest I do about it?" Sandor demanded.

"I don't know." It was her turn to shrug. "Create a diversion?"

The Hound laughed humorlessly. "...Shit for brains."

Arya glared up at him. Annoyed. Frazzled. And a little out of her mind. She had an idea, and looking at the group of teenagers by the mall entrance directly opposite them, there would be plenty of witnesses. Everything that Arya ever did was usually born out of impulsiveness. The next action that she took was no different. Had she given it a second thought or considered the ramifications of the fallout from her action, she might not have done it, but she was Arya-Act-Now-Think-Later, and no such thoughts came to her head.

She leaned over the gears and grabbed Sandor by the front of his jacket, and before he knew what was happening, Arya had pressed her mouth to his. It was a hard, closed-mouth kiss, but a kiss all the same. She heard his sharply inhaled breath, and his fingers wrapped around her wrists painfully to push her away, but she gripped his jacket so tight her knuckles hurt, preventing him. Sandor pulled his head back instead, and he looked down at her incredulously.

"What the fuck are you doing?" his raspy voice came out harsh with shock.

"Giving the Spyder something else to talk about!" she hissed.

"Are you insane?"

"Probably," she agreed, eyes glittering. "Kiss me back, and look like you fucking enjoy it!"

"You stupid little –!" he managed to growl out just before her lips were on his again.

Arya figured if she hadn't caught him by surprise, she'd never have been able to do it. She could feel her skin bruising under his fingers as the Hound tried to resist her. She wasn't sure what to expect. She'd never initiated a kiss before. She wasn't even sure she was doing it right. Both Gendry and Jaqen had kissed her, but not like this, so she had no basis for comparison.

Is this all? She wondered. What's the big fucking deal about kissing?

And then the Hound stopped fighting.

"Don't forget, you started this!" he rasped against her lips, and then his hands which had been trying to fend her off, were now suddenly pulling her tight against him.

She knew the moment she lost control of the situation, if she'd ever had it to begin with. Sandor slipped a large hand behind the back of her head at the same time he returned the pressure against her mouth. He angled her head to suit him, and then it was Arya's turn to inhale sharply when he slipped his tongue into her mouth. Her first instinct was to pull away – fuck, this is the Hound! – but curiosity
made her stay still.

His mouth was warm, and the contrast between his burned and unburned lips were not unpleasant. Experimentally, she moved her tongue against his, mimicking what she thought he was doing. He pulled her closer in response, so she must have done it right. The kiss was not gentle, she could tell that. She wasn't sure the Hound even had it in him to be gentle. She didn't feel any of the buzzing she'd read about in those stupid teen magazines. Still, it felt...nice.

Crushed as she was against him, she could feel the strength in the tense muscles, and feel his steady heartbeat under her flattened palm against his chest. She smelled his cologne, and the leather of his jacket. So, this is kissing. She thought, finally seeing why people bothered doing it. She moved her arms and attempted to get them around his back, and he let her, only he was just so broad and the car was cramped and she ended up just placing them on his shoulders. He's muscled like a bull, and he's freaky big...he could paralyze a guy if he had half a mind to beat him up.

Arya grew still. Another realization had just crossed her mind.

Sandor pulled his head back when she stopped moving, and he looked at her questioningly.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he demanded as he took in how wide her eyes had got. "I won't get better looking just because you kissed me."

Arya could only stare back, still mute. There were two reasons she was staring. The first was that she'd just experienced her first tongue-in-the-mouth kiss, and secondly it had come from the guy who'd beat up her friend...or, at least it appeared he'd beat up her friend.

"That's kissing, huh?"

"What? Don't fucking tell me you've never kissed a guy before?" He already knew the answer even as the question left his mouth. Arya just looked up at him and shrugged. "You. Are. Bloody. Insane!"

He pulled away from her completely, almost shoving her off him in his haste to put some distance between them.

"That Spyder's definitely going to hear about this now." He indicated the group of teenagers at the entrance of the mall hastily stuffing mobile phones into pockets. "I hope it was worth it, you crazy little bitch."

Arya put a hand on his arm, stilling him momentarily. "I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you to answer me honestly."

He glared at her. "Depends on the question."

She looked up into his eyes again, and squeezed his arm.

"Sandor," she used his given name, something she'd never done. "You didn't beat up my friend, did you?"

He sneered at her, and jerked his arm away from her. "I damn well did, and you know it."

"Yeah, you hit him," she agreed, "but you didn't beat him to a pulp, and you could have. Joffrey wouldn't have let him walk away, and Mycah walked away. I just want to know the truth."

Sandor swore, and then he re-started the Mustang and pulled away from the parking lot.
"Where are we going, now?"

"I'm insisting on taking you home."

"You could have left me at the mall. I was going to get our driver to pick me up."

"It's nearly eight p.m. and you're going to get in trouble,"

"Don't change the subject," she snapped, "what happened with Mycah?"

Sandor let out a string of expletives, but after his verbal diarrhea, he finally told her. "Joffrey wanted revenge after that photo came out, and it was your blood he wanted. I convinced him that it wasn't a good idea. It was you or the kid. Work it out."

Arya sat silent for a moment while her mind worked at filling in the blanks. It didn't take her long to figure out that the Hound had done something uncharacteristically noble.

"Why?" she asked him, "you didn't know me. You still don't know me."

He didn't reply, but Arya came upon the answer on her own.

"Sansa," she said, and noted the way the way his fingers tightened on the steering wheel at the sound of her sister's name. "You did it for Sansa."

Leaning back into the seat, Arya rubbed her hands over her face, noting that the one she'd used to punch that guy's face in was now throbbing.

It had been the longest day, and she was suddenly very tired.

All she had wanted to do was ask a few questions about Gendry's past. How was she to know that by the end of the day she'd end up throwing herself at the Hound and kissing him?

She started chuckling, which became a near-hysterical laughing. She couldn't help it.

"What's so funny?" the Hound demanded.

"Nothing. Everything!" she replied.

Things had just gotten way more complicated.

Chapter End Notes

Hands up if you saw that coming?

SanSan, Gendrya, Jaqarya lovers out there…I make no apologies for what I've done, it had to happen.

Those of you secretly shipping Sandor/ Arya, I hope you enjoyed that!

Now, I have good news and bad news – good news first. I am nowhere near finished this fic, and rest assured I will see it to the end!

Bad news, I have to go on hiatus for about six weeks. I have an exam to study for, so I
will be taking some time to prepare for that. I can't promise to update at all between now and the end of October.

… but I can promise that I will have more episodes to post, and hopefully a satisfying conclusion for our favorite couples when my exam is over.

Those of you who haven't got an AO3 account, I urge you to go get one, and follow my fic to make sure you get the alert when I come back and update!

For now, wish me luck, and thank you all for your continued encouragement and support! Love you all!

MagicMyth83
Episode 13 "Tangled Web"

Chapter Notes

Here it is! The long awaited update is finally here!

It's loooong and full of drama…and thank you all again for being so patient while I was on hiatus. I missed writing it, and the whole time I couldn't wait to get back into it!

Hopefully, I'll be back to my regular schedule of weekly updates!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gossip Spyder

OMG! OMG! OMG!

Prepare yourselves, people…this is BIG!

Arya Stark and The Hound were spotted kissing outside Harrenhal Mall last night!

I received photos from several people who were there and who saw this with their very own eyes, so I have no doubt that this kiss did indeed happen! OMG! See the pics for yourself if you don't believe me…

When did you two get together? You guys are usually seen snarling at each other in the halls at school…but then again, love and hate are two sides of the same coin – is that how the saying goes?

So Arya, what does big sister, Sansa, think of you hooking up with her boyfriend Joffrey's best friend? And does this mean that things weren't serious between you and Jaqen H'ghar? Or is there something that you want to tell him?

Let's see how this plays out!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

Sandor

Fuck!

Was the first expletive that came to his mind upon seeing the post. This was swiftly followed by actual verbal expletives.

"Cocksucker! Motherfucker! Bloody, buggering hell!" Sandor swore.

He'd known this was going to happen. He'd seen people taking photos of him and Arya the night before. He just didn't expect so many of them to go up on the site. There would be no denying it. Everyone knew his Mustang, and everyone knew his ugly face.
Gendry

Gendry had just sauntered into the garage and unlocked his car when his phone beeped in his back pocket. He reached for it and absentmindedly clicked on the Gossip Spyder's text message alert as he threw his schoolbag into the back seat. He saw the post and almost dropped his phone.

No! I don't believe it!

He viewed the photos.

What the hell? Is this a joke?

It didn't appear to be. The photos looked real enough, and Arya was clearly kissing the Hound.

This can't be right…

Yet the proof was at his fingertips. For the second time, he was confronted with images of Arya being with a guy that wasn't him. Fury, followed swiftly by envy filled his gut, and he slammed his fist into the concrete wall of the garage, not noticing the blood on his knuckles as his skin tore against the rough surface.

Gendry angrily tapped out a message to Arya.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON?"

Jaqen

Jaqen did not subscribe to the Gossip Spyder, but some of his friends did. It was at their insistence that he looked at the site that morning. He read the post and raised his brows incredulously, thinking there was some kind of mistake. Surely, the Spyder must have gotten Arya Stark confused with someone else?

He clicked on the link. He inhaled sharply when he saw the pictures the Spyder referred to. There was no mistaking her petite frame and purple-tipped hair. She looked ridiculously tiny in the arms of the Hound. Jaqen's stomach plummeted, and he had to steady himself a moment against the edge of his desk from his sudden loss of equilibrium.

How could she do this?

Before he could think rationally, he'd already fired off a text message to her.

"I know your fangs are sharp, lovely girl…you did not need to prove it to me."

Sansa

Sansa looked at the photos in shock.

"No!" she gasped.

This can't be real!
Something dark and bitter and frightening rushed through her veins.

Disbelief.

Jealousy.

Rage.

She wanted to gouge Arya's eyes out.

Her fingers gripped her phone tightly as she stared at the images, and a strangled sound forced its way out from between her clenched teeth.

She hit the button to refresh the page, hoping that when the page reloaded the images would prove that she'd somehow been wrong.

She wasn't.

The page reloaded, and Sandor Clegane was still kissing her little sister.

*How dare she?* Sansa fumed, *how dare she touch him?*

---

**Arya**

*Well, it fucking worked.* Arya chewed on her bottom lip as she read that morning's post, and grimaced when she saw the numerous images online. There wasn't a single mention at all of Sansa, or of the dog that had been sniffing around Joffrey's patch. She read the part about Jaqen again, and she swallowed with some difficulty. He would see the post too. *Oh, no…*

Her cell phone beeped, alerting her to a new message. She made no move to check it out. Her phone beeped once more about a minute later. She took several deep breaths. *Don't be a coward.* She checked her messages. One was from Gendry, and she bit her lip when she saw his message typed in all-caps.

"I'll talk to you at school." She texted back, not looking forward to it.

He'd only just started talking to her again, but now she was almost afraid of what he would say to her. He liked the Hound about as much as he liked Jaqen.

The other message was from Jaqen. She made a panicked kind of noise and sent him a pleading message.

"It's not what you think, I promise. Please let me explain."

Jaqen's response was swift. Her phone rang almost immediately.

"Jaqen, please let me –" Arya began as soon as she'd picked up the call.

"I'm not sure I want to hear it," Jaqen interrupted, his voice terse. "Just yesterday afternoon you were telling me that you missed me and were agreeing to meet me for a second date, and yet you were seen kissing another guy just *hours* later. What am I to make of that, Arya?"

"The Hound means nothing to me,"

"You hate the Hound, and yet you kissed him. That only makes me wonder about what I might
really mean to you," Jaqen said, his displeasure evident in his clipped and accented tones.

"I only kissed him because –"

"I don't want to know, Arya," Jaqen interrupted again, "and...I believe I've had second thoughts about breakfast tomorrow."

"Jaqen –!

"I hope you have a pleasant day, sweet girl."

Jaqen hung up abruptly, and Arya stared at her phone numbly. What have I done? Had she ruined everything with Jaqen? They'd barely even begun a relationship...did this mean they were over? Why didn't she think about what would happen before kissing the Hound?

"You're so stupid, Arya!" she berated herself, before grabbing the nearest pillow and screaming into it.

Jaqen hadn't even let her explain what had happened. She hadn't thought about how he would react – how anyone would react, for that matter. She'd just wanted to get the Spyder's eye away from Sansa. Why had I wanted to do that, exactly? She asked herself. She recalled the argument between Sansa and Joffrey that she had witnessed the day before, and watching as Joffrey had nearly crushed Sansa's wrists. Yeah, that's right. She'd wanted to take the Spyder's eyes away from the sister she hadn't spoken to in weeks, because said sister was dating a psycho who thought nothing of hurting his girlfriend over unfounded rumors of unfaithfulness.

Except, there had been some truth to the Spyder's post from the previous day. Sansa had been having pizza with another guy – a guy that happened to be into her, for that matter – but her reason for being with Sandor Clegane was innocent. Arya had no reason to disbelieve what the Hound had told her. Sansa had been thanking the Hound for saving her ass from the mob. This was a typical Sansa thing to do. Her sister had always been impeccably polite.

Remembered sensations of kissing Sandor crept into her head, making her squirm uncomfortably. Was there really nothing else she could have done to create a diversion? Had she really needed to kiss Sandor? She could have just punched him in the face – that would have gotten the Spyder's attention just as effectively, she mused. Arya sighed, remembering something else about the Gossip Gossip Spyder knew the real identity of Sansa's companion. She still didn't see why Sandor's name had been omitted, but neither Sansa nor the Hound himself had sought to clear this up with Joffrey. Couldn't Sansa have just told Joffrey the truth? Surely he would understand? Arya scoffed at the thought. Joffrey was too full of himself to see reason – psycho, remember? And if Joffrey were to question Sandor about his feelings towards Sansa, would the big brute be able to lie? Could he lie and deny his not so innocent or platonic thoughts about his best friend's girlfriend?

Arya frowned, and turned towards the direction of her sister's bedroom where she could hear Sansa moving around as she got ready for school. Did Sansa have any idea about how the Hound felt about her? Whether or not she did, Sansa must have had her reasons for lying to Joffrey. The Hound would have had his reasons as well.

Dropping her head to her hands, Arya realized that kissing Sandor probably was the only thing she could have done to distract the Spyder from connecting the dots between him and her sister. The Spyder had been closer to the truth than he/she/it probably realized. Regardless that the Hound's feelings for Sansa were not returned, all it would take was one rumor, one word said out of turn, one glance taken out of context, and Sansa would be in a world of trouble with Joffrey again.
It was better that Sandor Clegane was linked to someone other than Sansa Stark. And because of my impulsive stupidity, he's linked to me instead, she thought.

"I hope it was worth it, you crazy little bitch," the Hound had said.

So far, her actions had already backfired on her. Jaqen had sounded like he was through with her. She groaned, thinking about their earlier phone conversation. She never made it to a second date.

Gendry was also mad at her, and that confrontation was still ahead of her. She was sure Hot Pie would not be pleased either.

What about Sansa? Her insides churned at a sudden thought. Arya had pretty much screwed up all of her own relationships by trying to protect her sister. Her sister, who she wasn't speaking to, and who was the one stupid enough to date a psycho to begin with. Anger spiked through her. This is all Sansa's fault. If she wasn't dating that jerk, none of this would have happened. But even as the thought went through her mind, she knew that if she had to do it over again, she would probably still choose to protect her sister – except she'd try to come up with a better idea than kissing Sandor Clegane. She grimaced again in discomfort at the memory. It wasn't Sansa's fault that she was stupid, but it didn't stop Arya from feeling bitter about the situation.

What would Sansa say if she knew about what Arya had done for her? Would she be grateful? Would she thank her? Arya wasn't sure she was ready to start speaking to her again. Sansa was still dating Joffrey, that hadn't changed, and Arya's opinion of the blonde jerk had only worsened in the last twenty-four hours. She ran her hand through her now disheveled hair and got up from her bed so that she could fix herself up in front of a mirror. She had an inkling of what awaited her at school, and if people were going to be staring at her, then she wanted to look as unaffected as she could manage.

When she went downstairs for breakfast, Sansa was already at the table with their parents and younger brothers.

"Good morning, Arya," her father greeted her.

"Good morning, father."

"Arya." Her mother gave her a stern look over the rim of her coffee cup. "I don't have to remind you that you are banned from going out tonight, do I? That includes going to watch your school football team."

"I haven't forgotten, mother," Arya replied.

It was her punishment for coming home after curfew the night before. Really, it was less than what she had expected. The Hound had dropped her home at nearly half past eight, and her mother had been waiting for her in the foyer when she had let herself in. There had been no yelling, or lecturing, or even awkward questions.

"You should have called," her mother had said, "whatever plans you may have for tomorrow night, consider them cancelled."

Then she'd been sent to bed. It wasn't much of a punishment, but she wasn't about to complain if her mother believed her social life was that important, or even that eventful for that matter.

Sitting down at the table, Arya greeted the rest of her family, and made a point to look at her sister.

Sansa met her eyes, but her expression…well, she was expressionless. Arya did not like this.
Had she not yet seen the Spyder's post? Sansa responded to the conversation around her and answered the questions their parents and brothers asked her. She sounded normal, but this only made Arya uneasy. She'd expected more of a reaction from her sister, any kind of reaction…not indifference. Surely, the sight of her little sister kissing her boyfriend's best friend would be enough to rouse a 'what the fuck?' or at the very least, a look of curiosity?

The ride to school with their father was silent, as it had been over recent weeks, but at the school gate, after their father had driven off, Sansa had slowed her strides so that she matched Arya.

Arya looked up at her sister's face which now bore the tiniest of frowns between her well-groomed brows.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Sansa's voice was high and tight, and she didn't stick around to wait for her sister to respond, her long legs carrying her up the path away from Arya.

At last, a reaction, but Arya didn't know what to make of those seven words. The only words her sister had said to her in ages. Sansa wasn't reacting the way she was expecting at all. Unfortunately, everyone else was. Everyone was staring at her. She wasn't imagining it. As soon as Sansa had walked away from her, she had noticed that people were looking at her, and covering their mouths with their hands as they whispered to each other. No one was really trying all that hard to hide it either.

Neither Gendry or Hot Pie were waiting for her when she reached the steps leading to the student parking lot, so she made her way to her homeroom by herself, doing her best to ignore the stares that followed her. She took her seat, and listened to the whispers. She wasn't surprised by what they were saying about her, she'd anticipated a lot of it, in fact. On her way to her first class, she ran into Hot Pie in the hallway but her tentative smile died swiftly at the expression on his face. Hot Pie had never been anything but friendly with her, so the anger and disbelief in his eyes shook her.

"Hot Pie, hi."

"Arya." He nodded at her. "Anything you want to tell me?"

The usual mirth on his face was nowhere to be seen. She hadn't expected this, not from him.

"About the Spyder's post…it's not how it seems," she began.

Arya wanted so much to explain to her friend the truth of things, but the truth sounded unbelievable, even to her ears. She suddenly didn't know what to say.

Hot Pie took her silence as confirmation of every negative thing he was ready to accuse her of.

"I don't know what the hell is going through your head, Arya," Hot Pie stated, "but did you suddenly forget what the Hound did to Mycah?"

"No, I haven't." It's not like that!

"And you still sucked face with him," Hot Pie pointed out, "even knowing who he is, and what he's capable of."

Hot Pie sneered. She didn't think he was capable of doing that.

"I'll see you around, Arya."

She watched her friend walk away from her, and wondered how much worse it could get.
Sandor

He wanted to smash Joffrey's face in. That was Sandor's first thought when he saw him that day.

He wanted to wipe the seedy smirk off the jerk's face.

"A freshmen, Hound?" Joffrey smirked. "Arya Stark, of all freshmen? Can't say much about your taste in girls!"

Sandor chose not to comment. He wondered what the jerk would say if he ever found out which Stark sister it was that really got his pulse throbbing.

"Is that why you didn't want her face bloodied?" Joffrey pushed. "Because you like her pretty?"

Sandor grimaced inwardly at the comment. Joffrey hadn't forgotten about that incident afterall.

"Something like that," he grumbled reluctantly.

"I thought you were a tits and ass man?" Joff asked, "she hasn't got either."

"Trying something different,"

"Does she put out?"

"I'm not fucking her,"

"…Or is she guarding her cunt, like Sansa? As if it's some sort of prize?"

"I'm not fucking her."

"Yet," the blonde grinned.

Ever. Sandor thought, but didn't say it out aloud.

"She must put out," Joff continued, "you wouldn't be after her if she didn't. I know you, and you don't do relationships."

There was a growl building in Sandor's throat, and he bit his tongue to try and hold it back.

"She must have a thing for senior guys."

"Huh?"

"Apparently she was dating this senior from Braavos Academy."

Sandor frowned, recalling something about a wannabe rockstar in previous posts by the Spyder.

"I never thought you'd have that kind of pulling power, Hound." Joff smirked. "Arya's a bitch, but she's a pedigree bitch!"

Joffrey walked off towards his class muttering something sick about Rottweilers and Chihuahuas and Sandor resisted the urge to grab the jerks head and smash it into a locker. Instead, he walked into his first period English class and noted that everyone was staring at him, like everyone in his homeroom class had done earlier. There was a moment of silence as he made his way to his desk, before hushed whispers started up again as he sat down.
The girls behind him were muttering amongst themselves.

"…How did this happen?"

"She's so cute, and…"

"He's a brute…"

Giggles.

"Isn't she dating Jaqen H'ghar?"

"She was just with him last week. Is she two-timing?"

"With him?"

No prizes for guessing who they were referring to. Fucking hell! He hadn't seen the little bitch yet, but whatever class she was in, he hoped her classmates were giving her hell. No one was game enough to say anything to his face, but he heard more than a few derogatory references to mating dogs and comparisons about himself and Arya to different breeds of canines that really tested his self-control.

He didn't particularly want to speak to the little bitch, but he would need to, if there would be any chance of getting out of their current predicament. He wanted her to explain to him why she thought kissing him was the best way to divert the Spyder's attention. He hadn't given it much thought the night before, and it wasn't until he'd woken up and seen the post that he'd actually started trying to figure out how the little bitch's mind worked. He admitted that he didn't have a clue what they were supposed to do next.

There were few things in the world that could take him by surprise, but nothing could have prepared him for the shock of the pretty, petite and volatile Arya Stark grabbing the front of his jacket and kissing him. Arya Stark, the same girl who glared daggers at him every time he was in her vicinity, and who never said a thing to him without following it up with an insult or a rude girl who had been dreaming of the most gruesome ways to kill him just weeks before…had willingly kissed him, and allowed the whole school population to know about it.

And to top it all off, apparently he was her first kiss. He scowled at that. She was supposed to be dating Jaqen Whatshisname. Why hadn't she kissed him? He couldn't work that one out, and he didn't particularly care. He'd kissed her back, like she'd ordered him to, and it had been nice enough while it had lasted. He'd fallen asleep the night before with the taste of Arya's lips on his mind, and imagined that she had been Sansa instead. Then he'd woken up that morning feeling guilty, uncomfortable, and angry with himself.

There's nothing to feel guilty about, he'd told himself. He was nothing to Sansa. If he wanted to kiss another girl, then he damn well would. And that's part of the reason why you stuck your tongue in Arya's mouth. He'd kissed her back, not particularly because he wanted to, but because he could.

The expression on his face became darker, and the guy in the seat beside him inched further away from him. He wasn't Sansa's boyfriend. Sansa wouldn't care about him being with another girl. Well, she might care because it's Arya, but she won't be jealous. The only guy she wants to kiss is Joffrey fucking Baratheon. The things Sansa had said about him were still foremost in his mind…and still stung like an open wound. He wondered what she would have to say about the pictures. Maybe he'd get a chance to find out.

He was walking to his next class when he finally caught sight of Arya heading towards her locker
ahead of him. He was about to make his way over to her to remind her that they had things to talk about when he saw a tall black-haired guy come up behind Arya and spin her around by her shoulders. It was her friend, the junior called Gendry, and by his stance and the way he was leaning over Arya, Sandor could tell the guy was angry, and didn't care who saw it.

He stopped walking and pretended to drink from the water fountain halfway down the hall, keeping his eyes raised so he could watch what transpired, even though he couldn't hear them. Arya's eyes were wide, and Gendry's shoulders were hunched, like a predator about to attack. His eyes were narrowed, and his mouth was tight as he spoke. Arya looked upset, and for a moment Sandor was reminded of Sansa's expression when she'd pleaded with Joffrey the day before. Arya looked like she was pleading as well.

She reached out with one small hand to touch Gendry's arm, but he pushed her hand away.

"Don't!" he heard Gendry say.

Then Gendry slammed both his fists into the locker behind Arya, trapping her within his brawny arms. Other students now stopped to watch, and Arya's eyes showed a momentary fright at her friend's unexpected burst of violence. Gendry's face was inches from hers. Sandor frowned, and found that he was tensed and ready to move in case he had to intervene. This can't be good. He thought. He had no doubt what the confrontation was about. What had him thinking was the oddness about Gendry's reaction. It seemed too much like an overreaction.

*He's acting like a jealous boyfriend.*

"Little bitch, you've done it now," Sandor muttered as he came to that realization.

Jaqen Whatshisname wasn't the only guy that was interested in Arya Stark. *Stay out of it.* He told himself, *this is her problem.*

"I don't know what's gotten into you," Gendry's voice had become louder, "but right now, I don't want anything to do with you!"

Gendry dropped his fists and stalked away, leaving a shaken Arya standing at her locker. Sandor quickly walked the other way before she had a chance to spot him, seeing that she was physically okay. He would have to catch her later. *As for what's going on in her head, she can stew in her own mess.*

At lunchtime, he saw Sansa with Joffrey at their usual table in the quad. He didn't think it was a wise idea for him to see her given his current frame of mind, but he had to find out how she had reacted to the Spyder's post. He wanted to see with his own eyes that she wasn't jealous of him kissing her sister. He wanted proof that she felt nothing for him beyond the obligation to be polite to him, because he was Joffrey's friend. He wanted to rub salt into the bleeding sores she'd caused because he needed to make the pain feel worse…before he could begin to get over her.

Sansa looked breathtaking, as she always did, and he felt the wound she'd dealt him twinge painfully at the sight of her. When he was almost upon them, it occurred to him that he didn't know what to say. He could hardly just blurt out; *hey, I sucked face with your sister, what do you have to say about it?*

Luckily, Joffrey raised the subject of Arya first.

"There's the dog of the moment," Joffrey called as he neared them. "Where's your little girlfriend, Hound?"
Joffrey had his arm around Sansa's waist, and Sandor tried not to focus on this. Instead he watched Sansa's face. She was unreadable. He stopped walking, belatedly realizing that people probably expected him to be hanging around Arya now.

"You haven't seen her?" he guessed that was a reasonable question to ask.

"Nope, I haven't seen her, and the table she usually occupies is peculiarly unoccupied."

Sandor turned to look, confirming that the table was empty, and turned back to face them. Joffrey's possessive hand was now on Sansa's hip. Sansa looked like she was comfortable in the crook of the blonde's arm, and it looked like she had no intention of moving. It didn't appear she had any intention of talking about Arya, either. Sansa appeared not to care that he'd been kissing her little sister. This annoyed him.

"I'll find her." He turned to leave.

"You're really dating her?" Sansa called after him.

Finally. Sandor glanced at her. She looked concerned. That was all.

Did she think he wasn't good enough for her sister? He probably wasn't, he thought. Well, fuck that.

"Maybe," he finally said, before adding, "I won't hurt her."

He walked away. He'd seen what he'd wanted to see.

"I'll see you before the game tonight," he heard Joffrey call after him.

Sansa

She'd chosen not to gouge out her sister's eyes...for the time being. She had stomped and ranted in her bedroom earlier that morning, and thrown pillows and clothes around in an attempt to vent out some of the violent emotions that had coursed through her. Much as she'd wanted to throw objects with some actual weight to them, she didn't think her parents would understand.

At one point, she'd actually made it to her door and had her hand on the handle, ready to confront Arya – but logic and self-control had won out. She had no right to get mad at her sister, because she had no right to Sandor. So, she'd picked her strewn things up off the floor, re-brushed her hair and straightened her clothes before she'd eventually gone down to breakfast. It had been obvious that Arya was expecting some kind of reaction from her, and she was determined not to give one. But the longer she was in the same space as her sister, the weaker her resolve became.

"I hope you know what you're doing," she'd choked out, before fleeing her sister's side.

Then she'd had to hear about Sandor and Arya's kiss all morning, everywhere she went. Everyone was talking about them. Everyone. Sansa longed to just cover her ears and shout "la la la" so she wouldn't have to keep hearing about how shocking it was that her younger sister had been spotted kissing the Hound. She'd heard the same questions being asked from the moment she'd stepped foot into the school grounds. People were whispering in hushed tones in the halls, openly gaping.

Did you see the pictures? Can you believe it? How is this possible? Isn't she supposed to be dating Jaqen H'ghar? How did she hook up with the Hound? What did he say to convince her to kiss him? Why is she with him? Why would she choose the Hound over Jaqen? She really does prefer older guys, doesn't she? So, does this mean she's going to be dating Sandor Clegane now?
And the most annoying question of all... What does Sansa think?

She was furious, if she cared to admit it, and felt entirely helpless to do anything about it. How dare they? Like everyone else, she wanted answers to the same questions. If there was ever a time to speak to Arya, now was that time. Except her hurt was too fresh, and her jealousy too raw.

She hadn't seen Sandor at all that morning. She wasn't sure she could look at him without seeing the pictures of him kissing Arya in her mind. She kept seeing the way her sister's fingers had clutched at the lapel of his jacket, and the way Sandor's hands had gripped Arya's wrists in one photo. Another photo showed the same hand cupping the back of Arya's neck, while the other had splayed across her sister's back.

It had been a proper kiss, too. That was the hardest part to look at – seeing her sister's lips locked with Sandor's. She wanted to scream at the unfairness of it. It should have been me! She had believed that Arya and Sandor hated each other. She'd never seen them interact civilly when their paths happened to cross. No way in the world would she have believed it possible for Arya to be attracted to Sandor. Why would Arya look at Sandor when she was being pursued by a guy like Jaqen H'ghar? Not to mention her hot guitarist friend Gendry, whose interest in Arya, Sansa would swear went beyond friendship.

But she'd been appalled at herself at this thought, because it made her a hypocrite.

"Why is Arya Stark with Sandor Clegane?"

Of all the talk that she heard, that was the one question that made her gnash her teeth. It was asked in a manner that suggested that Sandor wasn't good enough to be dating a Stark. This question was followed by less than savory observations about the Hound.

"He's at this school because his father works for the Lannisters. That's the only reason."

"He's a thug. He's not much better than his psychopath brother, Gregor."

"Arya could do so much better... she should've stayed with Jaqen H'ghar."

Sansa was so incensed at what she'd heard she'd very nearly gone over to the girls in her History class to give them a piece of her mind. Sandor wasn't a bad guy. There was so much more to him than just his scars, his size or his 'I don't give a fuck' attitude. Sandor was brave, as he'd proven when he'd saved her during the riot. He could be kind as well, and thoughtful. She remembered what he'd done for her birthday, and she knew that she would always regard that night at Serpentine Alley as magical. She wanted to find out more of what lay beneath his scarred outer shell... but now she feared she wouldn't get that chance.

Arya would, and that knowledge hurt. Like an itch she couldn't scratch, this pain was something she didn't know how to soothe. She couldn't even talk to Jeyne about it. Nobody could know, especially not Joffrey. So she made herself become unresponsive. It took all her effort to control her expressions and her body language, and let everyone see how unaffected she was on the outside... while she was raging and screaming on the inside.

At lunchtime, she found herself waiting for something to happen. Would Sandor turn up at the group's table? Would he now go and sit with Arya? She was surprised to see Sandor making his way to the group table, and a new wave of hurt and jealousy washed over her again at the sight of him.

Sandor did not know how she felt about him. And given that her feelings for him were so new, she thought it unlikely that she might somehow have done something to give herself away. She was still
Joffrey's girlfriend, as far as everyone was concerned.

_Sandor's not yours, he never belonged to you_, said a bitter voice inside her head. He was free to see anyone, or kiss anyone he wanted. _Anyone, but Arya._ She wondered if it would hurt less if he had been kissing anyone besides her sister. The thought of him with any girl brought bile to her throat.

An arm slipped around her waist, and she tensed when she recognized Joffrey's scent.

"There's the dog of the moment," Joffrey said, watching as Sandor approached. "Where's your little girlfriend, Hound?"

Sandor paused mid-step, glancing between Joffrey and Sansa and wearing his usual scowl.

"You haven't seen her?" he asked, sounding uncertain.

"Nope," Joffrey replied, "I haven't seen her, and the table she usually occupies is peculiarly unoccupied."

Sandor looked towards the other side of the quad where Arya and her friends normally sat, but the picnic table under the tree was, as Joffrey pointed out, void of occupants. He turned back to them, glancing briefly at where Joffrey's hand was curved on Sansa's hip.

"I'll find her," he growled, and spun around.

"You're really dating her?" Sansa blurted out, unable to stop the words, surprising herself.

Sandor stopped and threw her a look over his shoulder, the burnt side of his face toward her.

"Maybe," he replied gruffly, and then in a rougher tone - "I won't hurt her."

He stalked off without another glance.

"I'll see you before the game tonight," Joffrey called after him, before he started chuckling beside Sansa. "They have got to be the oddest couple ever!"

"Odd, yes," she agreed distractedly.

"Arya's vicious, and he's close to feral. If anyone has a chance of keeping your bitch of a sister in line, it'll be him. God only knows what those two see in each other!"

At the back of her mind was the thought that Joffrey had no right to say such things about Sandor, or her sister for that matter, but she couldn't say anything to defend either of them at that moment.

"I won't hurt her," Sandor had said.

How much jealousy could one person handle? She wanted to know. She knew that Sandor would be an infinitely better boyfriend than Joffrey, and Arya probably wouldn't realize how lucky she was.

According to popular gossip and her own observations, Arya was being pursued by two, if not three guys, all of whom were older than either Arya or Sansa. What was it about her little sister than attracted these boys? Jaqen H'ghar was a roguishly sexy musician, and from what she'd heard about him, he was popular with the ladies. What did he see in a fourteen year old freshman?

Gendry Waters was a tall, dark and handsome junior, also a musician, and seemed to genuinely care for Arya. She'd heard her father say good things about him and his foster family. He seemed too sweet with Arya, and she'd watched them closely from the opposite side of the quad numerous times.
She believed Gendry had a crush on her sister, whether she knew it or not.

Then there was Sandor.

She bit back a sigh, and clenched her fingers into her palms were three guys that cared for Arya, while Sansa...well, she had Joffrey.

*It's not fair.*

Sansa had never really truly been envious of her sister before. Usually it was the other way around. This time, and for probably the first time in her life, she understood why jealousy was referred to as a monster, regardless of the color of its eyes. There was something destructive and malignant unfurling in her chest, and causing a crawling sensation beneath her skin. It felt like there was an unnatural entity growing inside of her, feeding on her negative emotions, and that if she couldn't keep it under control it was likely to consume her.

She was envious of Arya...and she hated it.

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**Gendry**

His anger had been simmering all morning, and he'd been amazed he'd driven to school without running anyone down. He must have broken every speed limit on his way in, because he'd gotten to school earlier than he'd expected. He'd passed the time during homeroom class, and his first two periods clenching and unclenching his fists as he'd listened to the bullshit about Arya and the fucking Hound. He thought about what he would say to Arya, but when he finally got a chance to speak to her, nothing went the way he'd intended.

He'd caught her at her locker.

"Is it true?" he had demanded as he'd spun her around to face him.

There had been fury in his eyes, and she didn't insult his intelligence by pretending not to know what he was talking about.

"It's not what you think," she'd said.

"Did he force you?"

"No, but -"

"So, you *wanted* to kiss him?"

"No, but -" she'd began, but at Gendry's expression she'd started again. "I mean, I did, but it's not what you think!"

"Did you suddenly forget who he is?"

"No, but -"

"You *willingly* let him put his hands on you!"

"You have to let me explain!"

"What about Jaqen? Does he know that you're two-timing with that *dog*?"
"I'm not two-timing him!"

"Sure looks like you are,"

"It's not like that." She reached out to touch his arm.

"Don't!" He shoved her hand away, unable to bear her touch.

"Gendry, please!" she'd pleaded, but the look on his face told her that he wasn't going to listen.

Gendry swore under his breath, and then before he knew what he was doing, he'd slammed his fists into the locker on either side above her head, pressing her back against the metal so that his torso was nearly touching hers. Arya had flinched, startled by the sound of rattling metal. His blue eyes were furious, and she looked away from him.

"I don't know what's gotten into you," Gendry had growled, sounding nothing like himself. "But right now, I don't want anything to do with you!"

He regretted his behavior the moment he'd walked away, and he spent the rest of the morning chastising himself. She doesn't want you. She made that clear when she kissed two other guys, not you. He didn't like either of the guys Arya had seen fit to kiss, but at least he could see why she would choose Jaqen H'ghar. The Hound however…that was just bizarre, and inexplicable. Arya had been adamant about hating the guy after what he'd done to Mycah Butcher. Gendry and Hot Pie had been witnesses to her rage, and the countless death threats all aimed at the scarred motherfucker.

He didn't understand her change of heart towards the guy at all.

Just give up. He told himself, you're stuck in the friend-zone. He hated the thought, and he knew he wasn't ready to accept it just yet. He had to speak to her again. He realized he hadn't really let her say anything during his earlier tirade, and he sought her out again at lunch that day. Except when he saw Arya, she was with Sandor Clegane who was leading her away from the cafeteria with a large hand on her back. Disappointed, angry and jealous, he'd just stood there and watched her walk away.

Hot Pie found him still standing near the cafeteria not long after, and they ended up at the performing arts block sitting with Edric, Beric and Allyria. All of them had seen the Spyder's post, but at the expression on Gendry's face, wisely chose not to comment. Gendry knew they were curious, and he believed that Edric at least suspected he had a crush on Arya, but though he didn't want to discuss it, he knew they were expecting him to say something.

"Arya's nuts, okay?" he offered pathetically, "I don't know why she did it."

"What about Jaqen?" Allyria asked.

Gendry's gut tightened, and he shrugged.

"Well, look at it this way," Edric pointed out, "maybe the guy will be so distraught about Arya ditching him for the Hound that he'll be off his game at the competition."

Beric laughed. "You think there's a chance of that happening?"

Gendry couldn't help but roll his eyes. The first heat of the Battle of the Bands was a week away. The Brotherhood Without Banners was ready, and Gendry knew he was ready. He'd been dreaming about the competition over the past few weeks, and in his dreams, Arya had always been at the front of the screaming crowd, cheering him on. They would win the competition of course, and Arya would fling herself into his arms and kiss him senseless.
"See, I knew you guys would win," she would say to him.

"And how would you have known that?" he'd ask her.

"Because, stupid," she would call him, but it would be more of an endearment and not an insult. "The other bands don't have you as a guitarist, and I've always known how talented you are!"

He wanted to laugh at himself.

You are pathetic, he thought, the only way you'll have her is in your dreams.

___________

Arya

Hard fingers bit into her upper arm as she was making her way to the cafeteria at lunch, and she gasped in surprise. She looked up in indignation at Sandor Clegane.

"What the fuck?"

"Shut up, little bitch," Sandor rasped above her head, and began to pull her away in the opposite direction. "We need to talk."

"So talk."

His hand moved from her arm to her back, and he pushed her along in front of him.

"Not here," he snapped, "are you a complete idiot? This is all your doing, I hope you know."

People spotted them together, and whispers soon followed them down the hall.

"You kissed me back," she pointed out, "it's not all my doing."

"You threw yourself at me," he corrected, and he was right. "It's all your fault."

"You should have pushed me away,"

"I did,"

"You still kissed me back,"

She was right.

He grumbled. "I won't be doing it again."

"As if I'd let you." She glared at him.

He leered down at her. "Having shit for brains would explain your short term memory… again, you kissed me first."

"I didn't do it because I wanted to," she hissed, "you know why I did it!"

"To distract the Spyder, yes," he agreed, "but you haven't told me why you thought kissing me was the only way to do it."

Arya groaned, thinking about the reasons she'd come up with just that morning to justify her actions. They'd sounded perfectly rational in her mind, but wondered if they'd still seem sane when spoken out aloud. She followed him outside of the building, and didn't speak until it became apparent that he
was leading her to the parking lot.

"Are we going somewhere?"

He nodded. "Out for lunch. I need to eat, but all that fucking whispering back there is making me lose my appetite."

"You do realize that people are watching us leaving together?" she pointed out. "This isn't going to help."

"It's too bloody late for that," he snapped, "isn't this what you wanted, everyone watching us instead of your sister?"

"I didn't think it was going to be this bad!"

"You didn't think?" He raised his brow incredulously. "Are you really that stupid?"

Arya bristled at the insult. No one called her stupid.

"Get in the fucking car, little bitch," he growled.

Arya angrily got into his car as he instructed and strapped herself in with jerky movements.

"How's your hand?" the Hound asked her, nodding towards the slightly discolored skin of her right hand.

"It's fine." She shrugged.

In truth, her knuckles kind of ached as a result of having punched a guy in the jaw, and she had purplish marks on her forearms and wrists from where Sandor had gripped her as he'd tried to push her away. She was wearing a long sleeve top for a reason. She hadn't forgotten that she had been assaulted the night before, but it wasn't something she wanted to keep remembering, so she was doing her best to forget that the incident with the two drunk goons had even happened. Her parents would have coronaries if they ever found out.

"You like to avoid questions," Sandor said as he exited school grounds. "You never told me what you were doing in Flea Bottom last night."

She'd been there because of Gendry, and she sighed, which didn't go unnoticed by her surly companion. Her earlier confrontation with Gendry had left her shaken and bewildered. She didn't know where his anger had come from, and his reaction had taken her completely off-guard. He hadn't reacted like that when he found out about her date with Jaqen. *He never even gave me a chance to explain...stupid, stubborn, bull-headed...!*

The things she'd learned about Gendry from Lommy Greenhands were too sensitive to discuss with anyone else, and she wasn't certain about what she was going to do with the information she'd collected.

"I...I just had something I needed to do."

"In Flea Bottom?"

"Yes, in freaking Flea Bottom!" she snapped. "Just drop it, okay? I'm not going to talk about it with you."

"You haven't forgotten who saved your scrawny neck last night, have you?"
"No, I haven't forgotten." She turned in her seat to look at him. "Do you want me to say thank you, is that it? Thank you." He gave her a dirty look at the words. "I said it, now leave it alone."

"Cranky little bitch, I was just asking…" he muttered as he turned back to the road.

Through her lashes, she looked up at the hulking figure beside her, and began to list the things she'd learned about him the night before.

Sandor didn't beat up people just because he was a thug. Occasionally he beat them up in the course of rescuing girls in trouble, like she had been with the goons from the bar. Sandor had a crush on Sansa. Sandor had saved Sansa from the mob riot. Sandor hung around Joffrey Baratheon, but didn't like to call him a friend. Sandor did beat up Mycah, but not to a bloody pulp. In his own backward way, he'd done it to save her neck…because she was Sansa's sister. It didn't make it right, or that she agreed with what he'd done, but she now knew his side of the story.

Sandor wasn't precisely what she'd first thought him to be, and he confused the hell out of her. They pulled up in front of the first fast-food place they came to, and Sandor ordered food and drinks for both of them. When they were seated at a table, Arya watched him eat.

"You still haven't explained to me why you kissed me," he said at length, and this time she knew what he meant.

She owed him an explanation. After all, she hadn't exactly asked for his permission first before getting him involved in the sorry mess.

"It was the first thing that came into my head," she began, almost defensively.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" he growled.

"But now I think about it…"

"Only now, you think about it?"

"…it seems to be the only thing I could have done that would throw the Spyder's scent off of you," she continued as though he hadn't interrupted.

"What do you mean?" His eyes narrowed.

She winced, but made herself tell him about how Joffrey probably wouldn't have understood why Sansa had been having pizza with him, and how all it would take was someone finding out that he had a crush on Sansa for there to be trouble.

"How the fuck would people find out?" he demanded, looking alarmed at the thought.

"I don't know." She shrugged. "Someone could catch you making goo-goo eyes at her."

"The hell I would!" he denied with a feral snarl.

"I'm just saying all Joff needs to hear is one rumor and he'll start going off at Sansa again." Arya's face grew grim. "I don't understand what she sees in him."

Sandor didn't reply, and it occurred to her just how strange their predicament really was. She couldn't believe she was sitting there having lunch with the Hound. She glanced at his mouth for a second, and quickly looked away with a mental shake of her head. She couldn't believe she'd been kissing him not so long ago, either. Arya felt uncomfortable all over again, and she vowed she'd try to curb
her impulsiveness in future.

While she had been shocked to learn that he had feelings for Sansa, it wasn't that big of a surprise. Heaps of guys thought Sansa was pretty. Boys had always found Sansa beautiful. She was one of those lucky girls that went straight from being a little girl to a young woman without having to go through that awkward, gangly phase where limbs were too long and one didn't quite know what to do with curves that had suddenly developed.

He would never have a chance with Sansa. Sandor was just not good-looking enough, even if he hadn't been scarred. Sansa was shallow like that. She'd always favored pretty boys. Arya didn't feel sorry for him, exactly. She couldn't go around being sorry for every guy that had a crush on her sister, but she figured she could empathize. Nobody enjoyed knowing that the object of their infatuation did not return their feelings.

"I still don't understand," Sandor suddenly said.

"What?"

"Why you'd do this for your sister," he clarified, "you said you haven't spoken to her in weeks."

"Not since Joffrey had you beat up my friend, if you want to know the truth," she pointed out.

He noticed, just as well as she did, that she had emphasized Joffrey's name. He gave her a strange look, and Arya took it to mean that he understood. In her own way, she was telling him that she no longer blamed him for what happened to Mycah Butcher…or at least, she no longer wanted to cause him grievous bodily harm. There was an awkward pause while they both adjusted to the unspoken acknowledgement. Both shifted in their seats.

"I don't hate my sister," she said at length, "not really. I hate that she's with Joffrey. I hate that he can hurt her…has hurt her, and I hate that she's choosing to stay with him. I hate that she's stupid, but I don't want her hurt."

The Hound was frowning again, and she figured he was trying to understand her relationship with Sansa. She knew about his older brother, Gregor, and had heard that the brothers hated each other but not the reason why. She'd been at the exhibition game between KL Prep and KL College and had witnessed the fight on the football field. Looking back on it, she realized that the hatred between the Clegane brothers was real. Perhaps he wouldn't be able to understand? She thought, and wondered what could have happened between the brothers to create such hatred.

"This is fucking bullshit!" he finally rasped.

"I already said I didn't know it was going to turn out this way!" Arya bristled at his tone. "I didn't exactly see you trying to help Sansa yesterday when that jerk was making a scene in the quad. Why do you hang around Joffrey anyway if you say he's not your friend? How could you just stand there and let him treat Sansa that way? Do you care about her at all? And for your information this whole thing backfired on me, too!"

"Shut the hell up!" the Hound growled at her ranting. "Let me think, would you?"

Arya sat back in the hard plastic seat and glowered at him. She knew that the rumors about them would only multiply after the way he'd marched her away from the cafeteria, and their not so subtle exit from the parking lot.

"Your stupid plan worked, you know," he stated, "Joffrey asked me about you this morning."

"What did you say?" she glanced at him sharply.
"I told him I was trying something different," he replied grudgingly, before looking her up and down. "You're not my usual type."

She grimaced at his casual inspection of her person. The Hound had a type, and against her better judgment she asked him what that was.

He smirked at her. "The one night only type."

"Asshole." She narrowed her eyes at him. "Sansa's not your usual type then, either."

The statement wiped the smirk from his scarred lips, and she almost smiled, until the next words out of his mouth had her frowning again.

"What did your friends have to say about it?"

She looked away from him. "They're not talking to me."

"What about this Faceless Man punk that you're supposed to be dating?"

She raised her eyes back to him, surprised that he mentioned Jaqen. Her mouth parted, and her voice shook a little when she responded.

"I think he broke up with me…I'm not sure."

"And Gendry? Is he jealous?"

"Jealous? Why would he be jealous of you?" Arya asked, and wondered at the look Sandor gave her, as though he knew something that she didn't. "But, he's not talking to me either."

Sandor gave a humorless laugh. "This shit really did blow up in your face!"

Arya sank into her seat, angry and miserable.

"What do we do now?" she asked him.

"How the fuck should I know?" He shrugged, but then he pushed a hand through his hair, giving her a close-up of his scars in doing so, before leaning forward in his seat. "I suggest we don't say anything to anyone,"

"Huh?"

"Don't confirm or deny any of the rumors," he repeated, "to anybody. Let people think what they want to believe. That's what they'll do anyway."

"What about Joffrey and Sansa?"

"Let me handle Joffrey,"

"So, what? I'm just supposed to play along?"

"Took you long enough to figure that out."

"You want me to pretend to be dating you?" she asked incredulously.

He nodded. "Just in front of Joffrey and your sister. A few weeks maybe, or long enough for Joffrey to find something else to fixate on."
"Long enough for you to get over my sister?" Arya raised her brow.

The Hound bared his teeth and snarled. "Don't go there."

She'd pushed too far once again.

"Then, what?" she asked instead.

"Then…I don't know." He shrugged. "You can publicly dump me or something, I don't care."

"What about my friends? What about Jaqen?"

Sandor shrugged, genuinely unconcerned. "They're your problem. I don't care what you tell them."

"Hardly seems fair," she grumbled.

"Fair? What isn't fair is that I got dragged into this without any say in it, and now there's even more bullshit about me going around school that I really could have done without. Now you need me to keep your precious sister safe from her psychotic jerk of a boyfriend, and get this, Arya—" He pierced her with hard stare, his grey eyes unflinching. "I don't have to help you."

Her eyes widened when she realized that he was right. He might like Sansa, but he had nothing to gain from any of this.

"Lucky for you, I don't want to see your sister hurt," he continued, and Arya unclenched the fist she didn't realize she'd been clenching. "But understand that if you want me to help you, you'll have to do what I say."

She could only stare at him.

"Still think it's worth the trouble?" he asked when she didn't acknowledge him.

Arya sighed, and for a moment she did have second thoughts. She had nothing to gain from it, either. But backing out seemed cowardly, and the damage had already been done. Gendry and Hot Pie weren't speaking to her, and neither was Jaqen. What more did she have to lose?

"Only for a few weeks, and only in front of Joffrey and Sansa, otherwise we say nothing to nobody," she finally said.

Sandor nodded. "That's the plan."

"Fine," she agreed, hoping she wasn't making an even bigger mistake.

After that, they left the fast-food joint and Sandor drove them back to school just in time for afternoon classes.

"Are you coming to watch the game tonight?" he asked her when he pulled back into the parking lot.

She shook her head. "Can't. I'm being punished for breaking curfew last night."

"You're grounded?"

"Just for tonight,"

"Some punishment," he scoffed. "You won't be missing much anyway."
"Why? Who are you playing tonight?"

"The Bears, from Bear Island High," he replied, "they're a piss poor team. We beat them every year."

"You're right, that would be a boring game." Arya looked up at him and made a face. "It's not an interesting match unless there's a chance you could get your face pummeled to the ground!"

He rewarded her with a glare. She might not want to kill him anymore, but there was nothing stopping her from antagonizing the shit out of him.

Chapter End Notes

What did you think of this episode? I hope it was worth the wait! Review and let me know!

Did you miss Jaqen? I know I did…I had planned for one more POV, but it didn't flow, so I'm putting it in a following chapter.

I recently joined Tumblr, so if you're interested, please see my profile for details so you can follow me there : )
Episode 14 "Sleepless In King's Landing"

Chapter Notes

Here it is - the next update!

Thank you to everyone that reviewed Chapter 13, it was nice to hear from all of you again after so long being away.

This chapter took so much longer to write, and if you've been following me on Tumblr, I've kinda of blamed it on Jaqen (sorry Jaqen, I love you but you are darn difficult to write!)...so again, thank you all for your patience!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gossip Spyder

Good morning everyone!

So, our White Knights kicked butts last night against the Bears of Bear Island High...no surprises there, our boys have beaten them every year for the past five years! Bear Island High's sporting achievements would be altogether non-existent if it weren't for their girls soccer team – this year, captained by Dacey Mormont – these ladies are on a winning streak this season!

It seems there is something between Arya Stark and the Hound if popular rumors are to be believed – not to mention the fact they were sighted leaving school grounds at lunch yesterday, and were again spotted together after school...Arya and Sandor, that public display of affection yesterday was somewhat lacking, compared to what we know you're capable of!

Arya was also seen arguing in the hallway with Gendry 'The Bull' Waters, supposedly a close friend of hers, and guitarist for Beric Dondarrion's band. Whatever you were arguing about, I hope it doesn't affect The Bull's performance for the competition this weekend!

And speaking of competition....The countdown for the Battle of The Bands Competition begins now! This coming Saturday at 2 p.m. is when it all starts, peeps! Baelor's Arena is where it's at! Be there to support our very own Brotherhood Without Banners, and check out what new talents will be unearthed! Tickets are available at the door!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

Arya

She felt like crap. She'd lain awake for the best part of the night, punching her pillow into shape because she couldn't get comfortable. Her mind had continued to churn and whirr, refusing to let her rest. But it was Saturday morning, she was awake, and she didn't have the luxury of going back to bed.

They wouldn't let me sleep!

Her thoughts went around in a constant loop, starting with the trip she'd taken into Flea Bottom two days before, and ending with the parting shot she'd left with the Hound before the football game – only to have it all rewind and replay.

After school the previous day, she'd been nonplussed to find the Hound waiting for her at her locker.

"Shouldn't you be prepping for tonight's game?" she'd asked him.

"Got a few minutes before Coach Selmy wants to see us. I'll be heading over soon as you've wished me good luck for the game," he'd said.

"Good luck," she'd said automatically.

"In front of your sister and Joffrey." He'd rolled his eyes.

"Oh." She'd frowned, realizing that the whole pretending to be dating thing was going to be tricky. "Is it really necessary?"

"It is today." He'd returned her frown. "Joff will notice that you won't be watching the game tonight. We're supposed to be together now, so let him see you wish me luck."

With an exasperated sigh, Arya had grabbed the textbooks she needed from her locker, before following Sandor down the hall. Joffrey, Sansa, some of the cheerleaders and other members of the team had gathered around the lower bleachers at the football field. Arya had grown self-conscious, and felt a total fraud as people started turning their way.

"I'm not going down there," she'd hissed at the Hound.

"I wasn't going to make you," he'd grunted, "when we reach that bench over there, you can be a coward and kiss me where they can watch. Then you can leave."

"I'm not kissing you,"

"So, pat me on the head instead," he'd snapped, "because that would be really convincing."

"Smartass,"

He'd grumbled something that sounded like irritating little bitch.

They reached the bench he mentioned, and Arya had watched as he sat down to face her. Seated, his face was level with hers.

"Why are you sitting down?"

"So we can pretend to have a meaningful chat,"

"This is ridiculous!" she'd humped.

"You're also a midget." He might have smiled then, but she hadn't been sure of his expression. "Be easier for you, rather than you trying to kiss me standing on your toes. Would you prefer we make a spectacle of it?"

"How long do I have to stand around here for?" she'd asked, ignoring him.
Sandor had glanced over her shoulder to observe the group at the bleachers. "Just keep talking,"
"About what?"

"How should I know? What did you talk about with that Faceless ex of yours?"

"He's not my ex."

"Thought you said he broke up with you?"

"I'm not sure we were actually together to begin with," Arya had been horrified to hear herself confess, "we'd only had the one date. We were supposed to be meeting tomorrow..."

"But he changed his mind when he saw the photos," he had completed her sentence when she'd stalled.

Arya had sniffed at the offhand way in which Sandor had spoken, and she decided she'd had enough of him.

"Okay, I think I've had all I can take of this today," she had stated.

After some moments hesitating, she had taken a step towards him and pressed a very quick and very chaste peck on his unscarred cheek, the way she would kiss Jon or Robb.

"I'm going to be wishing with all my might that just once tonight during the game, you'll get your face smushed into the ground!" Arya had said, giving him the brightest smile she could muster, before spinning on her heel and walking away.

"Wish as hard as you like, little bitch," he'd called after her, "not gonna happen!"

When she had arrived home, she'd harassed the family's employed chef for something to eat, before heading into the TV room where her two younger brothers had been surprised to see her home so early.

"Mom said you were banned from going out tonight, but I didn't think you'd actually take her seriously," Bran had said, looking up from where he was sprawled on the floor.

"Where would I go anyway?" Arya had asked, dejectedly. "None of my friends are speaking to me,"

"Don't they like you anymore, Arya?" Rickon, who'd had command of the remote control, looked away from the cartoon he'd been watching to give his big sister a look.

Arya had shaken her head sadly. "No, they're mad at me,"

"Why?" Rickon had pressed.

She had sighed. "Because I...made friends with another boy they didn't like."

"Why would your friends get mad at you for making more friends?"

"Because they think this boy is bad,"

"And is he a bad boy?" Rickon asked innocently, making Arya smile at his choice of words.

Sandor Clegane probably was the definition of bad boy.
"No." Arya decided after some thought. "He isn't a bad boy. Not truly, but everyone just thinks that he is."

"Well... couldn't you just tell your friends the truth?" Rickon suggested, with all the wisdom of a seven year old. "If your other friends knew that he was really nice, then you could all become friends. Mom always says it's better to have more friends."

"I wish it were as simple as that, Rickon."

"I don't see why it has to be hard," her baby brother had returned, before shrugging and turning back to his cartoon.

It was now Bran who was looking at her, and from the expression on his face, Arya had known that her younger brother had read between the lines.

"Is this to do with that senior you went on a date with?" Bran had asked.

"Not that senior... another senior,"

"How many boys are you dating, Arya?" Bran's eyebrows had risen.

"None... one." Arya frowned. "Oh, dammit!"

"Why is that a hard question to answer?" Bran's interest had been piqued.

Arya had been about to tell him to mind his own business, when she remembered that his logic had helped her out once before. Perhaps he could help her again?

"Look, here's the story," she'd begun, "there's this girl I know that's dating this total douchebag..."

As best as she could, and without divulging the names of anyone involved, Arya told Bran the general gist of the story.

"Like last time, Bran. None of this gets repeated to Sansa, or anyone, okay?"

"Got it,"

"So, to summarize everything I've just told you... I kissed this guy that likes this girl I know, who doesn't like him back, but whose boyfriend is a whackjob and would hurt her if he were to find out about this guy liking his girlfriend, and I only did it so people would stop talking about them because I don't want her to get hurt,"

Arya had stared at Bran, hoping he had understood her babbling because she really didn't want to have to repeat herself. Bran blinked a couple of times, before nodding his head slowly.

"And this guy you kissed is someone people think is... unsuitable? Which is why your friends are mad at you?"

"You could say that,"

"But you meant well," Bran said, and Arya realized it was the first time that it had been acknowledged.

"Yeah." She'd nodded. "I thought I was helping, and I didn't mean for anyone to get hurt."

"And, this other senior?"
"His name's Jaqen H'ghar," Arya had decided to reveal his name to Bran. "And, we were supposed to be going on another date tomorrow, but he called it off when he found out about what I'd done,"

"That sucks,"

"And we were supposed to go for pancakes!" she had moaned.

"Pancakes?" Rickon's ears had been sharp. "Where?"

"This place near the mall," Arya said to Rickon, then turned to Bran again. "What do I do to fix this, Bran?"

"Is the pancake place far from here?" Rickon pressed.

"No, Rickon, it's not that far," Arya replied distractedly.

"Why are you asking me what to do?" Bran had said. "I thought you were just venting out,"

"Because you're the logical one and I only told you because I thought you could help me,"

"I don't remember making that deal,"

"Bran!"

"Can we go for pancakes tomorrow?" piped Rickon, ignoring their bickering.

"Well, since you asked so nicely," Bran had relented, "I really think you should start by being honest. Tell the truth."

"That's what I said before!" Rickon added helpfully.

"Thank you, Rickon...Tell Jaqen the truth? Or tell my friends?" she'd asked.

"All of them." Bran shrugged. "You can't mend friendships, or relationships without honesty and communication."

"Where did you learn that?"

"Dr. Phil, I believe."

"You're kidding, right?" Arya had scoffed, but Bran had been serious. "What if Jaqen won't listen? He hung up on me!"

"You have to try, and try again. If he really won't hear you out, then he's probably not worth the effort."

Arya had rolled her eyes, but knew that Bran was right. Somehow, she had to make Jaqen listen to her...Gendry and Hot Pie, too.

"So, can we go out for pancakes tomorrow?" Rickon had asked, yet again. "We can be your date, Arya. Couldn't we, Bran?"

Bran turned to Rickon, then to Arya questioningly. Arya had looked at Rickon's hopeful little face, so happy at the prospect of pancakes, and found it hard to deny him.

"Sure." She'd smiled at him. "Ask mom first, and if she says okay, then it's a date!"
She'd spent the rest of the afternoon watching TV with her brothers, and when they were called to
dinner, she had a somewhat polite, if abrupt conversation with her mother. Her father arrived home
halfway through dinner, and he'd given her a perplexed look, as though to say it's Friday night, why
are you here?

Jory Cassel had followed him into the dining room, and joined them for dinner as he'd done many
times in the past. Arya had very few memories of her father where Jory wasn't far behind him. He
had no formal job title, but her father trusted him, and whatever it was that Eddard Stark asked of
him, Jory made sure it was done. It wasn't until Arya had excused herself to go to her room that she
remembered the questions she'd wanted to ask Jory about Gendry.

The information that Lommy Greenhands had told her about Gendry's past, and Bruce telling her
about Jory being at the 'Lucky 8' before her and asking questions about Gendry, had made her more
curious than ever. She wanted to get to the bottom of the mystery that was Gendry Waters. It hadn't
really dawned on her before just how much she didn't know about the boy whom she considered to
be a close friend. Looking back on it, she realized that Gendry only ever told her things he wanted
her to know, and let her see what he wanted her to see.

She had a feeling that she was onto something big…something important. But she knew that if she
wanted to get any information out of Jory, she needed to have her wits about her…or at least be in
the mood to play the sweet-little-girl-Arya (she shuddered) that Jory always found hard to say no to.

She would find a way to make things okay with Gendry again, she had vowed. She had to. The
Battle of The Bands competition was that coming weekend, and she wanted to be there to support
him. She'd imagined she would be in the front row, screaming her lungs out, like she had when he'd
first auditioned for the Brotherhood. Jaqen's band was in the competition as well, and if she hadn't
gone and screwed things up, she would have been screaming herself hoarse cheering for him too.

Arya had then spent the rest of the night in front of her computer stalking Gendry on Facebook,
messaging Jon and Robb, and checking out video clips of Jaqen on YouTube. She'd found out that
their school team had won the game through a Facebook post, and had been peeved to note that
Sandor hadn't had his face smushed into the ground. Sleep was long coming, and it seemed she'd
barely closed her eyes...before Rickon had suddenly come barging into her bedroom.

"Wake up, Arya!" He laughed. "We're going to have pancakes this morning!"

It was all she could do not to groan.

"Okay." She'd yawned. "Wake Bran, then go and get yourself dressed. I'll be up in a minute."

"Don't take too long, okay?" Rickon pouted. "You always take too long to get dressed."

"All right, I promise." Arya had laughed, and forced herself to swing her legs down to the floor.

After Rickon left her room, she picked up her phone to check her emails and alerts. Sure enough,
there was an alert from the Gossip Spyder. She groaned into her pillow when she found her name,
Sandor's and Gendry's mentioned. She wasn't really surprised to see that Gendry's outburst by her
locker had also been noted. It wasn't like he'd been careful about keeping his voice down. He'd
practically been shouting at her by the end of his rant.

_Gendry won't be happy when he sees this._

---

_Jaqen_
Jaqen wondered why he had bothered to turn up at the pancake and waffle house that morning. It wasn't as if Arya would be there waiting for him. He'd told her he didn't want to see her, and besides it was closer to lunch than it was breakfast. The Spyder's post that morning had done nothing to improve his mood, and yet he'd still found himself making his way to the pancake house. The post from the previous day had caught him off-guard, and after his abrupt phone call to Arya, he'd spent the rest of the day alternating between feeling jealous, sorry for himself, and angry.

He'd gotten a song out of it, though. The lyrics had come to him in bursts throughout his classes, and by the time school had let out he'd had a decent bass line and melody to go with it. He'd met up with the guys afterwards, and by midnight they had an angst-ridden rock song ready to rehearse.

"Angry Jaqen writes better stuff than dopey-happy Jaqen," Jorge had stated.

"Angry Jaqen likes being insulted even less than dopey-happy Jaqen." He'd scowled at his friend.

"What is it with you and this girl?" Ky had asked him. "You haven't told us much about her, but how many songs have you written since you met her? She means more to you than what you're telling us."

Jaqen had sighed and shrugged. "It does not matter, now."

His friends had exchanged glances, but it had been Izembaro who'd braved his wrath by bringing up the subject of the photos they had seen online.

"Have you spoken to her, Jaqen?" Izembaro had asked, "what did she say?"

Again, Jaqen had shrugged. "What is there for her to say? She was kissing another guy."

"Did you ask her why?"

"Usually when a girl is kissing someone else instead of you, it means she no longer wants you," he'd replied.

"You're an idiot," Ky had told him, "you never gave her a chance, did you?"

Jaqen had glared at the bass player.

"Man, I know you," the guy continued, "you're a stubborn sonofabitch, and you have a bad habit of disregarding people without hearing them out."

Jaqen had winced at his friend's words, but Ky had been right. His stubbornness had gotten him into trouble in the past, and had cost him at times. Like the time he'd asked a girl out in his sophomore year, and she'd told him she had other commitments at the time but he could take her number and call her at a later date. He had assumed she was brushing him off and his stubborn pride hadn't allowed him to call her. He had also assumed that the number she'd given him was probably a fake. It turned out that the girl had gone to her grandmother's funeral in another state, and by the time he'd worked out his error, the girl had moved on and was dating someone else.

Ky had made a very valid point.

"She was kissing another guy," Jaqen had insisted.

"You broke up with her," Jorge had observed.

"Not in so many words..."
"Then hear her out," Ky had said, "you owe it to yourself to learn the truth,"

"And if I don't like what she has to say?"

"Then you get over her and move on," Ky replied, "don't forget, the competition begins next Saturday. We can't have you moody like this,"

"Ah, of course!" Jaqen had rolled his eyes. "Your concern is about the competition…you really were not concerned about me,"

His friends had chuckled.

"Competition, first. You, second," Ky had agreed.

"Jerks, all of you!" Jaqen had called them.

He had gone to bed, but had not slept very well. He kept seeing the image of Arya with the Hound, and replaying the brief conversation he had had with Arya over the phone. She had told him that it wasn't what it looked like, and he'd reproached her for being fickle.

"Just yesterday afternoon you were telling me that you missed me and were agreeing to meet me for a second date, and yet you were seen kissing another guy just hours later. What am I to make of that, Arya?"

"The Hound means nothing to me,"

"You hate the Hound, and yet you kissed him. That only makes me wonder about what I might really mean to you,"

That's what really got him thinking. Had she been kissing any other guy, he might not have thought about it so hard, but it was the Hound, and he knew that there was a history there that he did not understand. Jaqen recalled an incident going back several weeks, to the night of the first football game of the season to be precise. His school had played against KL Prep, and his school had lost by two points. He and his friends had gone to watch the match. After the game, he had come across a livid Arya confronting a frightening looking Hound. He remembered that Arya had been involved in an unfortunate altercation with her sister's boyfriend, Joffrey Baratheon, and a friend of Arya's had been hurt with the Hound being somehow implicated. When he had come upon them, Arya had been arguing with the Hound about that very thing.

"I'm not afraid of you!" Arya had yelled at the linebacker.

"Maybe you should be," the Hound had snarled back, "don't you know? You shouldn't get in my way."

"Or else what? You'll beat me up like you did Mycah?"

Jaqen had watched as the Hound denied her accusations, and as Arya called him a coward.

"What exactly are you accusing me of, bitch? And be careful what you say next," the Hound had hissed at Arya.

"Oh, you know exactly what I'm talking about...I'm talking about you beating up a freshman half your size, for something that had nothing to do with him, just because that prick Joffrey ordered you to do it!"
The Hound laughed before he'd grabbed at Arya and pulled her so that he had been right in her face. "You have no idea what you're talking about, little bitch!" he had growled, "and be careful of who might be listening before you go accusing Joffrey."

Arya had called him out for daring to threaten her, which he had denied. That's when the Hound had shaken Arya by her shoulders, and Jaqen had rushed forward to help her.

"Go on. Keep pushing me, little bitch! I dare you."

"Let me go!" Arya had cried.

The Hound had let her go, but Arya had gone on to recite ways in which she would like to see the Hound dead.

"Stop trying to come up with ways to kill me. It won't do you any good."

Jaqen had reached Arya just as she was about to pounce at the Hound.

"You have more courage than sense, lovely girl," Jaqen had said to her, all the while glaring at the Hound.

If he had not stopped her at that point, Arya would have regretted it.

"I guess you've heard the story going around...about that photo of me and Joffrey?" she had asked him when the Hound had departed.

He had told her that he had heard a few versions, but not the truth. Arya had never volunteered to tell him before, and he hadn't thought to insist on it, thinking she would open up to him eventually. Now, he decided he would insist on it.

"It's not what you think," Arya had told him on the phone.

If she was going to tell him the truth about the kiss, then she may as well tell him the truth about everything. If they were to have a shot at the boyfriend-girlfriend thing, then he didn't want half-truths between them, or to have to play guessing games.

Jaqen was now standing on the footpath directly outside of the pancake and waffle house, staring up at the giant waffle signage perched above the doorway. His stomach grumbled, reminding him that he'd skipped breakfast. Perhaps, he could grab a hot chocolate, and then find a quiet corner somewhere where he could call Arya and convince her to meet him, he thought. Jaqen walked inside, and immediately his sense of smell was assaulted with the scent of maple syrup, cinnamon, chocolate and vanilla. The air felt warm and slightly heavy, but it was oddly comforting. Like being wrapped in a blanket made entirely of fluffy buttermilk...pancake. Jaqen bit his tongue at the same moment his stomach chose to rumble again. A man needs a short-stack with vanilla ice cream and maple syrup.

He had almost reached the counter when something thumped into his side, and on instinct he reached out to grab it. It turned out to be a small boy with unruly auburn hair.

"Hey, little man." He smiled at the little boy. "What's your hurry?"

"Sorry." The boy looked up at him.
"No harm done," Jaqen said, "but you may want to slow down, okay?"

The boy nodded, but he seemed to be staring instead at Jaqen's unusually streaked hair.

"There you are!"

Jaqen looked up to see another auburn-haired boy, older and taller than the one who'd smacked into him, come loping towards them.

"What did mom say about you running off like that?" the older boy asked of the other, who was clearly his younger brother.

"I said sorry,"

"What did you do?"

"Nothing serious," Jaqen took it upon himself to answer on the boy's behalf. "He was just agreeing that he should not be running indoors, right little man?"

"Right." The boy nodded, still looking at Jaqen's hair. "Your hair's so cool!"

"Thank you," Jaqen replied, "I'm in a band...it's part of my look,"

"You're in a band? That's awesome!"

"Rickon, don't bug him." The older boy put a hand on his younger brother's shoulder and pushed him towards the counter. "Sorry for whatever he did,"

"It was nothing." Jaqen followed them to the counter where they joined the queue.

The restaurant was filling up quickly, and Jaqen wondered if he'd be able to find a seat. He had his stomach set on pancakes now.

"So, what's the name of your band?" the little boy, Rickon, asked him.

"Rickon..." warned the older boy.

"It's quite all right," Jaqen said, "my band is called The Faceless Men,"

"What instrument do you play? I have another older brother that plays the guitar."

"I play many instruments, including the guitar." Jaqen found Rickon's enthusiasm amusing. It wasn't often that he was questioned by a grade-schooler.

"Wow!" The little boy grinned. "I'm Rickon, by the way...and this is my brother." He looked up at his older brother.

"Brandon," said the older boy, holding out his hand. "Bran for short,"

"Jaqen." He took Bran's hand and shook it.

Bran's eyes narrowed at his name. "You're Jaqen H'ghar?"

"The one and only." It was not unusual for people to recognize his name, given his somewhat public profile.

"I heard from my sister that you are kind of famous around here,"
"Is that so?" Jaqen asked as the queue shuffled forward.

"You're going to be in that competition this coming weekend," Bran stated.

"That's correct," Jaqen confirmed, "it's the biggest competition for unsigned bands around."

"Are you going to be eating here alone?" Bran asked directly, looking him in the eyes.

Jaqen wondered why it was that he felt like he was being stared down by the father of a prospective date. Bran didn't look older than thirteen, but the eyes of the boy and the expression in them made Jaqen think of Uncle Otto, and the way he always saw more than he gave away.

"I am," Jaqen replied, "but it does not look like I will be able to get a table. I may just get a hot chocolate to go."

"Would you like to join us?" Bran invited him.

"Yeah, would you?" Rickon seconded. "It's just me and Bran, and our sister. She's saving a table for us,"

Jaqen began to decline. "I couldn't impose, and your sister may not –"

"She wouldn't mind," Rickon insisted, "she likes making new friends, and…oh! She plays the guitar, too!"

"Does she?" Jaqen laughed.

"Well, she's learning…" Rickon corrected himself.

"Really, Jaqen," Bran said again, "you're more than welcome to join us."

In honest truth, he really didn't want to sit by himself. He was also procrastinating, he admitted. Sitting with company would buy him a few more moments before he would have to call Arya. Besides, the boys seemed friendly enough.

"Then, I will join you for breakfast," Jaqen accepted the invitation, and spent the next few minutes in the queue talking to Bran and listening to Rickon talk about his recent soccer match.

Bran ordered and paid for three meals, and Jaqen asked for his order to be delivered with Bran's, before he followed the boys to a table towards the rear of the restaurant. Rickon bounded ahead, and Jaqen's eyes widened in surprise at the sight of the girl sitting at the table Rickon had stopped at.

She was wearing black leggings that day, under an oversized grey tunic top, and boots. Her hair had been pulled into a careless ponytail high on the back of her head.

"Arya, we made a new friend and he's joining us for breakfast!"

"You, what? Who?" Arya turned around in her seat, caught sight of Jaqen and lost all color in her cheeks.

"Arya, this is Jaqen," Bran said with an innocent smile. "Jaqen, this is our sister Arya."

Jaqen regained his composure and smiled at Arya. "It is…lovely to meet you,"

At that point, he recalled their first date and remembered Arya telling him about her family and describing her siblings, all of whom had auburn hair, except for an older half-brother. He looked at
Bran again, realizing that he was only twelve years old.

"Er…yes. Lovely to meet you too," she stammered, "please, sit down."

Arya indicated the seat in front of her, while her brothers occupied the remaining two chairs.

"Jaqen's in a band, Arya," Rickon began to chatter, "and, he was going to eat alone so Bran invited him."

Jaqen watched Arya's face, wondering at the fickleness of Fate and the opportunity he had been given. Her eyes had flickered to meet his briefly, and then she'd looked away.

"Oh, that was kind of Bran," Arya said, and gave Bran a hard look.

"I recognized his name, Arya," Bran said, and this time he looked at Jaqen meaningfully. "I've heard you talk about…his band…before, and I knew you wouldn't mind."

"You have such a good memory, Bran," Arya returned.

It became clear to Jaqen that the siblings were speaking in some code, and it was about him. Bran knew more than he was letting on, and Jaqen's first impression of the boy seemed correct.

"It's a beautiful day." Jaqen decided it was time to join the conversation. "It is a nice thing to see a sister spend time with her brothers like this,"

"We're on a date," Rickon declared, "well, actually Arya was supposed to be on a date with another boy, but he changed his mind, and Arya got upset because they were supposed to have pancakes, so Bran and I said we'd be her date instead."

Jaqen raised an eyebrow while Arya's face turned bright red, Bran looked bemused, and Rickon kept smiling innocently.

"You have wonderful brothers, Arya," Jaqen stated, "but, why did this other boy change his mind?"

"That's kind of a long story…" Arya replied.

"I know this one!" Rickon cried. "It's because Arya was trying to help some other girl, by kissing this other boy, because some whackjob wanted to hurt someone, and he was unsuitable…wait, I'm confused." Rickon screwed up his nose. "It's complicated."

There was a revelation somewhere in the boy's rambling, but all Jaqen could focus on was the word _whackjob_, and he smiled though he tried not to. Evidently, Arya confided in her younger brothers…or in Bran, to be sure. The boy had not stopped watching him.

"That's enough, Rickon," Bran said, "maybe Arya can tell him that story after we eat,"

Fate had not acted alone, Jaqen decided. She'd had an accomplice in Brandon Stark.

"I'm sure Jaqen has things to do today." Arya glanced at him again.

"As it turns out I have plenty of time to hear stories today." Jaqen leaned forward in his seat, and purposely moved his leg under the table so that his booted foot made contact with hers, making her look up to meet his eyes. "I had already cleared my schedule because I was supposed to meet someone…something came up last minute…but I may have been too hasty in cancelling my original plans."
Arya's lips had parted slightly when she understood what he was getting at. He wanted to talk, and he was willing to hear whatever she had to say.

"After breakfast, we were planning on going to that mini-golf place that opened up nearby," Arya said quietly, "maybe, you'd like to come with us? We could do with another player,"

"Sure." Jaqen allowed himself to smile at her. "That sounds like a lot of fun,"

When their pancakes, waffles, hot chocolates and Rickon's juice arrived, Jaqen found himself participating in a conversation that revolved around cartoons, Rickon's soccer matches, books Bran had read, Jaqen's band and exactly how many instruments he played, and plenty of mentions of various members of the Stark family.

It was an experience that Jaqen found himself enjoying. He'd pretty much been raised as an only child, and while he had never lacked for company growing up, he couldn't help being a little envious of the bond the Stark siblings obviously shared.

After they had finished breakfast, Jaqen led his present company to his Jeep and drove the short distance to the mini-golf park. Bran immediately took responsibility of Rickon, leaving Jaqen and Arya in relative privacy. The mini-golf park had three courses, each more challenging than the last, and each themed after a certain manner. They followed Arya's brothers on the beginner course, which had a dungeons and dragons theme.

"Why were you at the pancake house this morning, Jaqen?" Arya asked him while she lined up her first shot.

"I had nowhere else to be," he replied.

"Oh,"

They could no longer stall the conversation, so Jaqen made it easy for her.

"Start at the beginning, Arya," he said, "tell me all of it,"

So, she did. Beginning with a sigh, Arya began to speak, and while they played a terrible round of mini-golf, Jaqen heard the truth behind the photos of Arya and the blonde Baratheon, the story of her friend Mycah, the Hound's involvement, about her sister Sansa and her blindness to her boyfriend's true nature. There were some parts in her story that he could tell she was glossing over, like how she came to be in the Hound's car for starters, but he chose not to pick on details just yet. Not when the picture she was painting was already so bizarre as it was.

"You are telling me that the Hound...Sandor Clegane, is interested in your sister?" Jaqen asked, brows furrowed.

"Yes,"

"Not you?"

"Not me," she confirmed, "he thinks I'm a pain, and the sentiment is mutual,"

"Yet you still kissed him,"

"It won't happen again,"

"But, you have just told me that the Hound expects you to pretend to be his girlfriend," he
challenged, "I do not like this, Arya."

They had given up all pretense of playing mini-golf by this stage, and now they sat on hard plastic chairs near the obstacle courses where they could keep an eye on her brothers. Arya's spirits appeared to have dampened, and there was a stiffness in the set of her shoulders that gave away her discomfort.

"I didn't know what else to do, Jaqen," she said softly, but her expression was stubborn.

Jaqen ran a hand through his hair, frustrated by what he had just heard. He was hoping that speaking to Arya would put to rest the doubts he'd had about where he stood in their relationship…or whatever it was they had. And while in some way it had, the situation that Arya had put herself in just served to raise more questions and doubts.

"You are playing games, Arya," he said quietly, "and people will get hurt."

She turned to look at him. "I'm sorry. I never meant for you to get hurt."

He believed her. Admitted, he still didn't know her very well, but he didn't think that the girl in front of him – the same girl who took her little brothers to breakfast and mini-golf, the same girl who wanted to protect her sister from a sadistic boyfriend – was capable of intentionally hurting someone. No, it is her impetuosity and recklessness that are lethal, he thought.

"Your friends…The Bull and the Pie Boy, they are not speaking to you?"

"No." She shook her head. "But I haven't had the chance to explain any of this to them yet."

"I cannot blame them for being angry with you. They are in a better position to understand the possible threat to you, being at the same school as the Hound," he began, "he has a reputation, Arya, and nothing of what I have heard about him brings me any comfort."

"He won't hurt me," Arya said, "I told you what happened."

"I know, but you cannot deny that he is a dangerous guy."

She looked away and said nothing.

"I do not want you with him," he stated.

"It's not real, Jaqen," she said again, "it's an act, and only for a few weeks,"

"All in the name of helping your sister." He couldn't prevent the scorn that crept into his voice.

"You don't know Joffrey!" Arya bit out defensively. "You weren't there, you didn't see how he was hurting her!"

"Have you tried speaking to your sister?"

"She's not going to listen to me!" she cried. "Sansa only sees what Sansa wants to see. She doesn't realize…she doesn't know she needs protection from her own boyfriend."

"And you know this for sure? You know that this is how your sister truly feels?"

There was a moment when doubt flitted across her face, but it was gone too soon.

"She declared it in front of the whole school. Everyone heard her."
"People often lie to protect themselves. How do you know she wasn't merely saying what her boyfriend wanted to hear?"

Doubt reappeared on her features, and this time it lingered. It seemed that the notion had not crossed her mind before. Jaqen could almost see her mind working, searching for signs she might not have seen before.

"Sansa's not a very good liar...Joffrey would know," Arya eventually said, looking distressed.

"She does not have to be a good liar," Jaqen said, "she just has to lie well enough to convince him, and perhaps what she does is...enough."

Arya sighed, and they sat in silence for some minutes, both of them thinking. At length, she spoke again, changing the subject. She asked him something he never thought he would have to answer.

"Jaqen, why did you ask me for three dates?"

He'd looked at her then, feeling foolish.

"Because I thought that three dates would be enough for you to be convinced," he said.

"Convinced of what?"

"That you want only to be with me."

She inhaled sharply at his response, before grimacing. "But now you really have changed your mind...after what I've just told you."

"I'm not sure that I have," he replied.

Her eyes flew to his, and they were wide. "You...you still...?"

He gave her a saddened smile and nodded. "I still like you, sweet girl. But I will need a little time to think about the things you have told me..."

"Why, Jaqen?" she blurted out, "why do you like me?"

He gave a little shake of his head and chuckled.

"I like you for the very same reasons that we are in the mess that we find ourselves in," he replied, "lovely girl, I like you for your impulsiveness, and your fearlessness. I like you for your loyalty, and I like that you don't try to fit into the mold. You don't seem to be afraid to be yourself, unlike a lot of other girls who seem to think they have to fit a certain image. I like that you wear no masks that I have to try and get behind."

"Oh,"

He had overwhelmed her with his response, that was clear. She was flushed, and fidgety.

"Do you want to know why...why I like you?"

Jaqen did. He truly did. However, he did not believe that Arya clearly knew the reasons herself. She was so inexperienced at dating, he didn't believe she'd really thought about why she wanted to be with him...if she really wanted to be with him?

"Not right now, Arya." He shook his head. "I think there are some things you need to think about,
including whether you truly want to be with me. You have to clear things up with your sister, and your friends...and then there is this business with the Hound..."

"Jaqen, I..."

"I'm insisting on it, sweet girl," he stalled her protests. "I need to know where I stand with you. You need to tell me what you want, Arya."

He prayed to Fate that Arya's answers would be the ones he wanted to hear.

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**Sansa**

Sansa had tossed and turned for most of the night and she had woken up feeling lousy. She had gotten home at about ten p.m. the night before from the post-game party that Joffrey had insisted she go to. She really hadn't been in the mood, and she'd taken the first opportunity to leave, hitching a ride home with Randa. Sandor had not gone to the party celebrating their team's victory over Bear Island High. Joffrey had made some comment about his absence being related to Arya.

"Where's your little girlfriend going?" Joffrey had asked Sandor before the game, watching as Arya had parted from Sandor. "She's not coming to watch you?"

Sandor had shaken his head. "She's grounded."

"What for?" Joffrey had snickered.

"I brought her home past curfew last night," Sandor had replied.

Sansa had known about Arya's punishment for breaking curfew, and she'd known that it was because her sister had been with Sandor, but hearing him talk about it made her chest tighten painfully. Jealously. She'd watched, along with everyone else, as Sandor had walked side by side with Arya down to the bench near the football field and as they talked. Everyone had speculated about what they could be talking about, but it didn't matter, in Sansa's opinion. They could have been talking about football and she still would have been jealous.

Then Arya had kissed Sandor's cheek, his good one, and everyone had giggled about how restrained they were. But Arya had been smiling as she'd walked away from Sandor, and he'd called something out to her with an answering expression on his face that Sansa knew to be a smile. When she had gotten home, she had walked by Arya's closed bedroom door and heard music coming from inside. She had paused outside the door, wondering if she should tell Arya that the team had won and that Sandor had played well, but she'd walked away in the end.

Sansa knew that she would have to speak to her sister soon. Their silence had gone on far too long, and it appeared Arya had forgiven the guy responsible for part of the reason they had stopped speaking in the first place. Sandor had been blamed for the injuries sustained by Arya's friend, and his subsequent departure from King's Landing Prep. Did it mean Sandor was innocent, after all? *Maybe he is,* Sansa decided. Arya wouldn't be dating him if he was in some way responsible.

*But that doesn't mean Joffrey is off the hook, either.* It was Joffrey that had been pictured in that scuffle with Arya, not Sandor Clegane. She had never received a satisfactory explanation from anyone about what really happened to Arya's friend, and the more she witnessed Joffrey's temper, the more she believed him to be behind it.

How the hell was she going to rid herself of him? He'd become more possessive of her ever since the rumors of her cheating on him had started. She did not enjoy his attention, or the extra touching. She
knew that he didn’t really care for her. He cared only about keeping her by his side because she, Sansa Stark, made him more popular. As a couple, they were the most talked about people in school.

Together, they were powerful. Kids literally stepped out of their way when they walked down the halls, they always got the best table in the quad, and people gave up their place in queues for them.

"People like you, Sansa," Jeyne had commented once, "everyone used to find Joffrey really unapproachable, especially when the Hound was around. But since you started dating him, they see him differently."

She now saw a meaning behind Jeyne's words that she hadn't understood before. Before she had come along, Joffrey would get his way through intimidation and coercion. But with her as his girlfriend, people did things like giving up their place in the queue and vacating the best seat in the quad because of her. She made Joffrey look good. Whether he knew that or not, he seemed to realize that having a girlfriend that everyone liked was a benefit to him. Great, she thought. All I have to do is find some girl who's willing to take him off my hands. She wanted to laugh at the idiocy behind that idea. Where was she going to find a girl pretty enough to attract Joffrey's eye, who wanted attention and popularity that badly?

Sighing, Sansa got out of bed and went to her bathroom to wash her face. When she went downstairs, she was informed that Arya had taken Bran and Rickon out for pancakes.

"The boys had wanted to ask you to go with them," her mother told her, "but we figured you would be sleeping in."

Had it been a normal Saturday morning, she would have been sleeping in and would not have wanted to be bothered about pancakes. But she was feeling particularly sensitive, and felt left out.

In any case, it saved her from being put in an awkward position with Arya before she was ready.

So, she had a late breakfast by herself in the kitchen and stared out of the large bay window that overlooked the rear garden of Chateau Meagor. The leaves on the trees had changed color, and she found a momentary calm just watching the orange-red-gold foliage waving in the autumn breeze.

After she'd eaten she went back to her room and read the latest post from the Spyder, briefly amused at the part about Arya being seen arguing with her friend Gendry. Obviously, the guy hadn't taken the news of Arya dating the Hound all that well.

With the house being so quiet, Sansa spent some time catching up on her homework, and was happy in the knowledge that Joffrey wouldn't be calling her until much later in the day, if he called at all. They guy liked to party, and was probably nursing a hangover from the night before. Small mercy, she thought. It was while she was trying to read her science text book that she fell asleep, both from sheer boredom induced by the topic, and from not having slept the night before.

When she next awoke, the light coming in through her bedroom window had changed letting her know that it was well past noon, and the noises downstairs alerted her that Arya and her brothers had returned. She'd been careful to avoid her sister so far, but with their bedrooms side by side, they were bound to bump into each other sooner or later. They met on the landing just outside their bedroom doors. Sansa was on her way downstairs to find a snack, and Arya appeared to be on her way up to her room. One stared at the other, each wondering who would break the silence first.

It was Arya that spoke first.

"I was wrong about him," she said, and Sansa knew that she was talking about Sandor. "He's not a
bad guy. He's not what everyone believes him to be. Not really."

Sansa already knew that about him. She'd seen for herself that Sandor Clegane was not the monster he appeared on the outside.

"So, he didn't do it?" Sansa asked.

Arya understood what she was referring to, and her sister sighed and looked away. "The thing is...he did."

"What did you say?" Sansa had not expected to hear that answer.

Arya's stance became determined. "Sandor did hurt Mycah. I made him tell me the truth."

"But, why did he do it? I don't understand."

"Look, Sansa," Arya began, "I know you're really into Joffrey, but you know how I feel about him. I've never hid it from you that I don't like him. Especially after what happened outside that dessert cafe..."

"Just tell me what's going on, Arya," Sansa snapped.

"Fine." Arya took a step towards her. "Joffrey wanted to get revenge on me for making a fool out of him in front of everyone, except Sandor stepped in before...before Joffrey could humiliate me in public...and unfortunately Mycah took the fall, instead of me."

Sansa could only stare at her sister in silence, digesting her words. If she had been told the same thing a few weeks before, she would not have believed her. However, she'd experienced firsthand Joffrey's ability to hurt people, and his inclination towards making a scene in public. Arya wasn't making this up.

"Sandor did this...for you?"

Arya shrugged. "Well, yeah. I guess."

"He protected you...from Joffrey?"

"Yes," Arya replied.

Sandor had protected her sister from Joffrey, all those weeks ago. It wasn't just public humiliation that Sandor had saved her sister from. Joffrey could have hurt her. Could Sandor have been interested in Arya the whole time? Sansa didn't know if she could handle that.

"Sansa, what I'm trying to tell you is that you need to open your eyes and start seeing Joffrey for what he is."

Sansa said nothing, and Arya took that as a sign to continue.

"Joffrey hurt you the other day, we all saw it..."

*And no one came to defend me.* Sansa thought sadly.

"...he hurt you, and you said that you still wanted to be with him..."

*Because I didn't want people thinking I cheated on him. And for what? For the sake of my stupid honor?*
"...Sansa, if Sandor can see what Joffrey is capable of, why can't you?"

I do see, she wanted to say to her sister. But now I'm too embarrassed and ashamed to admit that I've made a mistake. I can't tell you that you were right about Joffrey all along, and I can't tell you that I want to be out of this relationship with him so badly, because I don't want Sandor looking at me with pity.

In his own way Sandor had tried to tell her to be careful, but she hadn't seen his words for the warnings they actually were.

"Look. In another reality, I'd be telling you to save yourself some pain and give him what he wants...but that would be the worst advice I could give you right now," he'd said to her once, on the night of her birthday.

"You want my real advice, Sansa?"

"Yes, that's what I've been asking."

"No, you're asking me to give you the advice you want to hear. Sorry to disappoint you, little bird, but I won't lie to you."

"Then be honest,"

"My advice is not to give him what he wants...Not if you doubt yourself, or him. Don't give him anything you don't want to give him. Do you understand me?"

"Why are you telling me this? He's your friend."

"Maybe...But I'm not the one walking around with butterflies and fairytales in my head."

Even then, Sandor had known how blinded she'd been. He probably knew Joffrey better than anyone, and he'd tried to tell her. Except she hadn't been listening.

"Sansa?" Arya's voice broke into her reverie. "Why aren't you saying anything?"

Sansa shook her head. "I can't talk about this...not right now...not today."

I can't tell you what's going on in my head, Arya, because most of my thoughts are about Sandor...your boyfriend...I can't let you see how jealous of you I am.

"We need to talk about this," Arya insisted, "please...this is important."

"I know." Sansa nodded, and started back towards her room. "I just can't...I need to think,"

Arya backed off, and nodded in understanding. "When you're ready, you know where to find me."

Sansa closed the door behind her, and slid down to the floor. A moment later, she heard her sister's own bedroom door close with a click.

She really did need to think, and it was while she was still sitting on the floor that Sansa realized that throughout Arya's accusations towards Joffrey, she hadn't uttered one syllable in his defense.

Chapter End Notes
I really do value all of your comments and reviews, so please let me know your thoughts!

P.S. The Battle of The Bands Competition is finally here! So, expect to see some Gendrya next update, YAY!
Episode 15 "The Heat Is On"

Chapter Notes

Okay, so if you've been following me on Tumblr you will know that two days ago this chapter began as 4711 words...well it just kept growing and growing and this is the result.

It is rough, and I will have to come back and fine-tune the editing in a couple of days - but you guys have been so patient, so I won't make you wait any longer.

In a discussion with a reader - it became evident that I needed to provide a short re-cap/timeline of events as people may have forgotten just how little time has elapsed between key events in the story.

Saturday - Riots at Myrcella's farewell (chap 10)
Sunday - Sansa recuperates after the riot at home, decides she wants to break up with him (chap 11)
Mon/Tue/Wed - At some point, Sansa realises she has a crush on Sandor, and she goes for pizza with him Wednesday after school (chap 11)
Thursday - Sansa and girls gossip about Sandor, incoming text from Gossip Spyder (chap 11)
Thursday (still) - Sandor overhears the girls gossiping about him, Gossip Spyder spills about her being seen with a guy, and Sansa has public fight with Joffrey. That same night, Arya runs into Sandor in Flea Bottom, and she kisses him in his car (chap 12)
Friday - Gossip Spyder posts the pictures of Arya and Sandor online, we see everyones' reactions (chap 13)
Friday/ Saturday - Sansa witnesses Arya kiss Sandor on the cheek, the following day Arya has pancake with Jaqen and her brothers, then Sansa and Arya talk Saturday afternoon (chapter 14)

On with the story...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gossip Spyder

Good morning boys and girls!

Five days until the Battle of The Bands peeps! Baelor's Arena is going to be the place to be this Saturday! The competition website says that there are ten amateur bands entering Heat One…six will go on to Heat Two, but only three will battle it out in the Finals, with the winner being announced on the night! Who will win? With the prize including a meeting with Marillion Records and a recording contract, it will all come down to which band wants it most!

In other news…

Arya Stark, you have some explaining to do! I have it on good authority that those auburn haired boys are your younger brothers…but there is no mistaking Jaqen H'ghar for anyone else! It all looks perfectly innocent – pancakes and mini-golf with your brothers – but you were rumored to be dating
him *before* you hooked up with the Hound…so is there anything we should know about?

In yet more news…

I heard that mover's trucks were seen entering the grounds of *La Maison des Fleurs* over the weekend. A little sparrow told me that a certain, prominent family from Highgarden have rented out the mansion…but I'll check back with you later once I've confirmed this bit of information!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

Sandor

He found the little bitch at her locker just before the start of class, and he ignored the looks thrown their way when he stood behind Arya and growled above her head.

"Cheating on me already, are you?"

Arya whipped around, then tilted her head up to glare at him. "I am not cheating on you…Oh, wait. *What am I saying?*" She frowned at him. "*I am not with you!*"

She said the last part in a whispered hiss.

Sandor gave a rough chuckle. "So, the *Faceless* punk is talking to you again?"

"I don't want to get into it with you, but yes," Arya said, slamming her locker door shut. "I just explained how things really are between you and me."

"Explained how things…what did you tell him?" Sandor grasped her arm.

"Only the truth," she replied, a defiant look on her face.

Sandor glared down at her, fearing the worst.

"All of it? *Even about Sansa?*"

"All of it," Arya confirmed.

"Do you trust this guy?" Sandor demanded, his grip on Arya's arm tightening slightly. "I hope you understand the risk you're taking,"

"I trust him," the little bitch said, "so you'll just have to trust me,"

Sandor sneered, but he let go of her arm. "Just like you trust me?"

Neither of them had much choice in the matter.

"I'll be telling Gendry and Hot Pie, too," she said, "just so you know,"

He'd already figured that out. "If any of this gets out to anyone else…if the Spyder hears –"

"No one will hear about it." Arya met his gaze, and in her grey eyes, he saw that she believed what she was saying. "They won't say anything."

Sandor sighed. He realized then, that unlike Arya, he had no one he needed explain his actions to.
That's how he preferred it, he thought, not having anyone to answer to. But now he saw things a bit differently. There was no one who cared to question his actions, or hear his explanation.

"Meet me in the hall outside the cafeteria at lunch," he barked, distracting himself from his suddenly darkening thoughts.

"Why?"

"And you call your sister stupid," he snapped, "couples sit together,"

"But my friends –"

"Can do without your company for a few more days,"

"But I need to tell them –"

"So, tell them." He shrugged. "Then meet me in the hall outside the cafeteria at lunch."

She looked like she wanted to say something more, but he walked away before she could protest further. He had more than one reason for insisting on the little bitch's company. The first reason was obviously to maintain their farcical pairing, and the second was because he had no desire to sit with Joffrey, Sansa and the rest of them. As far as he knew, Arya still wasn't speaking to Sansa either so there was no point having them sit together. Hanging around Arya for an hour seemed like less torture than having to put up with Joffrey, and enduring Sansa's painful presence.

All he had done the entire weekend was think about Sansa Stark. Straight after the game on Friday, he had gone home alone and hadn't emerged from his house except to run to the grocery store to stock up on junk food on Saturday. After that, the next time he'd left the house was to go to school. The little bird was messing with his head…and she didn't even know she was doing it.

*And what the hell was I thinking? Pretend to date Arya? I am fucked in the head!*

He'd had a good few days to think about that decision now, as well as the conversation he'd had with Arya at the fast food joint that had preceded the unusually brash choice he'd made. It was unlike him to be so impulsive. He rarely lost control. Even on the football field during the toughest of games he kept his cool, sticking to Coach Selmy's plays and using his judgment if a play wasn't going as planned. His better judgment had gone awol in the aftermath of the kiss incident. All of Arya's talk about Joffrey hurting Sansa had made him think only of making sure it didn't happen, and it didn't matter what he had to do.

The entire school was already talking about him and Arya, and Joffrey's amusement at his expense earlier that day had encouraged his decision. It was less hassle just to let people talk – that ball was already rolling. Then there was the part where Sansa had looked at him with an expression of doubt on her face.

"You're really dating her?" she'd asked him, in a tone that suggested she was uncertain about him dating her sister, like he was…unsuitable.

Mentally, he had agreed. He was unfit boyfriend material for any girl, let alone a girl named Stark. Dating was for other people, not him. But the Stark girl he wanted didn't want him back…while another Stark girl had thrown herself at him. As far as the rest of the school population was concerned, Arya Stark wanted him. Arya Stark had kissed him – that was a fact. No one had to know the reasons behind it. Least of all, Sansa. He had an ego, like all guys, but his had taken a beating with Sansa's unwitting rejection of him, and the thought of Sansa knowing that Arya hadn't really wanted to kiss him just seemed too much to handle. He didn't need to add to his humiliation.
With that thought on his mind, he had decided that for her own good, as well as the good of his ego, that it would be best for Sansa to believe he was dating her sister. Sansa might not want him, but if it messed around with her head to think Arya did, then so be it. Again, he concluded, the ball was already in motion and he couldn't think of anything that would undo what Arya had started. It was easier to let people believe it, regardless of how unsuitable he may be. He would just make the best of the bullshit thrown at him. All I have to do now is forget about her.

He'd heard the guys on the team talk about girls, girlfriends and breakups before, and he'd heard the various things they'd done to get over a girl or a bad breakup. Most of the guys were outright liars, bragging about fucking their ex's friends and getting with impossibly hot, college girls. Others were more vindictive, posting compromising photos of their ex online or forwarding once-private emails and texts to their friends for the purposes of humiliating them publicly. Some punched walls in frustration, while others, like Joffrey, preferred inflicting actual physical and psychological pain.

A few guys, and Sandor was inclined to believe their reactions to be genuine, however emasculating it may be, broke down in tears in the locker room. Pussies, he'd labeled them.

He understood them, to an extent. His own experience in the relationship department was virtually non-existent. He'd slept with girls, yes. But he hadn't lied to Arya about them being the one-night-only type of girls. He didn't date. End of story. So, while he could understand the desire to want to get revenge, get angry, to humiliate or even cry like a girl – none of the guys ever described feeling powerless. What the hell was a guy supposed to do to get over a girl, who didn't even know how she was affecting him? This was all new ground to him…he was out of his depth, and he hated not being in control.

At lunch the little bitch, proving surprisingly obedient, was waiting for him like he'd told her to. With a nod of his head, she followed him into the cafeteria where he picked up a couple of burgers for him, and indicated for her to pick up whatever she wanted.

"You call that lunch?" he eyed her salad roll distastefully.

"You're not the one eating it," she replied dismissively, and paid for their food. "I've got it. You bought lunch the other day,"

Sandor carried the tray with their food on it and led her to a table under a tree, away from his usual group. The table happened to be occupied by a group of freshmen, but with a snarled, 'get lost' from him they vacated the bench quick enough.

"That was rude," Arya commented as she picked up the salad roll from the tray on the table between them.

He shrugged, then promptly ignored her for the next few minutes while he concentrated on his food. Arya kept shifting in her seat, conscious of the stares people were giving them, and from the corner of his eye, he could see that everyone at Joffrey and Sansa's table kept glancing at them too.

"This is total bullshit!" he hissed.

"It was your idea to sit together!" Arya hissed back.

"Just shut up and eat." Sandor glanced at the table on the other side of the quad that Arya and her friends normally sat at, finding it occupied by some juniors instead. "You told the Bull and Pie kid, yet?"

She shook her head. "I don't know where they are, and Gendry won't answer my call. Hot Pie said
he'd talk to me before the Battle of The Bands competition this weekend, but he didn't really specify."

"I suppose you'll be going," he said, "your *Faceless Men* boyfriend is in the competition."

"I wanted to be there for Gendry, too…"

"You're going to have to decide between them, you know." He watched her carefully, to see if she got his meaning.

"They're both awesome musicians, it doesn't matter to me who wins,"

"It matters to them," Sandor tried again, "they can't both walk away with the prize. One of them has to lose."

"It's just an amateur band comp," Arya stated, "they can always try again next year,"

"For some, that might be too late." Sandor thought of himself. "Some may not get to try again."

She chewed on her food, and gave him a puzzled look.

"That was sort of…deep," she raised her brow.

"What? Did you think I was stupid, like the rest of them?"

"I did, yes," she replied bluntly.

"Bitch," Sandor snorted, but he did notice her response was in past tense, and there was no heat behind his insult.

He gave up hinting at The Bull's crush on her. Arya just wasn't getting it.

"Can I ask you something?" Arya scrunched up the paper that had held her lunch together and shot it into a nearby trash can, showing she had a good throwing arm.

"Like I could stop you," he replied.

"Why do you like her?"

Sandor flicked his grey eyes to hers, and noted that while her tone had been casual enough, her eyes told him he'd better give her a decent answer.

"Well?" she prompted, "*why* do you like my sister?"

Of all the things she could have asked him that was probably the question he was least prepared for. Not because he didn't have an answer, but because he didn't know how to put it into words, let alone give an audible response. He wasn't sure he wanted to say it out aloud. He wasn't sure he wanted to tell it, of all people, to Arya.

"What makes you think I'll tell you?" he growled.

"You just will," she stated.

Sandor sighed. Sansa had caught his interest from the moment he'd set eyes on her at the welcoming party the Baratheons had thrown for the Starks at The Red Keep. It wasn't just because she was pretty, either. Hanging around Joffrey, he'd seen plenty of good-looking girls during their
acquaintance. He also never had a thing for redheads before meeting Sansa. What had kept his eyes wandering back to her again and again that night was the ingenuousness that had clung about her, like a cloak about her pale, dainty shoulders.

He wasn't just talking about her being a virgin, though that too had been obvious. She'd been too pure in her way of thinking, too naïve, that it hadn't seemed possible. Even if she had gone to an all-girl school, it was hard to believe she wasn't...more experienced. A girl like Sansa had no business being in Joffrey's circle of acquaintances. At first, he'd thought she was just putting on the innocent act, but he'd kept watching her at school that first week, and he'd seen for himself that the only thing fake about Sansa Stark, was the face she wore pretending she was more sophisticated than she was.

He'd found her good manners irritating, especially when he could see that she sometimes wanted to object to the things Joffrey did or said, but kept silent. Or when she wanted to ask the girls to clarify something about a naughty topic of conversation, but she either didn't want to admit that she didn't know what they were talking about, or thought it improper to ask. He'd gotten past that, however inadvertent it might have been, the night he'd told her the truth about his scars and his brother. Her chirping had annoyed him so badly, and her unwillingness to tell Joffrey off for groping her in public for fear of causing a scene had bugged him to the point that he'd very rudely, and abruptly, insulted her for being too polite.

After that, though she was still polite to him, Sansa had become more forthcoming with her opinions and her questions. As though she knew he was listening, and possibly judging the truth of her words because he'd called her out for being phony. That was when he'd started to get to know the real girl beneath the expensive clothes and perfect manners. He'd gotten to know Sansa, by listening to the conversations she had with other people. If Joffrey asked her opinion about something, he paid attention to her responses. If the cheerleaders talked about fashion and girly things...well, he didn't pay as much attention, but he still listened. Sometimes her answers were insightful, more often they proved how guileless she was.

She talked about her family and her experiences at The Mordane School for Girls. She talked about growing up in the North, and of her former home Winterfell Manor. Sansa had led a charmed, cosseted childhood, and in some things he envied her. The last real family memory he had to speak of was from when he was six, before his mother and sister had died. He remembered a trip to the riverside and being told to keep watch on his three-year-old sister Leonor. He also remembered Gregor pulling him off the swing, but not much else about that day. His recollection of what family life was like before his mother and Leonor had died was hazy, and he wasn't sure how much of it was real and what was wishful thinking.

Berating himself for being a sentimental pussy, he would admit that Sansa reminded him that there was good in the world. And when Sansa had hooked up with Joffrey Baratheon, Sandor had found himself wanting to preserve the good in Sansa, not wanting her to be tainted or hurt by Joffrey's influence. **Wonderful job you've done with that, you useless dog,** he thought darkly, **he has hurt her, and you did nothing.**

Then he'd taken to watching her even closer, and very quickly, the same traits he'd earlier mocked her for, became the things that attracted and drew him to her. No matter how many times he'd tried to tell himself that it was only physical, he'd fallen in love with Sansa without him realizing it. Then she'd actually been nice to him. He'd been alone with her all of three times, and in the brief moments they'd been together, she spoke to him...not just at him like most people. Even that night after he'd told her about his burns and he'd half scared her to death, she'd still reached out to him in the dark and touched his shoulder to console him...**console him.**

He'd had real, proper civilized conversations with her, too. The first time was when he had taken her
to the trattoria for her birthday, and again the afternoon they'd shared a pizza. Sansa had paid attention to him, really paid attention to what he had to say. She seemed like she was genuinely interested in him, and for a time he'd felt like he was someone who mattered.

"With her, I don't have to be the Hound," Sandor heard himself saying, not looking at Arya. "With her, I'm just me."

It didn't matter if the little bitch understood him or not. That was all he was going to say about it. Sandor did not talk about his feelings with anyone, and it left him with a strange sensation in his gut to even admit what he had to Arya. He shifted his gaze back to Arya, and found her looking at him quizzically.

"Don't ask me again," he rasped, "it won't change things, anyway. She was only being nice to me because I'm supposed to be Joffrey's friend."

He didn't bother disguising the bitterness in his voice, however.

"Why are you friends with Joffrey?" she asked him, "you've never told me why."

"He's not my friend. I've told you before,"

"That's not an answer,"

He scowled. "Who else has use for an ugly, scarred thug like me?"

"Don't tell me the truth then." Arya scowled at him in return.

"That is the truth," he barked, "your problem if you don't want to believe it,"

She sighed, looking at him like he was hopeless

"I talked to Sansa," she said, "or at least, I tried."

"What did you tell her?" Sandor was alarmed. "You'd better not have –"

"I didn't say anything about how you feel about her!" she quickly said, "I'm not dumb."

"Good. Keep it that way," he snarled at her. Sansa finding out was the last thing he wanted. "So, what did you say to her?"

Briefly, Arya told him about her attempts to speak to Sansa, and he shook his head when he learned Sansa now knew of him beating up Mycah Butcher. Like she hasn't seen what you're capable of, she saw you fight your own brother, remember?

"I spoke to her on Sunday as well, but I'm not sure she was really listening to me. I mean she was there in front of me while I talked, but she wasn't really responding. She wasn't even saying anything to defend Joffrey, which is what I thought she'd do."

"She didn't?"

"No," Arya shrugged. "But like I said, it could be because she was just watching my lips move, and not hearing a word I said."

"Silly, little bird."

"Little bird?" Arya raised a brow.
Sandor shrugged. "You're little bitch, and she's little bird,"

Arya shook her head, clearly thinking him mad.

"Well, since we can't hope for Sansa dumping Joffrey anytime soon…I guess we can only hope that he breaks up with her first."

Sandor agreed, thinking that it couldn't happen soon enough.

Gendry

Gendry closed the browser as soon as he finished reading the paragraph about Arya, and wondered for the billionth time, what the hell is she doing? Jaqen H'ghar one week, the Hound the next…now she was seeing Jaqen behind the Hound's back? This was hardly typical behavior he recognized from the awkward, unsophisticated girl he'd gotten to know during his first weeks at King's Landing Prep. This new Arya…well, he didn't get her at all.

He went to his homeroom class, and once he was seated, he allowed a pretty, black haired girl in the seat behind him to distract him with her questions about the competition that weekend.

"Are you nervous?" she asked him, and he remembers her name is Bella.

"Who wouldn't be?" he replied, trying to act casual. "But on the stage, you forget about that, and the rush from performing live doesn't compare to anything else."

"Really?" She gave him a flirtatious smile. "You can't think of anything else it would compare to?"

His jaw dropped a little when he caught her meaning. Bella laughed at the stunned expression on his face.

"Maybe we could go out some time…if you're interested." Bella leaned forward over her desk, giving Gendry an eyeful of cleavage. "I'm sure we could find things to do off the stage that would give you that same…rush."

Did she just…? Bella's smile had definitely turned suggestive.

"Aft...after the comp, maybe," he blurted, "I'll...I'll think about it."

"Good." She grinned at him and leaned back in her chair. "I'll be cheering for you this Saturday!"

He'd never received such a blatant come-on in his short dating life, and the fact it had been from a very pretty girl stroked his bruised ego. Arya's not the only girl out there. He was glad of the reminder, but it did not make him feel any better. It was still Arya that he wanted. He dodged Bella on the way to his next class and caught up with Hot Pie at lunch. On the way to the cafeteria, he told his friend about Bella.

"And you didn't say, yes?" Hot Pie looked at him like he was crazy. "Why the hell didn't you take her up on her offer?"

"I don't know her, Hot Pie."

"That's the whole point!" Hot Pie exclaimed. "You go out with her to get to know her…and it sounded like she wanted to get to know you very well."

"Shut up." Gendry shook his head with a laugh, remembering that Hot Pie knew nothing of his
feelings for Arya. "If you want, I'll introduce you to her, and you can take her out."

Hot Pie turned as red as the cherries on the cherry pies he liked to bake and proceeded to call him names under his breath.

At the entrance to the cafeteria, Gendry put a hand on Hot Pie’s shoulder, stopping him in his tracks. He nodded towards the front of the cafeteria when Hot Pie looked at him. Together, they watched Arya walk away with the Hound who was balancing a tray of food between his massive paws. Gendry had three missed calls from Arya…well, ignored calls actually. They weren’t missed calls if one purposely didn’t pick up. Beside him, Hot Pie shook his head.

"I spoke to her earlier, and I said I'd let her tell me her version of the story before the comp this weekend."

"Why?" Gendry wondered.

"Because." Hot Pie gave him a puzzled look. "I want to know,"

"You really think she'll tell the truth?"

"Why would she lie?" Hot Pie asked, "she's still our friend, and as her friends we should at least hear her out."

Friend. Gendry was coming to loathe that word, and Hot Pie saying it again was not making him any more willing to listen to Arya's explanation. All he would be hearing was one more reason why she wasn't with him.

He'd thrown himself into band rehearsals the whole weekend, much to Beric's glee. He and Edric had both slept at Beric's place on Friday and Saturday nights to keep their slightly crazed frontman from completely losing it. It had also kept Gendry's thoughts from dwelling on Arya overlong.

Beric had kept studying the list of the bands that were entered in the competition, and had obsessively hunted down clips of these bands on YouTube in an effort to determine which were actual threats. Other than the obvious threat of Jaqen H'ghar and The Faceless Men, there were another possible two that had sufficiently caused Beric to come down even harder on them during their rehearsals.

At one point, during a heated argument with Thoros, Allyria had come into the basement at just the right moment to distract Beric and take him outside for some air.

"Was he like this last year?" Gendry had asked Edric.

"Worse," Edric had replied, "last year, we weren't as prepared and he knew it."

"So, why is he freaking out now?"

"A few reasons, I guess." Edric had shrugged. "The first being, Beric is Beric. Secondly, this is the second time we're entering and he remembers what last year was like. And lastly, you're a phenomenal musician Gendry, but you've only been playing with us a short time and really, the comp will be the first we'll have you on stage with us,"

"He doesn't have to worry about me," Gendry had stated adamantly. "I've been in front of crowds before."

"Sure...but the Battle of The Bands isn't the same as some gig in a basement or warehouse
"I'm aware of that." Gendry wasn't about to start doubting himself or his abilities. "I can do this. I won't let him down."

"I know you won't."

Both Gendry and Edric had turned around to see Beric return to the room in time to hear Gendry's words. Allyria had been behind him, and she'd given them a small nod to say Beric was okay again.

"Sorry for being such an ass these past few weeks, guys," Beric had said, running a hand through his already disheveled red-gold hair. "I know we'll do well, whatever happens."

After their frontman had chilled out, the rest of the weekend and rehearsals had been enjoyable. Beric was still insisting on rehearsals each afternoon after school until the competition, but whatever Allyria had said to him had made him rein in his maniacal need to fix and perfect everything.

Gendry and Hot Pie picked up some food and found their way to the performing arts block where Beric, Allyria and Edric always sat. Much to his dismay, the first question Allyria asked him was about Arya.

"What's this morning's post on the Spyder's site about?"

Gendry shrugged. "I honestly couldn't tell you."

"He's refusing to speak to her," Hot Pie declared, "but personally, I really want to know what's going on."

"As we all do." Edric gave Gendry that look again, the one that kept hinting that the guy suspected he had feelings for Arya.

"It would be strange going to the comp without Arya," Allyria said, with the same look Edric was giving him. "Especially as we talked about it a lot, and she was there for your audition, too."

Gendry wondered just how obvious he was being about his crush on Arya, and whether Hot Pie knew, but just chose not to admit to it.

"Arya was the one that submitted his audition video, actually," Hot Pie added, "she did it without him knowing."

"So, without Arya, Gendry probably wouldn't be in the band," Beric stated.

They were ganging up on him, but even as his head formulated arguments against it, in his heart lay the real truth. He would hear Arya out. He would listen to what she had to say.

He sighed. Soon, I'll speak to her soon.

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Arya

Arya got her chance to speak with Hot Pie on Wednesday. He had texted her that morning and offered her a ride to school. She'd been surprised at the offer, but sure enough, he had been waiting for her in the driveway shortly after.

"Why did you change your mind?" she asked him once they were on the road.
"I'm not angry, now." Hot Pie shrugged, looking over at her quickly. "I know we haven't been friends long, but the stuff you've done these last couple of weeks are just really...weird, and I'm at the point where I just want to know what's going on."

"You're going to think I've lost my mind."

"Too late for that." He smiled at her. "But I won't hold that against you, provided there's a good reason for why you've been acting so strange...and hooking up with that scary senior,"

Arya grimaced and took a breath. She may as well start there.

"About Sandor." She took a deeper breath. "I'm not really dating him. It's all an act."

Hot Pie shot her another look. "Oh, this is going to be good..."

"You've no idea." She laughed nervously. "Please promise me you won't repeat any of this to anybody."

"What about Gendry?"

"I'll tell him myself, if he'll let me," she said. "Please, Hot Pie. It's important that no one, not even my sister find out about any of this. Let's not mention what the Spyder would do if one drop of this get's out."

The seriousness in Arya's tone must have convinced him, because he swore and crossed his heart. Satisfied, Arya told him everything. Everything, except for what she'd been doing in Flea Bottom the night the Hound had rescued her. Gendry's past wasn't something she could discuss with anyone. Not until she'd spoken to him about it first. When she finished speaking some minutes later, Hot Pie actually had to pull over on the side of the street to gape at her.

"If I'd heard that from anyone else, I don't think I'd believe it."

"So, you believe me?" Arya looked at him hopefully.

"I have to." He shrugged. "It's too unreal not to be true."

"Are you saying that I lack imagination?"

"I'm not saying that at all," Hot Pie quickly defended himself, but he looked glad to see the familiar, argumentative face of Arya again. "I'm just saying that I know of no other girl who could possibly get herself into so much shit and still have a plausible explanation for it all. Now, everything you've told me is completely whacked. But, you're saying that the Hound is in on this, and that guy is too freaking scary to second-guess...so, I believe you."

"You believe me because you're scared of the Hound?"

"It's a good reason." Hot Pie smiled, but Arya could see that he believed her words just as much. "But this does change how I'll look at him, from now on."

"If I were you, I'd say nothing in front of him about any of it,"

"I wouldn't dare," Hot Pie agreed, then he started the car and pulled back onto the road again. "It's a shame about Mycah, though."

Arya felt a pang of regret again for the friend she'd known so briefly. He'd suffered because of her, and it wasn't just her who felt the loss of his company.
"I know," she agreed quietly, "I just hope he's doing okay,"

"I think he is," Hot Pie replied, "he's not on Facebook all that much, but he's at some boarding school out at the Vale. Eyrie Boys Academy, I think."

"I know that school," Arya said, "my father went there."

She was genuinely glad to hear that Mycah was doing okay. Maybe one day when he was ready, he'd speak to her again. She hoped he would, and she could ask him to forgive her.

"I'm assuming Jaqen knows the truth, too? You were with him at that pancake place on the weekend, right?" Hot Pie asked.

"Yes." She sighed anew. "I told him everything I told you."

"So, when things are over with you and the Hound, are you going to date him for real?"

Arya was silent then, and it was a few moments before she gave him an answer.

"I want to. I think I do," she said, "but...I don't know,"

"I'll change the subject then," Hot Pie said, sensing that this was a sensitive topic. "When are you going to speak to Gendry, then?"

"When he lets me speak to him," she replied, though they'd really just moved from one sensitive topic to another. "He's the one ignoring me,"

It was Hot Pie's turn to sigh. "I'll have a word to him. You two need to make up before the competition this weekend. Gendry will never admit it, but I know it will mean a lot to him if you were there cheering for him."

"Yeah? It would mean a lot to me, too."

The day of the competition drew nearer, and while Hot Pie and even Beric, Allyria and Edric were happy to speak to her, it seemed Hot Pie hadn't been successful in convincing Gendry to do the same.

On the other hand, her situation with her sister had somewhat improved. They were speaking again, and their parents both mentioned to them that they were happy they had overcome whatever feud they'd been having the past few weeks. Conversation at breakfast and at the dinner table resumed as though they had never stopped, but there was a condition regarding their armistice. They could converse about anything, but as soon as Arya opened her mouth to say anything that involved Joffrey or Sandor, Sansa would clam up. Their respective boyfriends were off-limits. Not that Arya was expecting to engage in girly-talk with Sansa. The thought sent shudders down her spine.

It came as a huge shock to her, when on Friday morning, Sansa raised the topic of Sandor voluntarily.

"Will Sandor be going with you to the Battle of The Bands this Saturday?"

Arya had blinked once, twice. Shit! I hadn't thought about that!

"Yes," she said, "he is."

"I guess we'll see you there, then."
"We? Are you and Joffrey going to be there?" Arya never saw her sister or Joffrey as rock concert going types.

"Yeah. Joffrey's uncle Renly, and some other friends will be as well."

"Oh." Arya hoped that Baelor's Arena was big enough so that she wouldn't have to run into them. "That's great. I'm sure you'll have fun."

Arya had ambushed Sandor at his locker as soon as she got to school.

"You're coming with me to the Battle of The Bands tomorrow," she stated, without preamble.

"The hell I am," he'd snorted, stacking textbooks messily into his locker.

"I already told Sansa you were coming. She and Joffrey and some others will be there."

"Why the fuck would you do that?" he turned to glare at her.

"I panicked!" she waved her hands in front of her aimlessly. "But I'll pay for your ticket, and as many hotdogs as you can eat!"

Sandor swore so foully Arya wondered that her ears hadn't started bleeding. "Little bitch...how the hell can you be so tiny, and be such a gigantic pain in the butt?"

She knew he meant that to be insulting, instead it made her think of Gendry who'd once had a similar sentiment, and that made her wistful.

"It's a talent I have," she said darkly, "deal with it."

He just shook his head and slammed his locker. "Fine. But if you're coming to the game tonight, I want to hear you cheering for me. Loudly."

She glared up at him. "You play dirty."

"So do you," he returned, and left her with a raspy chuckle.

At the game that night, with an amused Hot Pie in tow, Arya did indeed cheer for Sandor. The scarred motherfucker would probably use it against her later, she just knew it, but once again she had managed to drag him into something he wanted no part of. Cheering for her 'boyfriend' seemed like a small price to pay.

The White Knights were playing The Pirates of Pyke Prep School, and while the match looked even at the start, it appeared the White Knights would more than likely win. There was a lot of talk going on about the Championships coming up, and that Coach Selmy was taking extra steps to make sure that the varsity team was better prepared this year.

"That looks like it's causing you pain to do that," Hot Pie mused after Arya had once again screamed; Go Sandor! Woohoo Hound!

"Is it obvious?"

"To me it is," he laughed. "I can see your face when you do it! I hope you cheer for Gendry better than this."

Arya had glared at her friend, who only laughed louder. "I hope that burned fucker can hear me...Go Sandor!"
Further down the Home bleachers, Arya could see Sansa sitting with her friend Jeyne. Arya had thought about sitting with them earlier, but she figured she wouldn't be able to keep up the pretence of genuinely cheering for Sandor the whole game. Hot Pie thought the same, so they had sat separately. *I make such a big deal out of this, but I'd rather be cheering for Sandor, rather than that blonde jerk Joffrey.*

Hot Pie had been right when he'd said his view on the Hound would change with the knowledge he'd learned about the guy. Arya had to admit that her opinion...her entire behavior and general regard towards the guy had been evolving daily. The more time she spent in his company, the more she learned about him, and the more she came to believe that you really couldn't judge someone based on their looks.

Arya remembered the expression on Sandor's face when she'd asked him about why he liked Sansa. She hadn't really understood his answer at the time, but she had seen that he struggled to even get those words out.

"*With her, I don't have to be the Hound. With her, I'm just me.*"

He'd spoken as though the Hound was separate to him, and while she didn't quite get the significance of it, she'd chosen to take his second statement literally. Sandor could just be himself around Sansa. She could respect that.

"GO GET 'EM, HOUND!" she yelled again, genuinely.

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**Gendry**

The day had come. The day of the competition had finally arrived, and Gendry had been awake way too early that morning.

"It starts at two," Ellen Mott repeated as she watched her teenage foster-son eat his breakfast. "At Baelor's Arena."

"Yes, the details are on the tickets I left on the counter, and I gave Tobho the passes so you can get back stage," Gendry replied, knowing his foster-mom was feeling nervous for him.

"Do you really have to be there that early?"

Gendry nodded. "Beric wants to do a final sound-check."

"Isn't that what you were doing last night?"

"Yes, but Beric has an in with someone on the organizing committee who's letting us go again, only we have to be there early."

"Well, make sure you stay hydrated, and don't forget to eat," Ellen reminded him, "it sounds like you're going to need to keep your energy up if you want to make it through all three rounds."

"I will, don't worry." Gendry never failed to appreciate her concern for him.

When he reached The Hollow, the restaurant itself was still closed, but Edric let him in through a side entrance. As predicted, Beric was beside himself, and only Allyria's presence seemed to keep him calm.

"This is it, guys," he kept saying, "in just a few hours, we're going to be up on that stage."
"Chill out, man," Tom said to him, his girlfriend Jenny by his side. "We're more prepared than ever. We got this."

"Positive thinking." Beric nodded. "I like it."

Rolling his eyes, Gendry got into the back of the van Thoros had borrowed from someone, and with Beric and Allyria leading the way in a separate vehicle, they drove to Baelor's Arena. Baelor's was actually a multi-purpose arena, with a massive domed roof that could be left open in good weather, and closed in inclement conditions. The weather predictions had been good, so the organizers intended on keeping the roof open that afternoon and evening. The arena could seat 20,000 people, but Gendry figured the standing-room only section would hold close to the same volume of people. *That'd be one hell of a mosh pit!*

Gendry took his lead from Beric. He did what was asked of him, and kept out of Beric's way as much as possible. It was nearly eight o'clock in the morning, and by the time their sound-check was done, they had nothing left to do but wait it out. Allyria and Jenny, who'd been appointed make-up and wardrobe duties, agreed that it was too early for them to get in costume so had plenty of time to get comfortable in the dressing room the *Brotherhood Without Banners* had been allocated.

It was while he was settling down for a long wait when he received a text message from Arya.

"Just wanted to wish you luck for today. I will be there in the crowd cheering for you, just so you know."

Sighing, and suddenly desperate to see her face, Gendry caved in.

"Beric," he called out to their frontman, who turned to him. "Can you speak to that organizer contact of yours about having some backstage passes ready for Arya at the gate?"

Beside Beric, Allyria and Edric smiled.

"Sure, no problem."

After another moment of hesitation, Gendry dialed Arya's number.

"Hi, Gendry." Arya had picked up on the second ring. "I didn't expect you to call me back,"

"Neither did I," he said, truthfully.

"How are you?" she asked him, "are you nervous? Where are you?"

He smiled, despite himself. He missed her.

"I'm okay," he replied, "I'm not nervous yet, but I suspect I will be later, and we're already at our dressing room at the arena."

*You should be here, too.*

"You guys have your own dressing room! That's so cool!" she exclaimed. "Like real rock-stars."

"I am a rock-star," he stated, "thank you for noticing,"

Arya laughed. "Of course, you are!" And it was the sweetest sound in the world.

"Listen, Arya." He turned serious again. "If you can come here earlier, there's some backstage passes waiting for you at the gate. That is, if you'd like to talk."
A moment’s pause on her side, and he knew he'd surprised her again. "Sure, I'll be there."

After he’d ended the call, Gendry soon found himself distracted by the arrival of the other bands they were up against. Shortly after nine, the band calling themselves Wildlings turned up to occupy the room next to theirs. The lead singer was a small, dark-haired, intense looking guy with a widow's peak and a mono-brow that called himself Rattleshirt. The rest of his band members went by the names Orell, Harma and Styr.

Next came a group of women going by the name Spearwives. They introduced themselves as Rowan, Holly, Willow, Frenya, Myrtle and Squirrel. Gendry found them nice enough to talk to, but he sensed they'd be formidable on stage. Another girl band followed after them. Four young women showed up, dressed all in grey and black, and didn't even look or speak to anyone.

"Silent Sisters," Edric informed Gendry, "punk rock is their style, but they've got a bit of an attitude problem."

The backstage area started to get louder with the arrival of The Stone Crows, led by a large hairy guy called Shagga Dolfsson. Then came a band called The Black Ears, led by frontwoman Chella Cheksdotter, who was small, not very pretty, but fierce looking. Everyone was slightly taken aback by the arrival of The Undying, who came in full stage costume. The lead singer was named Pyat Pree, and he was a pale guy who wore blue lipstick, and seemed to like lots of bling.

A group calling themselves Brave Companions occupied the room across the hall, and the lead singer introduced himself as Vargo Hoat. He was a tall guy, gaunt and spoke with a lisp. His bandmates were called Qyburn, and Zollo. One of the last to arrive was a band from the North as well. They were called Rangers, and they were all nice guys led by a guy called Eddison. Gendry shook hands with Grenn, Dywen and Bernarr, and it was one of them that commented about the absence of one last band.

"Anyone seen The Faceless Men?"

"Not yet," someone else replied, "but they'll be here. Jaqen H'ghar is supposed to be the consummate performer. They won't be late."

Gendry clucked his tongue. He hoped they turned up. The Faceless Men, as far as he was concerned, were their only real competition. Hot Pie appeared backstage just after lunch, without Arya, and it was then Gendry realized who she was probably turning up with.

Great, just great.

Sansa

She was waiting in the hall for Joffrey to come and pick her up so they could go to the Battle of The Bands together. They were supposed to be meeting Renly Baratheon and his friend Loras Tyrell beforehand for lunch, and she knew she was going to have to act like she was enjoying herself. Actually, it was good that Renly was going to be there. She liked Joffrey's uncle. He was funny, charismatic, and not to forget, he'd stayed behind at the riots with Joff's other uncle, Tyrion Lannister, to help Sandor who'd rescued her and the Stokeworth girl from the mob. It was a shame that Joffrey wasn't half the gentleman Renly was.

"He's not even half the man Tyrion Lannister is," Sansa muttered, then smiled to herself when she realized just what she'd said.
Tyrion Lannister was a dwarf, and she considered him a bigger and better man than Joffrey.

Over the week, Sansa had come to terms with knowing that Arya and Sandor were together. Over the week, she'd learned to keep a tight lid on her jealousy, and she'd even managed to hold conversations with her sister again. There was no longer a reason for them not to speak to each other. Arya had forgiven the boy responsible for her friend's injuries. Something had also happened to change Arya's opinion of her, and her sister now saw her as a victim in need of saving from Joffrey. Arya it seemed, had forgiven her too for whatever part she might have played that resulted in Mycah Butcher being hurt.

Sansa had no other option but to pretend that the sight of her sister with Sandor did not hurt her. She'd had no choice but keep silent when her friends would giggle and point at Sandor and Arya. And she had no choice but to respond to her sister if she spoke to her. She'd found, that as long as Arya did not bring up the topic of Joffrey or Sandor, she could manage conversation just fine. It was of keen importance to her that Arya never find out about her crush on Sandor.

When they were younger, she remembered with great clarity how she would show off in front of Arya...rub it in her face really, whenever she got given something that Arya sorely wanted. She remembered a visit they'd once made to their grandfather, Hoster Tully, when she was eight years old, Arya was seven and both of them had been begging to be allowed to ride the new pony their grandfather had bought for them. Somehow in the course of the day, Arya had been naughty and she'd been banned from riding the pony as punishment. Oh how Sansa had gloated about how much fun she'd had, and how sweet the pony was, and how sorry she was that Arya had missed out. Arya had been fuming, she remembered.

In the end, their parents had lifted the ban and Arya had been given permission to have her turn the following day, but the weather had turned bad for the rest of their stay, and Arya never did get to ride that pony. Sansa would never forget the expression on her sister's face the day they had driven away from her grandfather's. Arya's little face had never been so glum, and Sansa had felt bad for the way she had behaved, though she'd never apologized for it. Their childhood was peppered with similar scenarios. All their lives, it had always been Arya who had been jealous of Sansa.

However, this was much bigger than some silly childhood, sibling-rivalry. While Sansa didn't believe that Arya had it in her to gloat, or rub her face in it, she just didn't think she could handle it if Arya were to learn that for the first time, she had something that Sansa wanted. She just couldn't handle it.

A car horn tooted outside, and she stood up with a sigh.

"Mother, I'm leaving now!" she called down the hall, and caught sight of Arya as she looked over the banister. "I guess I'll see you there."

"Sure," Arya said, "and if not, then have fun."

Doubtful. Sansa thought, highly doubtful.

"Who should I cheer for?" Sansa asked, "Gendry or Jaqen?"

"Both of them," Arya replied, "they both deserve to win."

"But only one of them can win,"

"Then the better one will win," her sister stated simply.

The car horn tooted again, impatiently, and Sansa hurried outside to greet Joffrey.
"You took your time coming out," he snapped, "you know I hate waiting."

"Sorry, Joffrey," she said automatically.

"Well, at least you look pretty," he remarked, giving her a once-over as she strapped herself into her seat, "We're going to be meeting some people today, so you should look pretty."

Sansa made no comment. She was going to a rock-concert, and she was wearing jeans and comfy flats. She wore a blue sweater over a fitted shirt that molded to her curves. She was told it was going to be a long night, so she'd wanted to be comfortable. The only attempt she'd made at looking pretty was taming her curls, and wearing smudge-proof mascara to bring out her eyes.

"Where are we meeting Renly and the others for lunch?" she asked, hoping to get Joffrey talking so she wouldn't have to.

"This place at Visenya's Hill, near the arena so we can take our time."

"Have you heard of any of the bands that will be in the competition today?"

"Some of them," Joffrey replied, then he proceeded to tell her exactly which bands and why he liked or didn't like them.

Sansa only had to utter the occasional 'oh, that's interesting' and 'why is that, Joffrey?' and the blonde kept right on talking. Much to her relief he never asked her for her opinion.

The restaurant he took her to was a posh one - Joffrey Baratheon only ate at the best places in the city, but whenever he was around, everything tasted like sawdust to Sansa. But she remembered Renly would be there, and in his company perhaps she might just be able to taste some of her meal.

Joffrey directed her into the restaurant with a firm hand on her hip, and she found herself wishing for the gentle fingertips at her back as Sandor had done on occasion. She bit her lip.

They were led to a table that was already occupied by six people, four young men, and two young women. Sansa recognized Renly and Loras, but not the others.

"Hey, Joffrey! Sansa!" Renly stood up to greet Sansa with a kiss on the cheek.

Sansa greeted him in kind, all the while feeling the interested stares of the people at the table.

"You both remember Loras Tyrell?" Renly turned to the handsome Quarterback, and Sansa indicated that she hadn't forgotten him. "I want you both to meet Loras' brothers, Willas and Garlan..." Sansa met two pairs of identical golden eyes, similar to that of Loras, set in slightly older but no less handsome faces. "...Garlan's girlfriend, Leonette...and this is their younger sister, Margaery."

Sansa's blue eyes met the brown eyes of a very beautiful girl, who looked to be around Sansa's age. Margaery Tyrell was blessed with a glossy mane of softly curling brown hair, and a gloriously slim figure.

"So, you're Sansa Stark." Margaery regarded her with a smile on her lips, and Sansa got the distinct feeling that she was being sized up.

"I am." She held out her hand. "It's so nice to meet you,"

"Likewise." Margaery shook her hand. "I hope we'll be good friends, Sansa."
"Margaery will be transferring to King's Landing Prep shortly," Renly supplied, "though I'm sure Sansa would be well aware that your fathers are now doing business together, but that's boring stuff...come on, sit down you two."

Sansa had heard something about a man called Mace Tyrell, and knew that if she hadn't been caught up in her own problems, she'd probably have paid more attention to the news or at least what her father might discuss with her mother. In any case, she was going to be catching up fast. She found herself seated next to Willas Tyrell, and Joffrey sat across from her, next to Margaery. Joffrey quickly engaged Margaery in conversation and proceeded to ignore Sansa, which was fine by her, and it was with a tiny smile still playing on her lips that she found Willas watching her.

"I'm almost afraid to ask what you might be thinking about, that makes you smile so," he began, "just in case it's much more amusing than any conversation I can hope to offer you!"

Sansa laughed, much to her surprise, and suddenly the odds of her actually tasting her meal that day just got better.

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**Arya**

Despite her begging Sandor to pick her up earlier, the stubborn brute had still made her wait. Consequently, by the time they reached Baelor's Arena, she had only one hour to get backstage and speak to Gendry.

"Thanks a lot, asshole." She'd glared at Sandor as she flashed her ID to the guy at the gate who was collecting tickets.

"Arya Stark...I've got some passes here for you." The guy at the gate took out an envelope and handed it to her. "Your friends are already backstage, so when you get to the side door, flash your pass and tell them who you're after."

"I didn't want to come in the first place," Sandor grumbled as they walked through the gate.

"I fucking cheered for you last night!"

"I heard," he chuckled, "so did everyone else, now you can't go back to heckling me, after that display!"

"Jerk."

"You said something about buying me as many hotdogs as I wanted..." He ignored her, and looked towards the direction of the food stands.

"After," she barked, "come with me first,"

With his grumbling, and her growling at him, they didn't notice the group of people heading their way until they were almost upon them.

"Oh, no," Arya heard herself say.

"Fuck," Sandor swore, and he immediately put a hand on her shoulder. Whether it was something a boyfriend did, or just to make sure she didn't bolt, Arya couldn't be sure.

"Well, who do we have here?" Joffrey said as he spotted them.
Arya could see Sansa in the rear of the group, talking with a guy with a walking stick. Arya looked again...yep, the good-looking guy who looked to be in college, was definitely carrying, and using a walking stick. She recognized Renly Baratheon, and the Stags star Quarterback, but not the four others.

"Clegane! Arya!" Renly ended up taking control and making the introductions, while Arya grew impatient. She just wanted to get to Gendry.

Arya smiled at the Tyrell's, soon learning their identities, and gave them what she hoped was an apologetic smile.

"It was nice to meet you all, and I'm sure we'll meet again soon, but I've got to meet my friends backstage."

"Are you going to wish Gendry good luck?" Sansa asked her, unexpectedly.

"I am," Arya replied, "did you want to come with us? I have one extra pass."

"Sure, I'll come," Sansa replied.

Both seemed surprised by her answer, but Arya could not now un-invite her.

"Are you sure, Sansa?" Renly asked her.

"It's no problem, I'll find you guys when we're done backstage."

"It's all right." Joffrey shrugged. "Let her go, she'll call if she can't find us."

The Tyrell's and Baratheon's waved as they walked away, and still to her great shock, Arya found herself handing a pass to her sister. Why is she choosing to come with us?

"Thanks for doing this for me, Arya," Sansa said as they resumed walking, at a much faster pace, "I always wanted to go back stage at a rock-concert!"

Sansa had never been a good liar, and Arya saw right through that one.

"You're welcome," was all she ended up saying.

Sandor did nothing but stay a dutiful step behind Arya, and though she briefly wondered what was going through his mind at the sudden turn of events, she didn't have time to dwell on it. The security guard at the door waved them through the door once he'd seen their passes, and someone else pointed them towards the dressing room being used by the Brotherhood. Gendry looked up as they entered the room, but he did well to cover his shock at seeing Sandor Clegane and Sansa with her.

Gendry was wearing black jeans and a red t-shirt that pulled taut across his muscular chest. The sleeves of his shirt had been rolled up, displaying his biceps and the stylized bull tattoo on his right arm that he was known for. Someone had styled his hair so that it defied gravity and spiked at unnatural angles.

She had always found him good-looking, but now she realized that Gendry was hot. Really hot.

"Arya, you made it!" Gendry greeted her, just as the rest of his bandmates called out greetings of their own, and Arya waved at Hot Pie.

She pulled her eyes from Gendry and noted that the other members of the band were dressed similarly in red and black. Edric was even wearing black eye-liner, and Arya grinned at him when
"We were starting to think you wouldn't make it," Allyria said to her.

"I had my doubts, too." Arya glared at Sandor for a second. "But here I am!"

She allowed herself some minutes to speak to Beric, Edric, Tom and Thoros, while Sansa spoke to Gendry, and Sandor stood there and just glared at everyone, ever the unsociable beast. When Arya looked at Gendry again, she could tell that he was losing patience quickly.

"Stay with my sister, would you?" she asked Sandor, "I won't be too long."

She didn't wait for Sandor's response. Instead, she walked to Gendry and leaned into him. "Is there anywhere we can talk in private?"

He eyed her warily for a moment. "Sure, follow me."

Gendry ended up leading her to the end of the hallway, into an unused dressing room. Once he'd closed and locked the door, to make sure they wouldn't be disturbed, he turned to Arya with his arms crossed over his chest.

"I haven't got long, Arya," he said, "start talking,"

"Okay, but firstly I just want to say that I do wish you luck today, whatever happens."

"Thank you." He allowed his expression to soften a little bit.

Arya knew she wouldn't get another chance, so she took a breath and started speaking. "You're not going to believe this, but what I'm about to tell you is the truth..."

For ten minutes straight without pause Arya spoke, much as she'd spoken to Hot Pie earlier in the week, and with a touch more urgency than when she had spoken to Jaqen. As in both times, she skipped the part where she went to Flea Bottom. Gendry's expressions changed swiftly and often the entire time she spoke, but he did not interrupt her, opting to listen completely, so when Arya finally finished speaking, she fully expected him to start asking questions.

He asked three questions.

"You're telling me that you're not really with the Hound?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," she repeated, "I'm not dating Sandor."

"And you're not with Jaqen H'ghar...at this moment?"

"No, I'm not with him, either," Arya confirmed.

Gendry had uncrossed his arms and had taken several steps towards her, close enough that Arya had to tilt her head to look up at him.

"Right now, you're single. Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, Gendry," she replied, "I'm single. I'm not dating anyone right now."

She watched his blue eyes turn stormy, and as a frown drew his brows together. He seemed to be warring with himself, but in the end, his brows smoothed out, and his dark blue eyes bore into her own. He'd made a decision.
"Right. Arya." He took another step closer. "There's something I need to do..."

And then Arya found herself being caught up in a pair of muscular arms, Gendry's arms, and he was holding her against him with one hand on her back, while the other was under her chin tilting her face up to his. His lips came down on hers, and the hand on her chin slipped behind her head. Her mouth parted to gasp her surprise, and Gendry took advantage of it, slipping his tongue between her lips.

Gendry was kissing her. It was commanding. It was forceful. It was unexpected and confusing and nothing like she'd ever felt...and it was wonderful. *This* is kissing. The thought came to Arya, just as Gendry's palm slid down her back, and she gave a little moan that Gendry answered with one of his own. The vibration his moan created against her lips seemed to travel from her mouth, down her spine and across every nerve-ending that she possessed. It was a sensation she couldn't describe with any semblance of coherence...tingly...buzzing...electric...need more...want more...how is he doing this?

Without her consciously knowing it it, both of her hands had stolen up to his chest and were now flattened against his heart, where she could feel it beating against her palm. She could smell his cologne, and it was familiar and fresh. She'd missed his scent. She hadn't known it was possible to miss a person's scent, but she now knew she'd recognize Gendry even if she were blindfolded.

He tasted like berries, and she knew it was from the fizzy drink he'd been sipping earlier. She kissed him back, daring to move her tongue against his. Tasting him further, trying to find what he really tasted like under the berries. When she tasted him for true, she moaned again. He tasted of warmth and promise, of possibility and of something that was just of him. *Gendry.*

One of her hands slipped to his shoulder, and she pulled herself closer to him, liking the friction her movement created. She didn't wonder why he was kissing her, or why it was something he needed to do. She just wondered why he hadn't done it sooner. And then he was pulling his head back, when what she wanted was more, he was ending the kiss. Her eyes were huge when she looked up to meet his eyes, and she noticed that the frown was back between his brows.

"Gendry?" she didn't know what she wanted to ask him.

*What does this mean? Why did you kiss me? Why did you stop? Why are you looking at me like that?*

"I've got to go, Arya," he replied, his voice calm. "They're calling for the performers to get back to their dressing rooms."

In the background, Arya became aware of an electronic bell tolling in the hall.

"Oh. Okay."

Gendry released her, and Arya became aware of how unsteady she was, while his eyes never left her face.

"I think, we both still have a lot to talk about," he said.

All she could do was nod.

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Sansa

Sansa and Sandor were standing in the hallway, opting to wait for Arya outside of the increasingly crowded dressing room when the bell calling all performers to return to their dressing rooms began to
"I guess that means they'll be starting soon," Sansa said, glancing up at her silent companion.

She wondered yet again, what had possessed her to accept Arya's offer to come backstage? It wasn't as though she'd been having a horrible time with Renly and the Tyrells...Who are you kidding? You were being humiliated in front of everyone.

Sansa had been starting to enjoy herself, but that all changed the moment Joffrey had started to openly flirt with Margaery Tyrell. She didn't care about him flirting with the pretty girl, who it turned out, was a junior like him, except he was blatantly doing so in front of her and in front of Margaery's brothers. This showed an utter disrespect for Sansa, which she was rather prepared for, but also a lack of respect for Margaery. Renly had even tried to tell him, tactfully, to cool it, but the hint had gone over Joffrey's head. Things had gotten awkward very quickly, and it had seemed fortuitous at the time, that Arya should present Sansa with a way out.

"Yeah," Sandor nodded, "we'd probably need to clear out of here. Get you back to Joffrey's side, too."

"What do you think they're talking about?" Sansa changed the subject and indicated the closed dressing room door where Arya and Gendry were still confined to.

"Me," Sandor rasped, and elaborated when Sansa gave him a questioning look. "Arya told you what happened to her ginger-haired friend? Well Gendry doesn't know. She's in there telling him about why I did what I did to their friend."

Sansa's eyes went round at the flippant way he responded. "Aren't you worried about how Gendry'll react?"

Don't you know that Gendry has a crush on Arya?

Sandor gave her a look, puzzled by her reaction. "I think I can handle him,"

She turned back towards the closed door, wondering how this revelation would affect Arya's relationship with Gendry. She was still watching the door when it suddenly opened, and Arya stepped out, directly followed by Gendry. On first glance, Arya looked okay, but Sansa knew her well enough to see that her eyes were huge, and that something had clearly shaken her.

Sandor made a noise beside her. "Things just keep getting better."

Four young men were making their way towards them from the opposite end of the hallway. One of them was clearly Jaqen H'ghar. His scarlet and platinum streaked hair made him impossible to be taken for anyone else. With some alarm, Sansa realized what was happening and looked to Arya. Her sister's face had gone ashen. Sansa hastily glanced at the faces of Sandor, Gendry and Jaqen and noted that their expressions had turned deceptively calm.

They came together in the middle of the hallway, and Jaqen quietly urged his band mates to go on ahead of him.

"Good to see you again, lovely girl," Jaqen addressed Arya first, before nodding curtly to Sandor and Gendry in turn. "Hound, and The Bull."

The Bull said nothing, choosing just to nod.

"You're Jaqen," the Hound grunted in acknowledgement. "Arya never introduced us that night,"
"No, she did not," Jaqen agreed, and a wary look passed between them, before Jaqen fixed his gaze on Sansa.

Arya found her tongue at that moment. "Jaqen, this is my sister. Sansa, this is Jaqen."

"A pleasure to meet you, Sansa," Jaqen said.

"Likewise," Sansa returned, and noted how he was glancing between herself and Sandor, with a curious expression playing about his eyes and mouth.

Jaqen turned his attention back to Gendry. "I wish you good luck, Gendry."

"You can keep it," Gendry returned, "but, thanks anyway."

"Your confidence is admirable." Jaqen smiled at a now scowling Gendry. "May it serve you well today."

Tension filled the hallway, and it had nothing to do with the people milling about them, or the nervous aura being given off by the other performers. Sansa glanced between Jaqen and Gendry and noticed that both had taken to ignoring Sandor. Gendry and Jaqen were now staring each other down. Sansa wasn't sure what was happening, but understood that the situation could turn volatile at any moment if someone didn't do something soon.

Arya was now standing between her best friend and her ex-boyfriend or whatever he was, her eyes darting between them nervously. Then she glanced at Sandor, and at Sansa briefly, before she looked pleadingly up at her boyfriend.

"Sandor, could you please take Sansa out of here?" she asked him, seemingly unwilling to step away from between Gendry and Jaqen. "Take her back to Joffrey and Renly."

"You sure?" Sandor was eyeing the two guys on either side of Arya just as warily.

"Yes." She nodded. "I can handle this. I'll meet you out there soon."

Now even more confused, Sansa felt Sandor's fingertips at her back as he led her out back towards the audience seating area.

"What's going on?" she asked him, "why did you just leave her with those two?"

"There's a disagreement between Jaqen and Gendry that's been going on before I came into the picture," Sandor growled, "that had nothing to do with me,"

"And you think letting Arya handle it is a good idea?"

"The little bi...Arya is the only one that can," Sandor grunted.

"You just do what she tells you to do?"

"I didn't particularly want to stick around that hallway. Did you?" He held another door open for her. "And, your sister's bossy."

Sansa couldn't help but laugh, and he chuckled with her. Their laughs turned into sounds of disbelief when they saw how crowded the arena had gotten in the short time they'd been backstage.

"Where did all these people come from?" Sansa asked.
The arena had already been crowded when she had first arrived, but the volume seemed to have trebled and now all the designated seating areas in the stands were all occupied, and the standing-room only area was nearing full capacity.

"This is crazy," Sandor noted, "you'd think this was a concert for someone famous, not an amateur band comp."

Sansa agreed. She'd had no idea it was going to get this big, and she wondered briefly if Gendry knew the size of the crowd they'd be performing for. He might be confident, but she wished him luck just the same.

"How the hell are we going to find Renly and the rest in this craziness?" she asked, refusing to say Joffrey's name.

Sandor used his height to his advantage and shortly, he pointed to a spot all the way on the other side of the hundreds deep crowd.

"Over there?" Sansa was dismayed, as the prospect of shoving and fighting their way through the pack of bodies was too reminiscent of being caught in the mob riot...it was too awful to think about.

Sandor must have noticed the expression of horror on her face, and he sighed.

"We don't have to join them," he said, "we can find a place to watch around here."

"How will Arya find us?"

"I'll text her when we find a spot."

Finding a spot turned out to be harder than they'd first thought as security forbade them from going past certain points, and as other audience members became possessive of their 'spot'. In the end, Sandor had resorted to using his size and intimidation to clear a two-square foot space for himself and Sansa against the railing that separated the standing-room from the seated areas. They were also further to the side than they'd wanted to be, but at least they had a good view of the giant screens suspended above the stage.

Sansa watched as Sandor took out his cell phone, but a message came through for him first. The burned corner of his mouth twitched.

"Arya's staying backstage," he rasped.

"What? Why? All afternoon? What about tonight?"

"She's keeping the peace, I guess. She told me to go home if I didn't want to stick around," Sandor continued.

"And you don't want to?" she asked him.

He shrugged and looked away. "I can take it or leave it,"

"You didn't want to come in the first place, did you?"

"No."

"Stay with me," Sansa heard herself say, and Sandor glanced at her sharply. "Please?"

Oh, God...What am I doing?
"Please, Sandor?"

They'd played out this scenario before. It wasn't the first time she'd begged him to stay with her. The first time she'd been lonely and he'd been there when no one else was. Now, she was begging him because she wanted his company.

"Not keen to hang around the Tyrells?" He frowned.

"It's not the Tyrells," she huffed, "it's Joffrey!"

Sansa covered her mouth as soon as she realized what she'd said, but it was too late. Sandor had heard, and he was giving her a curious stare.

"What's he done?" he rasped.

"He's been flirting with Margaery all afternoon and, I was getting sick of it," Sansa said truthfully.

"I...I didn't want to cause a scene,"

"So, you ran away." Sandor wasn't judging her, just stating fact.

There was an odd look on his face. He didn't pity her. It was more like regret. Perhaps he'd seen this happen before. He had known Joffrey longer, and she was kidding herself if she believed she was the only girl Joffrey had treated abominably. It was too late for regret, in her case, but she didn't need to tell Sandor she really didn't care that Joffrey was flirting with another girl.

"I'll stay," Sandor finally said.

"Thank you." Sansa smiled at him, and promptly pushed from her mind the thought that he was staying because he felt sorry for her after all, or the nagging thought he was doing it for Arya.

Tonight, she was going to pretend that he was here for her alone. You're only setting yourself up for pain! A voice in her head screamed at her. I know, and I don't care. He's here, and I just need to be near him!

The random rock music that had been blaring over the speakers came to a stop, and a loud and excited voice announced that the competition was about to start. The voice went on to explain that there would be ten bands competing that day. Each band had been asked to prepare three original songs. Ten bands would play in the first round, six bands would go through to play another around, and finally the top three bands as voted by the industry reps present that day would battle it out for the top prize. The winner of the grand prize would be chosen by Emun Marillion of Marillion Records, himself. The label sponsoring the competition, and who would be giving the winning band a recording contract. The voice went on the describe how last year's winners were currently touring Asia.

The first band to come on stage were the Silent Sisters, who stunned the crowd by walking on stage garbed in head-to-toe grey robes and their faces covered by deep hoods. Once behind their instruments, the four young women threw off their robes to a flash of blinding lights, a scream of guitars and bursts of smoke, revealing costumes of tight leather and chains, elaborate makeup and structured hairstyles. Sansa had not expected theatrics, and she cheered along with the crowd. The Silent Sisters were good, in Sansa's opinion, but their music was not to her taste. She suspected that most of the music that night would not be her style, so she figured it would have to be an awesome band that would get her to change her mind.

She stood up straight when The Faceless Men took to the stage. She'd heard them before and she
knew they were good. They had various sounds and she wondered which they would display. Jaqen and his band mates were dressed in black and white, and when Jaqen appeared behind the microphone, the audience broke into a deafening roar. She stole a quick glance at Sandor, he did not look impressed with Arya's ex (or whatever he was), but she did see him nod in approval after he'd heard them play. She noted that the song had a classic-rock feel to it, more in line with his taste in music.

The Brotherhood Without Banners were the last on stage, and by this time Sansa had grown particularly nervous for Gendry. She wondered if Arya was somewhere in the wings, watching them and biting her nails. The spotlight flicked on, and all five members of the band were already on stage, with Gendry standing to Beric's right. Gendry waved to the crowd, and this brought on a wail of screams from teenage girls. One of them being Sansa.

"Hi, everyone." Beric smiled at the crowd. "This song is called Seven Deaths!"

Edric counted them in, and after that all Sansa remembered was screaming along with everyone else. Sandor gave her a look at one point, but she ignored him, and joined the chant that had suddenly started.

"BWB! BWB!"

She did not stop screaming until they had left the stage.

"You're going to lose your voice, you know," Sandor commented, "especially if they make it into the final round."

There was a forty-five minute break where the judges deliberated which six would go into the next round. Sansa and Sandor used the break to grab light snacks, and tried to find another vantage point. While they'd bought food, some other people had stolen their spot. They ended up further down the same side of the arena, still against the barrier, but with worse views than they had earlier. By now it was early evening and the floodlights had come on with the fading light. Neither said a lot, mostly because Sansa didn't know what to discuss with him, so the brief exchanges they had were mostly to do with the bands they'd just seen and speculation on who would get through.

About twenty minutes before the start of the next round, an announcer came on stage to call out the names of the six bands going through to round two.

"The six, in no particular order are... The Stone Crows, Silent Sisters, Rangers, Brave Companions, The Faceless Men...and Brotherhood Without Banners!"

Round two began with the Brave Companions, and again Sansa was impressed by the theatrics when one of the guys came out dressed as a court jester - Jester Shagwell, he was called.

"Oh, damn...I can't see!" Sansa wailed when someone a few feet ahead of her stepped into her line of vision.

"Can you see the screen?" Sandor asked, "I can see just fine."

"Because you're a hundred feet tall." She rolled her eyes. "All I can see is the back of that guy's head."

With a frown, Sandor eyed the offending person in question, but seemed to decide against forcibly removing him. Instead, he looked behind them and eyed the metal railing. The railing was only several inches thick, but it was solid.
"If you stand on the railing, you'll get a better view than me," he said, he looked around them, and noted that several people had done just that. "They've got the right idea. Come on,"

"I'll slip and fall!" Sansa protested, even as Sandor circled his hands around her waist.

"I won't let you won't fall," he rasped.

The next thing she knew, she was standing about two and half feet off the ground, balancing on a metal beam no more than three inches wide.

"Sandor, I don't know about this!" Sansa said, grabbing onto his shoulder.

"For a little bird, you really are afraid of heights, aren't you?" He was openly laughing at her. "You're hardly off the ground, Sansa."

"Stop laughing at me!"

He ignored her and moved to stand directly in front of her, before turning back to face the stage.

"Grab onto my shoulders," he said, craning his neck to look at her. "Lean into me if you need to."

She did as he instructed, clinging tight to his shoulders, and leaning into him to keep her balance. He supported her weight with ease.

"Better?" he asked, shouting over the music.

Sansa bent her head so that her mouth was next to his good ear. "Much better, thank you."

She felt him jump, as though her action had been unexpected, and the small movement of his shoulders under her palms suddenly made her realize just how familiar they were acting with each other. She'd been much closer to him than this, she recalled. She'd clung to him after the riots. He'd tucked her under his arm, and she'd hid her face in his chest. You can't go through something like that and not be familiar with each other.

Somewhere on the stage in front of them, the lead singer for The Stone Crows was wearing a Viking style helmet on his head complete with horns, and while Sansa saw them she no longer heard what was going on around her. Her focus was now centered on the solid bulk of Sandor's shoulders under her hands, and the feel of the fabric of the black sweater her wore. She could feel the heat of his back against her chest and abdomen, and she caught faint hints of his cologne. Staring at the back of his head, she noticed that he'd had his black hair cut at some point, though he still favored wearing a longer style. She guessed that the top of Sandor's head was not something most people got to see. He really was so very tall. She moved her right hand slightly, and she caught a few strands of his hair between her fingers.

You'd better know what you're playing at.

Said that voice in her head, even as she ever so carefully ran the black strands through her fingers, hoping that he didn't notice. I'm not doing anything wrong.

The Rangers took the stage, but like before, she saw them, but she didn't hear them. By this stage, she was wondering if Sandor would notice if she moved her hands further down his shoulders.

"Who do you think is going to win?" Sandor suddenly spoke, and startled, Sansa felt herself falling backwards, losing her balance.

Sandor's fingers were swiftly around her wrists, and he pulled her forward so that her hands were now flat against his chest, and her left cheek was pressed against his right. His good cheek.
"Didn't I tell you to hold on?" Sandor growled.

"You startled me," she said into his ear, feeling her heart beating rapidly in her chest, and her knees locking.

"Do you want to get down?" he asked.

"No," she said, almost too quickly, "I'm fine."

"I told you I wouldn't let you fall," he reminded her, "but you still need to hold on,"

He turned back towards the stage, but he didn't let go of her wrists immediately. Instead, he shifted her hands so that her arms crossed over his chest, and she was left with little option but to rest her chin on his shoulder. He probably meant for her to move back to her former position once she'd regained her balance, but Sansa had no intention of doing so. This position brought her into closer contact with him, and this suited her fine. From this angle, she could study the line of his neck, and she studied to her heart's content. She was embracing him, essentially, and she didn't want to question why he was letting her. She focused on the fact that he was in her arms, and she would take advantage of it.

Slowly, she splayed her fingers over his chest, and she imagined that she heard him take in a sharp breath...but of course, she was imagining it, she thought. She sighed. Her touch wouldn't have any effect on him. By the time the Silent Sisters came onto the stage, Sansa had progressed to drawing lazy circles on Sandor's chest. He didn't say anything, and neither did he stop her. There was a spot at the base of his neck that her eyes kept drifting back to, and she soon found herself wondering what that patch of skin would feel like under her lips. *I bet it's warm, and it'll be firm yet soft at the same time.*

It proved too tempting.

Without another thought, Sansa slowly bent her head and pressed her lips to the spot at the base of Sandor's neck where it met his shoulder. To her satisfaction, she found that it was just as warm as she imagined, firm and soft at the same time, and with a little flick of her tongue, she found that she liked the taste of his skin. She heard him groan then, and for a moment his head had tilted back into her shoulder. For a moment, he had leaned into her arms. For a moment she had stripped the feared Hound of his armor, and she glimpsed the vulnerable young man underneath.

Then Sandor's eyes had opened, and he'd stiffened in her arms shortly before he'd pulled away. Sansa dropped to the ground without him to support her, but he'd caught her before she could fall and hurt herself.

"Sansa?" Sandor's fingers were digging into her arms.

*What have I done?*

"I'm sorry," she said, "I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry."

"No!" he said gruffly, "don't apologize."

She looked up at him, bewildered by his reaction to her, and embarrassed at her behavior. She hoped he could see that she was sorry for putting him in an awkward position, but when her blue eyes met his grey, she could see her confusion reflected in his eyes.
Shagga Dolfsson (Shagga son of Dolf) and Chella Cheyksdotter (Chella daughter of Cheyk) were given Swedish Patronymic surnames...just to keep that same kind of flavour, not sure if it worked :)

Also - we never saw the end of the Battle of the Bands...so that's what chap 16 will cover, and what happened to Arya/ Gendry/ Jaqen after Arya stayed backstage.

This story just get bigger and bigger...so, we met the Tyrells...so more of them too!
Merry Christmas everyone!

I finally finished this chapter - Gendry's POV was completed at 48,000 feet in the air btw...

First of all, I have to say thank you to a few people - Heliotropa, Ohsandor and karlybing over on Tumblr for the FREAKIN' AWESOME FANART they've done for Gossip Spyder, and also to the lovely xxxidrilxxx (also on Tumblr) for her Gossip Spyder trailer video - Ladies, you are FANTABULOUS!

The links for the above can be found in my profile!

Gossip Spyder

Hey peeps!

Just an update on the Battle of The Bands – It's now coming to the end of Heat 2, and by what we've seen of the performances this afternoon, the judges will have it tough deciding which of these awesome bands will go on to the Final Round!

I'm posting direct from Baelor's Arena this evening, and I can tell you that the energy here tonight is electric!

Just about anyone who is anyone is here! I spotted both of the Stark sisters earlier, as well as Joffrey and Renly Baratheon...and all three of the Tyrell brothers - Willas, Garlan and Loras, along with sister Margaery, are here too!

I can now reveal that the mansion I mentioned in a previous post, La Maison des Fleurs, has been rented out to Mace Tyrell and family. A friend of a friend from Highgarden Prep has also heard tell of a rumor that Margaery Tyrell, star cheerleader for the school squad, will be transferring to King's Landing Prep!

Exciting times ahead peeps!

Now, back to the Battle of The Bands! My next update will be to tell you who's won!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

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Arya

"I've got to go, Arya," Gendry said, "they're calling for the performers to get back to their dressing rooms,"
Arya heard the muted *ding ding* of an electronic bell from beyond the closed doors.

"Oh. Okay."

Gendry broke the embrace he'd been holding her in, and Arya struggled with her balance a moment while he kept watching her.

"I think, we both still have a lot to talk about."

Arya nodded, unable to find appropriate words with which to respond.

"I've confused you, and you probably have stuff you want to ask me," Gendry stated, taking in the expression on her face. "I didn't mean to just come at you like that. But, I like you, Arya...and I thought you should know."

She knew that, now. After the way he had kissed her, there was no denying it.

"Gendry..." Arya felt that she should be saying something. What had just happened would change things between them. Even now, being in the same room with him felt...different.

"We can talk after." Gendry started towards the door and glanced at her sheepishly. "My timing could have been better..."

Arya's shoulder brushed his chest as she walked through the door that he held open for her, and again she couldn't help but notice his scent. Goosepimples prickled her arms at the slight contact.

She saw Sansa and Sandor waiting in the hallway outside of the *Brotherhood's* dressing room, and Arya noticed that her sister was observing her quite intently. *Can she tell? Will anyone be able to tell?* She glanced at Sandor's face just in case, but all she could see in his expression was a mild curiosity.

It was when she glanced past his elbow and saw who was coming down the hall towards them that she felt all the blood drain from her face. Jaqen was almost upon them, with the other members of *The Faceless Men* close behind. His eyes were fixed on her, and that half-smile was playing across his mouth...until he caught sight of Gendry behind her...and Sandor. Jaqen said something to his band, and they headed down the hallway with a curious look at the group assembled there. All of them nodded at Arya as they passed her. Jaqen came to a stop before Sandor and her sister, at the same time as Arya and Gendry.

"Good to see you again, lovely girl," Jaqen greeted Arya, before nodding at Sandor and Gendry. "Hound, and The Bull."

Gendry only nodded back.

"You're Jaqen," Sandor rasped, "Arya never introduced us that night,"

"No, she did not."

Arya watched as her pretend-boyfriend and her almost-boyfriend conversed in nothing but facial expressions and wary glances. Each knew the truth about the other, and Arya wondered what they would make of each other. Some kind of understanding seemed to pass between them, as Jaqen turned to watching her sister and Sandor curiously.

She belatedly remembered to introduce them. "Jaqen, this is my sister. Sansa, this is Jaqen."
"A pleasure to meet you, Sansa," Jaqen acknowledged her sister.

"Likewise," Sansa replied politely, her own eyes glancing to Sandor.

Then Jaqen turned to Gendry, his expression unreadable. "I wish you good luck, Gendry."

"You can keep it." Gendry moved behind her, and Arya became conscious of the tension radiating from him. "But, thanks anyway."

"Your confidence is admirable." The half-smile was back on Jaqen's lips. "May it serve you well today."

The air suddenly felt heavy around them, almost threatening, and Arya looked between Gendry and Jaqen. _Can he tell? She wondered. Would he be able to look at me and know? What if he can? What do I say? What do I tell him? What am I going to do?_ Understanding dawned on her, and she found herself stepping between them, hoping that neither of them would say nor do, anything stupid. _They both like me, she realized in bewilderment. They both like me, and I think that both of them know it._

Arya then stumbled upon a discomfiting thought, and she had to take several breaths as she found herself almost too afraid to admit that...she liked both of them, too.

_How did this happen?_

Jaqen had piqued her curiosity from the moment she'd met him. There was something about the guy that she couldn't adequately describe. He was open and yet secretive, cool in demeanor and yet he exuded heat and passion. He was opposites and contradictions, black and white, and so intense she still wondered what a girl like her, so uncertain and awkward, could offer a guy who seemed so self-assured. The reasons he had told her about why he liked her still blew her away.

Gendry was proving to be just as much of an enigma, she thought. She had come to comprehend that she hardly knew him. The things she had learned about him proved she'd barely began to breach the barrier he'd built around himself. She still didn't know why he kept so much of his past a secret. Yet she knew that he preferred Coca Cola over Pepsi, and that he took his foster-sister on walks to the park whenever he could. He was generous, caring and thoughtful. She knew that his temper was just as quick as hers, but he usually gave in to her, and that though she called him stupid, he was actually far from it. He was a regular guy, and she liked him that way. He'd kissed her once before, innocently, on her birthday. She thought she'd felt something then, but _that kiss_ moments before...she couldn't deny it. She was definitely attracted to him.

Arya caught Sandor's eye, and she was reminded of something he'd earlier said to her.

"You're going to have to decide between them, you know,"

"They're both awesome musicians, it doesn't matter to me who wins,"

"It matters to them. They can't both walk away with the prize. One of them has to lose."

Sandor hadn't been referring to the competition. Somehow, and she didn't know _how_, the big brute had known that Gendry had feelings for her too.

"Sandor, could you please take Sansa out of here?" She needed to calm Gendry and Jaqen down, "Take her back to Joffrey and Renly."

"You sure?" Sandor did not look happy with her instruction.
"Yes," she said calmly, "I can handle this. I'll meet you out there soon."

He gave her one last quick look, before doing as she'd asked her and leading Sansa down the hall.

Arya again focused her attention on Gendry and Jaqen, who were both still glaring at each other over her head.

"Guys," she began, raising her arms and placing a hand on each of their chests as though to push them apart. "I think you should go to your dressing rooms now, the competition's about to begin."

Jaqen dropped his eyes to look at her, and Arya's cheeks warmed when she saw his gaze lower to her mouth, and as she felt him studying the way she bit her lips. She had the distinct feeling that he knew something had happened between her and Gendry.

"You're right," he said, "the Bull seems confident, but I wouldn't say no to some words of encouragement. Would you have a minute to talk with me, lovely girl?"

Yeah...he knows. Arya decided from the tone of Jaqen's voice, and she quickly looked at Gendry. His expression was carefully neutral, but the tightness about his lips told her just what he thought of Jaqen's request.

Gendry met her eyes. "Your decision, Arya."

And she knew just what he meant. Arya chewed on the inside of her mouth, knowing she had nothing to feel guilty about, yet feeling guilty about something all the same. Gendry kissing her did not make her his girlfriend, and she could speak to Jaqen if she wanted. I don't have to make up my mind right at this moment, she thought, but something tightened in her chest. There was an uncomfortable weight suddenly on her shoulders, knowing that this time her decision would mean consciously choosing to hurt one of them. Not today, God of Heartbreak.

She gave Gendry a please-understand-I-have-to-do-this kind of look. "I'll stay backstage. I'll be back in a moment."

He gave her a terse nod. "Do what you need to do."

She watched him disappear inside his dressing room, before she turned to Jaqen whose smile had softened somewhat, now that Gendry had gone.

"Come on, Arya." He held out his hand to her. "I want to introduce you to the guys before the competition starts."

With her hand faintly trembling, she took his hand and followed him down the hallway.

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Jaqen

The Bull has made his move, at last. Jaqen thought, his fingers tightening around Arya's as he led her towards the dressing room allocated to his band. Her already large eyes had been wide and glazed, and her lips were swollen when he'd first seen her. He knew the look of a girl who'd just been kissed. It was a look he knew the look well, having kissed his fair share of girls.

It hadn't really come as a surprise to him. He'd suspected that Gendry Water's feelings for Arya had not been as platonic as she'd made it seem. She might have been blind to it, but one only had to see the way Gendry looked at Arya to know how the guy felt about her.
"I gather you have told Gendry the truth about you and the Hound?" Jaqen asked her.

"Yes...just before you arrived," she replied.

It made sense that Gendry had moved so quickly, Jaqen thought as he held the dressing room door open for Arya. She brushed past him, and he caught the scent of a man's cologne on her. He resisted the urge to growl. The guys looked up at their entrance, and Jaqen made the introductions his friends had been waiting for.

"We were wondering if we were ever going to meet you," Izembaro said, smiling at her.

"You're the girl behind these songs Jaqen has been writing," Ky stated.

"Songs?" Arya asked with some surprise. "There's more than one?"

"An embarrassing number of them!" Ky wiggled his brows.

Arya began to blush. "Really? I hope they're not all about me keeping him waiting, like In Your Hands."

Jaqen's friends laughed at his expense, and for his part, Jaqen felt like blushing too. He'd never intended to write more than one song about Arya, but she had a habit of doing things and saying things that would result in him writing a song about it. She unwittingly, and at times painfully, drew out his creativeness.

"Fortunately, they're not all sappy," Ky replied, before beginning to tell Arya about their music and buying Jaqen time to just observe her.

Jaqen had in some ways, always known that Arya's affections would not be easily won. Her inexperience was another factor that he hadn't counted on as being a negative. He had thought that he would be the one to teach her, and give her some of her first experiences of what dating and being a couple was about. He never thought that her inexperience would lead to her being so indecisive. He glanced down at the top of Arya's purple-tipped head and bit back a sigh. There was a difference, he thought, between indecisiveness and just simply not knowing what one wanted. In Arya's case, he believed that she really did not know what she was looking for in a boyfriend.

His friends were still curious about his interest in dating a freshman, and he couldn't blame them for questioning his choice. They normally saw him date girls older and more experienced than Arya.

There was a knock on the door, and an event organizer came in to speak with them about how the competition was to proceed and when to expect their cues.

"Guys, we're on second to last in the first round," he told his band when the event organizer had left. "We can watch the competition on the TV over there."

Izembaro walked over to the 22 inch flat screen bolted to the wall in the corner of the room and found the channel where the live feed of the stage was being broadcast into all the dressing rooms. The first thing to register when the sound kicked in, was the noise of the crowd that had gathered outside.

"How, exciting!" Jorge exclaimed.

Jaqen spent a few moments sharing in his friends' enthusiasm, but shortly he beckoned Arya to slip outside of the dressing room with him. Taking her hand, he led her further down the hallway and eventually came upon a door that led to a small holding room. He motioned for her to take a seat on
one of the benches that lined the wall, and she watched him nervously as he sat down beside her.

"You guys seem way too calm," Arya stated by way of breaking the silence, "aren't you nervous?"

"Don't be fooled," Jaqen said, "we might not show it, but we're just as nervous as all the other bands here. I guess we are just used to it, given that we are always on a stage somewhere each week."

Arya smiled at him. "I'm sure that confidence plays a part, too. You're one of the most confident guys I've ever met."

"You are sweet." He'd kept hold of her hand, and now he gave it a squeeze. "Thank you."

The both of them sat there for a moment, and Jaqen wondered how best to broach the issue they both knew they had to speak about. Eventually, he understood that there was no way to approach it, but head on.

"Arya," Jaqen began, "will you be honest with me? Even if you think that the truth will not be what I want to hear?"

She hesitated, but gave him a small nod.

"Good." He inhaled. "I've never made a secret how I feel for you…do you feel anything for me?"

She nodded, her cheeks turning pink. "I do like you, Jaqen."

"But, you like Gendry, also," he stated.

Her eyes flicked to his, and he found himself impressed when she didn't look away. "Yes."

He wasn't going to ask whom she had stronger feelings for, because he could see that she was somewhat distressed by just admitting to her divided affections. He wouldn't put her on the spot and make her choose between them right then. If she were to choose him, then it had to be because she truly wanted him.

"I'm sorry, Jaqen," she whispered to him, "I don't know when it happened…how…"

"You do not need to explain to me," he told her, hardening himself to the jealousy that was now coursing through his blood. "These things just seem to happen, and it always takes us unaware."

"Are you mad at me?" she asked him, "I mean, after what happened with Sandor as well."

Jaqen shrugged. "I am not mad at you, lovely girl. I'm just frustrated at the way things are. Fate is playing games with all of us. As for the Hound, let's just say he will never be my favorite person, but right now I like him better than I like the Bull."

*Because the Hound is not after you.*

Arya turned even pinker and dropped her eyes.

"Arya, look at me." Jaqen trailed his hand up to her shoulder, keeping his touch light. She raised her grey eyes back to his. "I want you to know something."

"What is it?" she asked him, searching his face for some clue.

Jaqen gently cupped her face in his hand and he watched as her eyelids fluttered. Then, slowly, he traced the outline of the curve of her lips with the pad of his thumb. He felt her shiver. Images
flashed through his mind. First came the image of the Hound kissing her, then the Bull…and lastly, the look on Arya's face after the brief, chaste little kiss he had given her on their first date. The kiss he had shared with Arya now seemed sadly inadequate when compared to the kisses she'd had since then.

His mouth tilted in wry amusement, and he suddenly realized that he needed to pick his game up. He'd misjudged her. Arya had never been scared. Not really. She'd just been unsure, and there was a difference there, too. He wanted nothing more than just to haul her to him and kiss her the way he'd wanted to from the beginning. But he hesitated. She'd been kissing someone else not long before. Her lips were still swollen from it. Kissing her now, knowing she might be thinking of someone else, and when he could still smell the guy's cologne on her made him uncomfortable. He also didn't want to lessen the meaning for either of them.

Instead, he closed the gap between them so that his thigh pressed against hers, and again he ran his thumb around her mouth, and over the line of her jaw, before slowly sliding his fingers down the side of her neck. He let his hand come to a rest at the base of her neck, just above her heart. He then traced the same thumb over her collarbone, and into the hollow at her throat.

Arya's lips parted.

Jaqen found the little spot at her neck where her pulse betrayed the effect he was having on her. He wanted to laugh. He didn't have to kiss her to get her heart racing. He watched her eyes and noted the shallowness of her breath. Arya was reacting to his touch, whether she meant to or not, and this pleased him more than he could say.

"Jaqen?" Arya must have seen the look in his eyes, or sensed the change in his mood for she was looking at him and trembling under his hands.

"You agreed to three dates. Do you remember?" he asked her, his thumb still stroking along her collarbone.

"I…I remember." She nodded, her voice slightly thick. Another tell-tale sign of the effect he had on her.

"I will claim my third date," Jaqen stated, "I want you to know, I am not discouraged by a little competition, lovely girl."

Sandor

"The six, in no particular order are...The Stone Crows, Silent Sisters, Rangers, Brave Companions, The Faceless Men...and Brotherhood Without Banners!"

Sandor had to admit that his afternoon hadn't turned out to be a complete waste of time. He couldn't say he was having fun – he was too wound up for that, but so far his day had been eventful, to say the least. He'd been annoyed with Arya at first for once again getting him dragged into something without his prior knowledge, but she had cheered for him at the game the night before (he'd fully expected her not to) so he'd held up his end of the stupid deal. He would have taken her to the competition even if she hadn't cheered for him, but she didn't have to know that.

Sandor smirked at the memory of Arya's loud hollering carrying over the bleachers. He'd find a way to keep reminding her about it, somehow. They'd bickered the entire way to Baelor's Arena. Apparently he didn't pick her up early enough, but in his defense, the little bitch never gave him a specific time, or tell him why it was so damned important for her to get to the arena so early. The
backstage passes the guy at the gate had handed Arya made things a bit clearer for him. Arya had wanted to speak to Gendry.

Running into Joffrey and company had been an unpleasant encounter, particularly when the Tyrell pretty boys had kept watching him during the introductions. Loras Tyrell had even smiled at him, and Sandor had a brief recollection of saving the guy's face from being mangled by Gregor's fist. The Tyrell girl, Margaret or Maggie...whatever her name was, had glanced at him once, then not again.

He'd done his best not to stare at Sansa throughout, but he hadn't been able to help it when Arya had invited her to come with them, and definitely not when Sansa had accepted. Sandor couldn't say which of the two sisters had looked more shocked; Arya for asking, or Sansa for accepting. In any case, he'd stayed silent and he had followed the little bitch, and the less than chirpy little bird backstage where he'd found himself surrounded by rock-star wannabes.

Gendry Waters had not been happy to see him, that was certain, but that changed as soon as he and Arya had come out of the dressing room and he'd heard whatever Arya had to say to him. Gendry still hadn't been happy to see him, but the murderous glint had been absent from his eyes. Sandor had even been willing to wish the guy luck for the competition, but Jaqen H'ghar had turned up, and he and Sansa had soon been ignored once Jaqen and Gendry had gotten to sizing each other up.

Then Arya had asked them to leave, and he had felt some concern for Arya at that point, but though Jaqen and Gendry looked ready to punch each other, he didn't think they actually would. So, he had found himself alone with Sansa, awkwardly trying to explain to her why he, Arya's boyfriend, had left his girlfriend alone with two guys that quite obviously were interested in her.

And then he had ended up in the sole company of Sansa, after the little bitch bailed on him and Sansa had begged him to stay with her because she didn't want to go back to Joffrey. It had bad idea written all over it. But, once again he'd ignored the voice telling him that she was only asking him because there was no one else, and he'd stayed.

He was playing a risky game with Sansa Stark, and he already knew that one way or another she was just going to cause him more torment. Yet, he had stayed. She's going to torment you whether you're in her presence or not, he told himself with a touch of bitterness.

However, things had turned out okay, so far. They'd just watched the first round, the second was about to start, and Sandor was having a better time than he'd expected. Sansa had started screaming again at the mention of Brotherhood Without Banners making it through to the second round. She cheered for The Faceless Men as well, but he noticed that she was more enthusiastic when cheering for Gendry and his friends.

The second round began, and the band called the Brave Companions took to the stage.

"Oh, damn...I can't see!"

Sandor glanced at Sansa, then noted that someone had stepped into her view. "Can you see the screen? I can see just fine."

"Because you're a hundred feet tall," she said sarcastically, "all I can see is the back of that guy's head."

He glanced at the guy blocking her view again, but decided it wasn't worth getting into an altercation. Looking around him, he spotted the metal railing of the barrier they stood against, and came up with an idea.
"If you stand on the railing, you'll get a better view than me." He nodded towards other people who were doing that very thing. "They've got the right idea. Come on,"

"I'll slip and fall!" Sansa cried even as he reached out to pick her up, doing his best not to notice how nicely the curves of her waist and hips felt under his hands.

"I won't let you won't fall," he assured her.

He carefully perched her onto the metal railing that had to be no more than three feet high.

"Sandor, I don't know about this!" Sansa clutched at his shoulders.

"For a little bird, you really are afraid of heights, aren't you?" He caught sight of her facial expression and laughed. "You're hardly off the ground, Sansa."

"Stop laughing at me!"

Seeing as she was so worried about falling, he stood in front of her and offered to be a prop of sorts.

"Grab onto my shoulders." He turned his head to look at her. "Lean into me if you need to."

She did both, and he had to stop himself from jumping when her slender fingers had curled into his shoulders.

"Better?" he shouted so she could hear him.

"Much better, thank you."

He felt her breath on his cheek, and this time he couldn't help but jump at the sensation. He didn't realize how close they suddenly were. He was now very conscious of the warmth coming from her hands. Staring straight in front of him, now reluctant to make any move, he became hypersensitive to the slightest movements Sansa made. There were people and noise all around them, but it all faded into the background. There was a band on the stage with some guy in a Viking helmet stumbling about, but he wasn't interested in listening. A cacophony of voices had erupted in his mind, creating a din no one else could hear, but him.

What is she thinking? Make sure she doesn't fall! This isn't your smartest idea. She's touching me. I don't want her to stop. You're supposed to be her sister's boyfriend. Shut up, I know! You're only torturing yourself. I said, shut up! Don't forget, she's with you because she has no one else to hang around with. She's using you. I don't care. You should, and you do. She didn't want to be with Joffrey. She's with me right now, and I can pretend that she actually wants to be with me, just for tonight.

Sandor was so close to her that he picked up the citrusy notes in her perfume, and feel the lightest brush of her breasts against his back as she leaned into him. He forced his arms to stay at his sides, in case he was tempted to turn around and pull her into his chest. Her hand moved then, and had he not been so aware of her he wouldn't have noticed it, but a soft tugging against his scalp confirmed what she was doing.

She's playing with my hair. She's playing with my fucking hair! No one had ever touched him so gently, not in many years, and he was too stunned to question why she was doing it. He merely relished it. He let her sift the strands of his hair between her fingers, and the sensation of it created goosepimples across the skin of his arms, and rippled throughout his entire body. Sandor quickly found himself wondering how it would feel to have her fingers continue moving through his hair, down over his shoulder and across his chest. He nearly groaned.
"I need a distraction."

"Who do you think is going to win?" he asked her, a second before he felt the sudden shift of her weight as she started to fall from the railing.

His hands were at her wrists in less than a heartbeat, pulling her to him with enough force that he could now feel the length of her torso against his back. Her face now pressed against the good side of his, and in the process of saving her he'd ended up clutching her hands to his chest.

"Didn't I tell you to hold on?" he growled.

"You startled me," she gushed, and this time her breath tickled the side of his neck.

Her forward momentum and colliding against his body had created a warm puff of air around them that was laced with the combined scents of her perfume, and his cologne. He liked the combination way too much.

"Do you want to get down?" Please, stay where you are.

"No," Sansa replied, "I'm fine."

"I told you I wouldn't let you fall," he said, feeling an odd relief at her answer. "But you still need to hold on."

Sandor faced the stage again, knowing that he didn't need to keep holding onto her wrists, but he was unwilling to let her go just yet. Pretending to be cautious, he found an excuse to pull her against him a little more, repositioning her arms over his chest so that she was basically hugging him. He was grateful that it was dark where they were standing, because he was fairly certain there would be pink on his cheeks, and he didn't want anyone seeing that. The Hound did not blush.

He expected her to move back to her standing position with her hands on his shoulders once she'd found her balance again, so he was curious when all Sansa did was rest her chin on his shoulder. And she stayed there, right where he could feel her breathing against his neck, and where the feel of her body against his, the scent of her skin and hair and her warmth enveloped him in a cloud filled with delusional thoughts of what it would be like if Sansa really were his.

Then she moved her hands, slowly splaying her fingers over his chest the way he'd imagined her doing short moments before. He took in a sharp breath when her little hands caressed him, because it really was happening and he wasn't imagining it. He thought he heard her sigh. What is she doing to me? Sansa continued to touch him like she had every right to do so. As though it was really him that she wanted in her arms, and all the while Sandor was aware that he should put a stop to it, but he couldn't make himself do it.

The punk-rock Silent Sisters were on the stage, and by this time Sandor's ability to speak had vanished, and his breathing was growing ragged. Sansa was drawing patterns on his chest, and he was acutely aware of his rapidly beating heart just inches from her fingers. He closed his eyes. She hasn't got a clue what she does to me. His body was responding to her, and if he didn't put a stop to things, then the discomfort he already felt below his belt was just going to get worse.

That was when he felt her hot little mouth on the skin at the base of his neck, and his heart seemed to stop. He froze. She's kissing me! Then a warm lick of wetness grazed the same spot on his neck, and he groaned, his mind's eye seeing exactly what she had done to him. The feel of her lips and her tongue on his neck was incredible, and for a moment he gave in to the sensation. He lay his head against her shoulder, and sank into her arms, lowering his guard and making believe that this moment
with Sansa could last.

But then he remembered that it could not, and she was not his.

Then his limbs became rigid, his eyes flew open and he pulled away abruptly. She lost her balance, but he had her shoulders in his hands before she could hurt herself.

"Sansa?" His voice came out gravelly as he stared down at her, his eyes flashing rapidly across her flushed face.

*What are you doing, little bird? Have you lost your mind?*

"I'm sorry," she said in a breathless rush, "I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry."

"No!" he rasped, "don't apologize."

He searched her face for anything that would signal what she was feeling, or what she was thinking, but all he could see was confusion in her eyes. The same confusion that was probably mirrored in his.

He let her go.

"Don't apologize," he repeated, "not to me."

He didn't want to hear her excuses. He didn't want to hear her tell him why it was a mistake.

Sansa's eyes widened at his words. "Arya won't forgive me for this! Sandor, this is all my fault. I'm sorry...I didn't mean anything by what I did. I can explain!"

Sandor frowned.

What the hell does Arya have to do with this?

And just like that, Sandor's bewilderment turned to anger. *That's right. I'm supposed to be her sister's boyfriend.* He stared down at Sansa, the line of his mouth tightening, and soon the burned side was twitching. It was the final straw, really. Now he was supposed to feel affronted on behalf of his pretend-girlfriend.

"*I didn't mean anything by what I did,*" she had said.

"Did you forget who I am, little bird?" he snarled at her, oblivious to the heaving and screaming crowd around them. "Did you forget whose girlfriend you are, Sansa?"

He couldn't make himself ask if she'd conveniently forgotten whose boyfriend he was, because in truth he was no one's boyfriend. He belonged to nobody. In his head, he could still remember the conversation he'd overheard in the quad between the cheerleaders, and the sound of Sansa's voice as she'd told her friends that she could never think of him in a sexual manner, and that he frightened her. Sansa's actions confounded him. Her kissing him made no sense.

"No." She shook her head. "I didn't forget who you are, and I haven't forgotten about Joffrey."

"Then what was that about?" he demanded, "when did you start playing games?"

"I didn't mean to," she pleaded up at him, "I just wanted...Joffrey's been such a...he was flirting with Margaery and...I got carried away...you've been nice to me and -"

"Shut up," he said to her, when he'd made enough sense of her broken rambling.
"Sandor, I -"

"I said, _shut up._" He didn't shout it at her, but he may as well have. Sansa paled under the heat of his stare. "Joffrey's ignoring you, and you thought you'd find comfort in me?"

Sansa just looked away from him, but he didn't need to have her say it. There could be no other reason for her odd behavior, and if he cared to remember, the last time she'd begged him to keep her company had been because Joffrey had abandoned her on her birthday. Joffrey ignoring her to flirt with another girl wasn't that much different. Her boyfriend treated her badly, and he could understand why she would feel compelled to seek comfort and affection from someone willing to give it to her. He could have been anyone else, and yet he'd had the misfortune of being the one with her both times Joffrey had neglected her.

_I'm done with that. She can find it somewhere else._

"That's it, isn't it?" he rasped, then he leaned over her and gave her a hard glare. "I'm not the one you should be coming to for comfort."

"I won't do it again."

"And you might want to think about what kind of _comforting_ it is that you ask for," he bit out, "or people might get the wrong idea."

Sansa turned bright red with embarrassment, but then she looked into his eyes and hers had a challenge in their blue depths.

"You didn't pull away," she said, "not until I...kissed you,"

"Are you trying to accuse me of something?" Sandor sneered at her.

"You...you let me. Why?"

"Why? Because it felt nice, Sansa." This drew a gasp from her. "Is that what you wanted to hear? My _girlfriend_ is backstage with Jaqen and Gendry right now, not with me. Doesn't really boost a guy's confidence, does it? Then you come along and start bloody _touching_ me...and it felt _good_, okay? But at what point did I ask you to hug me? At what point did I ask you to kiss my neck? All I did was stand there...the rest was all you."

"I'm sorry," she repeated, "it won't happen again...I'll apologize to Arya." He saw her wince.

"I'll tell her myself," Sandor growled, and imagined the little bitch's mocking expression.

"It's my fault," Sansa said, "she can't blame you for something I did!"

"Leave it, little bird," Sandor snapped, "don't even try to understand what's going on between me and your sister, you're not in any position to judge."

Suddenly, he had to get away from her. Sansa's mind was in a shambles because of whatever was going on between her and Joffrey, and she'd somehow dragged him into it. Both Stark girls had caused him nothing but trouble since the day he first laid eyes on them. Sansa kissing him had messed him up more than he was letting on, and all he wanted to do was put some distance between them. He was supposed to be trying to get over her, but now that he knew what it felt like to be in her arms and how her lips felt on his skin, he knew that getting over her would be that much harder to do.
People were milling around them again, and slowly, Sandor became aware that the second round had ended, and neither one of them had even noticed. He didn't care for the competition now, in any case. He just wanted to leave.

"I'm taking you to Joffrey, and then I'm out of here," Sandor grunted.

Sansa might have made a sound in protest, but he ignored it. She was not his girlfriend, and he was not responsible for her in any way. He wasn't sure he even wanted to be her friend, at that point.

He took hold of her elbow and began barreling his way through the crowd towards the area they had last seen Joffrey, Renly and the Tyrells. By the time he found them, Sansa had schooled her features to that calm mask he'd seen her wear so often around school.

"Where were you?" Joffrey demanded when Sansa rejoined them.

"I'm sorry, Joffrey..."

Always fucking apologizing!

"We got held up backstage," Sandor replied curtly.

He didn't stick around after that, leaving without a backward glance.

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Gendry

"Now, ladies and gentlemen! The three bands going through to the Final Round are...Silent Sisters, The Faceless Men...and Brotherhood Without Banners!"

The people within the dressing room erupted in loud cheering. Somewhere in between the first and second rounds, the number of people in the room had swelled to include Gendry's foster family. His little foster-sister, Tabitha, now threw herself at him and squeezed his waist.

"You're in the final round, Gendry!" she exclaimed.

"Oomph...not so hard, Tabs!" Gendry laughed.

Toby Mott came along and thumped him on the back, and the next few minutes were spent just taking in their success so far. The door to the dressing room opened then, and Arya let herself in. She'd been alternating between dressing rooms, trying to split her time equally between supporting him, and Jaqen. It was his turn again, and she made a beeline for him, smiling widely as she came to his side.

"I told you you'd make it through to the final round, didn't I?" she asked him.

He smiled back. "Yeah, you did."

She had come back to their dressing room not long after she had agreed to speak with Jaqen. She hadn't told him what they'd spoken about, and he hadn't wanted to ask. He could make a good guess of it. He imagined it would be similar to the conversation he'd already had with her...in his head.

"I know you like him, Arya...but is there any chance you might like me, too?" he would ask her.

"After that kiss, I think it's obvious that I do," she would reply.

"So, what do we do now?"
"I don't know, Gendry,"

"I guess you're going to have to make up your mind. You'll have to decide who you want to be with."

"But, how? This is so sudden!" she would wail, and in his mind there would be a hint of melodrama in her voice. "And, I've never had a real boyfriend before!"

"You'll just have to let me show you," he would say.

They hadn't mentioned the kiss, or what it might mean for them, but there was a mutual understanding that they would talk about it when the timing was better. When she had come back, all she had done was stand at his side and smiled at him, though her smile had been shaky at first.

"When I'm in here, I'm here for you," she had said.

Then she had watched from the wings. She'd hugged him as the band had come off stage, and she'd chattered excitedly about how the Brotherhood would surely make it to all three rounds.

"Did you hear them out there?" she'd cried, before breaking into chanting. "BWB! BWB!"

He hadn't seen whether she'd also hugged Jaqen after The Faceless Men had performed. Thinking about it made him jealous, and he couldn't afford to be distracted anymore than he already was, so he chose instead to focus on what Arya had said to him. When Gendry was with her, then he would believe that just for that moment, no one else mattered to her, but him.

By now Beric was beside himself with both elation and trepidation.

"Get a grip, Beric," Tom was saying to him, "this is what you wanted. What we all wanted."

"Chill out, man!" Thoros said to their frontman. "There's nothing to be worried about! Our final song rocks!"

Ellen Mott was now sitting next to Beric, helping Allyria keep their super wound-up leader calm.

The door to the dressing room opened again, and an event organizer came in.

"Congratulations, Brotherhood! You're through to the next round!" the man's exclamation was met with more cheers. "You have thirty minutes from now to get yourselves ready, then when you get your cue, head back to the holding room, okay?"

"Got it, thanks." Beric nodded to the man.

"Great." The man then looked around. "Now, is there someone here who goes by the name Weasel?"

Everyone in the room started to shake their heads.

"That's me," Arya suddenly said, "I'm the one called Weasel."

Gendry turned to her in surprise. "Weasel?"

"Long story." She grimaced, then looked back at the man questioningly. "Is someone looking for me?"

"There's a guy who's been asking for you at the stage entrance," the man said, "he's saying he forgot his pass, but that you would have one for him."
Arya's brows furrowed for a second. "I'll go and see him," she said.

And before Gendry could ask for more of an explanation she'd already disappeared out the door. When she came back five minutes later, Gendry received the biggest shock when he saw who had followed her into the dressing room.

"Lommy!" Gendry stood up.

"Gendry, dude!" Lommy reached out and grabbed Gendry's outstretched hand, before leaning in for a bro-hug and thumping him on the back.

"What are you doing here?" Gendry asked, though he was glad to see his old friend.

"I came to show my support, man. What else?" Lommy replied, then grinned when he saw Toby and Tabitha. "Tobes, Tabs...Oh, hey Mr. and Mrs. Mott!"

Gendry remembered his manners and went around quickly introducing Lommy Greenhands to Beric and the rest, all the while flicking questioning glances at Arya.

"The rest of the guys are outside, but Weasel could only get them to let me in," Lommy said to him.

"The guys are here, too?" Gendry's eyes widened.

"Yeah." Lommy nodded. "You got time to see them?"

"Ten minutes, Gendry," Beric said to him.

He looked at Arya.

"Go." She nodded, and quickly, Gendry followed Lommy outside where four more of his friends were indeed waiting.

"Man, you rocked on stage!"

"Final round, dude! Way to go!"

"Thanks for coming, guys," Gendry said, "I wasn't expecting you all to turn up,"

"Well, we didn't think we would either, but Weasel said we should come, so here we are." Lommy replied,

"And, how do you know Arya?"

"Who?"

"Weasel." Gendry shook his head. "Her name is Arya Stark."

"Stark? Like that rich guy my uncle works for?"

"Yeah, that Stark."

"The circles you move in these days..." Lommy clucked his tongue.

"How do you know her, Lommy?" Gendry pressed.

"Facebook, she said." Lommy shrugged. "She found me through Facebook, then she came to see me at the pool hall the other day."
"She what?" Gendry blinked several times. "Arya went to the 'Lucky 8'? To Flea Bottom?"

"Yeah, she did," Lommy confirmed, "hustled me good, too!"

The thought unsettled him, but he didn't have time to dwell on the issue just then.

He spent the next few minutes talking to and convincing the security guy to let his friends through to the reserved area so they could find a better viewing spot, before heading back into the dressing room.

"I have questions for you," he said to Arya, "the first being, I hope you didn't go to Flea Bottom on your own?"

Her guilty wince did not please him.

"Arya…"

"Nothing happened! I was safe," she said, but didn't look him in the eyes, which was a dead giveaway to her lie.

"What are you –?"

"Holding room, guys!" Beric suddenly interrupted. "Let's go!"

Gendry raised his brow at Arya. "We're not done with this. You're going to tell me why you had to go to Flea Bottom on your own. Actually, you're going to tell me why you had to go there at all. Lommy can read, you know. You could have just messaged him on Facebook."

"Just go, Gendry." Arya gave him a shove after the rest of the guys. "I'll be watching in the wings, like before."

In the holding room, Jaqen and his band, as well as the girls of Silent Sisters were already there. Once again, Gendry gave Jaqen a wary nod in acknowledgement. Beric tried to speak to the lead singer of the Sisters, but he barely got a response out of her, and he shrugged and gave up. Gendry caught Jaqen's glance again.

"Still have no need for luck, Bull?" the guy asked him.

"What good is luck when chance doesn't have anything to do with this competition," Gendry said, "either the crowd likes your music, or they don't."

Jaqen regarded him, both of them trying to figure out where they stood with Arya, and in the unfortunate triangle they now found themselves in. The other guys now stopped what they were doing to listen to their exchange. Even the Silent Sisters were now watching them, too.


"Maybe you did," Gendry agreed.

"They're not talking about this competition, are they?" Beric said to Edric.

"No," Edric replied with a hint of sarcasm. "Oh, gees I wonder what it could be about?"

"Don't give me cheek, punk." Beric glared at him, before turning back to Gendry and Jaqen. "Guys, now is not the time to argue about your rivalry."
"Who said we were arguing?" Gendry asked.

"No, we're not arguing. We were talking about the crowd out there tonight, and what it would take for one of us to win."

"Other than talent?" Gendry posed. "The crowd knows we've got plenty of that,"

"Some, more than others."

"Bragging, Jaqen?" Gendry smirked. "Talent isn't everything. The crowd loves an underdog, too."

Jaqen's bandmates were watching on, and while they could sense there was an undercurrent behind their words, their curious expressions showed that they had no idea what was going on. Meanwhile, Gendry wondered which rivalry it was that Beric had been referring to, and just how badly he'd been keeping his feelings for Arya hidden. He hadn't told anyone about Arya and the Hound, but the guys seemed able to tell that there was something there that wasn't quite right.

"Ah…the underdog." Jaqen gave them that half-smile he was known for. "Is that how you see yourself, Beric?"

The question was definitely not intended for Beric, and everyone in the room knew it. Gendry clenched his fingers, and prepared to retaliate, but Beric's response took him completely by surprise.

"If it helps your confidence to see us as such, then fine, I guess we are the underdog." Beric smiled. "However, like Gendry said, sometimes the crowd is looking for something new, something they haven't seen or heard before that captivates them. If you want to see yourself as better than us, then so be it. But, you already know this, Jaqen H'ghar…being the best is not always enough. Being crowd favorite goes a long way in this competition, too, and many times in the past we've seen how the underdog has become crowd favorite and gone on to win."

Gendry only managed to stop himself from gaping at Beric. Even Edric, Thoros and Tom were staring at him. Jaqen was now regarding their frontman with a different expression.

Beric had come to his defense, and superbly so.

"Bravo," said a feminine voice, and they turned to the Silent Sisters lead singer, who was nodding her head in approval.

The door then opened, and a guy holding a clipboard came in. "Silent Sisters, you're on," said the backstage hand.

"Let's go Sisters!" the lead singer cried, "here's to the underdog!"

Jaqen and Gendry ignored each other from that point to focus on the competition and their next performance. Gendry wasn't about to let the guy get to him and mess with his game.

"Forget him, okay?" Edric said to him. "We've got this, remember?"

When The Faceless Men were called on stage, the deafening roar they heard through the opened door caught them off-guard.

"Sounds like the Silent Sisters killed it out there," Tom mused.

They spent an agonizing few minutes waiting for The Faceless Men to finish their song, and for their moment in the final. When they were finally called, adrenaline surged through Gendry's veins, and it
was a rush that he relished.

"BWB! BWB! BWB!" the chanting had picked up again, and in the shadows behind the stage curtain, Gendry could see Arya and his foster family cheering for them too.

They took their positions on the stage at their instruments under the cover of darkness.

"Ladies and gentlemen…our last contestants. The *Brotherhood Without Banners*!"

The spotlights hit him in the face, and he was blinded for a moment. All he could hear was screaming, and amidst the noise of the crowd, Gendry found his calm as he held the familiar grooves and angles of his Les Paul. *This is it!* Edric counted them in, and then there was nothing but their song was titled *Burning Need*, which was about all-consuming passion and obsession, and how obsession could become destructive. Beric's lyrics were provocative, while the music itself was evocative. Gendry had helped Beric write the melody, and he was of the opinion that it rocked.

"Fire consumes… It consumes, and when it is done there is nothing left…Nothing…" Beric sang into the microphone.

Gendry felt on top of the world at that moment. He glanced to the side of the stage and caught sight of Arya's grinning face. It was almost as he'd imagined, and he was glad she had turned up. It wouldn't have been the same without her there.

Then it was over, and the thunderous applause that broke out within the stadium made it seem as though a storm had erupted inside. So loud were the screams that came from their fans that it made Gendry's ears throb. When he walked off the stage, Arya launched herself into his arms, while Hot Pie and the Motts went around congratulating the other guys.

"That was so freakingly awesome! You guys rocked!" she exclaimed while she hugged him.

Gendry hugged her back. "Thanks Arya,"

"Are you glad it's finally over?" she asked him, pulling away slightly.

"In a way, I guess," he said, "now we just have to wait for the judges' decision."

"Oh, boy." Arya looked at Beric who was in Allyria's arms. "I hate to think how he's going to react if you guys don't win."

"He'll be close to inconsolable," Gendry mused.

Over Arya's head, he saw Jaqen H'ghar watching them from the shadows.

The Battle of The Bands might be over, Gendry thought, but another competition was just getting started.

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah...I'm making Sansa suffer a bit more...seriously, I love her, but I wasn't going to let her get away with making a move on Sandor knowing he was dating Arya ...and this is ME writing it...so obviously there was going to be more drama!
I know a lot of you had questions after chapter 15, and I wanted to resolve some of them in this chapter but it didn't turn out the way I planned...so some things will have to wait until the next chapter :)

Have an awesome Christmas everyone!
Episode 17 "Truths & Lies"

Chapter Notes

AAAANNNDD HERE IT IS! Oh my gosh! If you've been following me on Tumblr you will know just what a struggle it's been for me to get this chapter written! But finally, it's done, and I want to thank you all for bearing with me and being so patient!

Also, I want to say a special thank you to 'outsidethecavern' for the awesome fanart she's created - I've run out of space in my profile to post the links, but please check out Tumblr.

Lastly - thank you to all that reviewed after the posting of Chapter 16 - normally I try to respond to each and everyone, but I never got the chance to this time (what with travelling overseas, then coming down with bronchitis etc...all the dramas!)...but I haven't forgotten, so thank you all!

Gossip Spyder

The winner has just been announced!

The Silent Sisters have won! OMG! They've done it!

I could not have predicted that these sassy ladies would beat both the Brotherhood Without Banners and The Faceless Men to take out this year's Battle of The Bands! Congratulations ladies… awesome things ahead for you all!

As for the BWB and TFM…Beric and Jaqen, you guys were great on stage tonight, but never underestimate the underdogs! Better luck next time…Oh, and Beric, it's not the end of the world – I just saw the guy walking off, close to tears!

With all this excitement, I almost forgot to mention…I received an anonymous tip-off that a party is going to be held by the Baratheons in two weeks time. My source seems to think it's in honor of the Tyrells who've just moved into the mansion, La Maison des Fleurs…seems likely, so I'll keep my eyes and ears open for further news on this!

One last bit of news - someone on the football team sent me a text message to say that the after-game party this Friday night will be at Boros Blount's place...which reminds me, there are only two more games left before the play-offs, so watch this space for more football updates!

Once again, a big congratulations to the Silent Sisters!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

Eddard

Ned looked at the elegant invitation in his hand and was proud of himself when he didn't groan or
swear out aloud. He happened to be walking through a busy office, and it wouldn't be proper to see the CEO behaving in a less than decorous manner. There was going to be another party at The Red Keep. This time it was to welcome the Tyrell family into the fold, and it was going to be held in a fortnight. He hated formal parties. He'd been to so many formal parties in his time he ought to be used to them by now, and he was, but he would never like the pretentiousness and snobbery that always came with those kinds of gatherings.

"Remind me about this later, would you?" Ned handed the envelope with the invitation enclosed to Jory, who as usual, was a step behind him.

"Sure thing." Jory smiled, knowing what was in the envelope.

"I wouldn't be smiling if I were you," Ned warned him, "you'll be accompanying the family, this time."

"Security detail, of course."

"And you'll be wearing a tux,"

Jory waited until they were behind the closed doors of Ned's office before he groaned. "I hate wearing tuxedos!"

Jory was rarely seen outside of his preferred attire of black pants and shirt and leather jacket, with the occasional black coat if he had to dress smart.

"You're welcome." Ned returned the man's earlier smile. "So, you said you had something to discuss with me,"

Sitting down across from Ned, Jory appeared to think about how to broach the subject.

"Out with it, Jory," Ned prompted.

"Oh, all right." the man rubbed his jaw. "It's about Arya,"

"Hmm?"

"She's been asking questions...about Gendry Waters,"

"She's aware that I've been known to do checks on her friends, particularly new friends." Ned waved a hand dismissively.

"Yes, but her line of questioning was quite specific." Jory sighed. "She's asking about his past."

Ned put his pen down, sat back in his chair and stared at the man across the desk in front of him.

"Go on,"

"She kept mentioning how much Gendry looked like Renly Baratheon, and how sad it was that Gendry didn't know who his father was."

Ned's mind started working. "When did she speak to you?"

"Sunday evening, after dinner," Jory replied, "she was trying to be subtle about it,"

"Subtle? Arya?" Ned raised his brows in disbelief.
"Yes, exactly." Jory chuckled briefly. "She knows something, Ned."

"How much does she know?" Ned was not surprised to learn that Arya was curious about the boy.

"I suspect she's been talking to Gendry's old friends in Flea Bottom," Jory began, "meaning she's been to that pool hall I told you about, and if those boys talked, then Arya would now know about Gendry's inheritance. That is, if Gendry hadn't told her first."

"And you say she's noticed the resemblance between Renly and Gendry?"

She was in the foyer the afternoon Renly and Robert brought Sansa home from the riot, Ned recalled. Gendry was there, and one would have to be blind not to see it.

Jory nodded. "She kept mentioning it. She even went as far as suggesting old Steffon Baratheon had an extra-marital affair after Renly was born."

"Arya said that?"

"Not those exact words and she didn't mention Steffon exactly... don't make me repeat them," Jory said wryly, and Ned knew very well what colorful vocabulary his youngest daughter was in possession of.

He leaned further into his chair and ran a hand over his jaw. "She knows too much. She's too close to the truth, Jory."

"How do you think she found out?"

"The same way we found out," Ned responded, "we asked questions,"

"And Robert confirmed it."

Robert had not told him how he'd heard about Jory asking questions, despite Jory's surreptitious methods. With his daughter not being the most discreet of people, he wouldn't be surprised if Robert had already heard about it too.

"It's only a matter of time before she learns the truth," Jory gave voice to the thought now circling Ned's mind. "What are you going to do, Ned?"

Ned had no doubt that his daughter would soon put two and two together. A secret this big cannot stay hidden forever...the truth will always out. His major concern lay in what his daughter, once she learned the truth, would do with that information. Would she tell Gendry? Did the boy even know that Arya was prying into his past?

"Will you try and dissuade her from asking further questions? Or convince her she's wrong?"

"You know as well as I do that Arya's too smart, and headstrong for that."

"Then what?"

"I will have a word to her," Ned decided. "She may as well hear it from me,"

He hoped he would be able to make Arya understand the responsibility that came with knowing something that had the power to irrevocably change a person's life.

Arya
"Beric is driving us all mad," Gendry said to her over the phone, "we knew this would happen if we lost, but even Allyria is finding it hard to cheer him up."

Arya chuckled. "It sounds like he needs a distraction."

"Thoros is about to give him one," Gendry revealed, "a guy called him last night, saying something about a paid gig for an event around Thanksgiving weekend."

"You mean, someone wants to hire the *Brotherhood* to perform somewhere?"

"That's right."

"How awesome!" Arya exclaimed excitedly.

"Definitely," Gendry agreed, "if anything, the competition just helped to really get our names out there, you know?"

"Beric must see that, surely?"

"I'm sure he will...once he's regained his sanity." Gendry sighed.

Arya laughed, before glancing at the clock on her nightstand. "Hey, I'll see you at school, okay? My dad's about to leave for work and I'm hitching a ride with him."

"Okay, we'll talk then."

Arya stared at her cell phone briefly after Gendry had hung up. It had been four days since the Battle of the Bands, and while she and Gendry had talked almost every day, their exchanges were punctuated with moments of awkwardness as they silently acknowledged that there was one conversation they still had to have. They still hadn't spoken about what had happened in the empty dressing room that day, and truth be told, Arya wasn't sure she was ready to have that conversation with Gendry. She had been completely unprepared for his kiss, and also for the confusion it would cause within her.

Jaqen declaring that he would compete with Gendry over her was only adding to the mixed up muddle of her emotions. He had told her that he would be claiming a third date, but so far he hadn't specified a time or place. She had actually been expecting both guys to act almost immediately after the Battle of the Bands, but whatever their reasons for taking their time, she was glad for it.

Perhaps, she thought, both bands needed time to recover from the competition. She'd heard that Beric had been obsessive about rehearsals, and she'd learned from Jaqen's bandmates that Jaqen could be a taskmaster when he had a mind to be. All the guys would probably benefit from some time out. *Beric definitely could do with a handful of chill pills!*

Losing the competition to the *Silent Sisters* had come as a blow for both bands, and Arya had been in the unique position to have witnessed that unfortunate moment. There had been a forty-five minute interval after the *Brotherhood* had performed their last song, and as she'd done the entire night, Arya had divided her time between Gendry and Jaqen's dressing rooms. She'd been supportive to both of them, but she'd found herself having to stay neutral whenever someone asked her who she thought should win. She didn't want to be seen as favoring one over the other, because that wasn't the case. If it had been up to her, there would have been two winners.

When the time came and the three bands were called back on stage for the announcement, Arya had waited in the wings along with all of the *Brotherhood's* supporters. Her stomach had been in knots, and she could only imagine what Gendry, Jaqen, Beric and the other guys must have been feeling.
"And now...the moment you've all been waiting for!" the event host had declared, "the winner of this year's Battle of the Bands competition...and the winner of the prize, including the recording contract with Marillion Records...the Silent Sisters!"

The arena had erupted with the combined noise of Silent Sisters fans screaming, and fans of the Brotherhood Without Banners and The Faceless Men wailing in disappointment. Arya had gasped in shock at the announcement, and had watched as the shoulders of all the guys from both bands had dropped. Yet, almost as one, they'd squared them again and had been gracious in defeat.

Beric and Jaqen, as the frontmen of their respective bands, had been the first to congratulate the girls of Silent Sisters. The others had quickly followed suit, before they had been ushered off the stage so that the winners could play their encore.

"There you have it folks...what an exciting evening we've had! Let's give it up again for the Silent Sisters!"

Arya had fretted momentarily when she couldn't decide who to console first, but Tabitha Mott had run straight to Gendry, and with his foster-family surrounding him, Arya saw that her decision had been made for her and she'd walked over to Jaqen. He'd given her a smile that conveyed his disappointment, and reluctant acceptance of the result.

"Well, we did our best," he'd said.

Arya had walked into the arms he'd held open, and hugged him. She'd realized then that it was the first time she'd properly been in his arms, and that sudden realization merely resulted in her hold becoming awkward.

"I know you did," she'd said into his chest.

Pulling back, Jaqen had glanced briefly to the girls on stage and clicked his tongue. "These girls do not say very much off the stage, but they make enough noise where it counts!"

"It doesn't matter, Jaqen." She'd patted his bicep, attempting to distract herself from the feel of his forearms around her back. "You guys are awesome, and everyone knows it, regardless of who won."

"Defeat still stings."

"I'll bet it does," she'd agreed, "but, I suspect you'll get over it soon enough. You're a Faceless Man...I doubt your legion of female fans will think any less of you."

"A legion, huh?"

"Several legions, judging by all the high pitched screaming I heard earlier."

"Several legions...I like the sound of that!" Jaqen's mouth had curved into that half-smile again.

She had been glad that he remained upbeat, and Arya had laughed with him, before briefly commiserating with Ky, Izembaro and Jorge.

"We're going to the House of Black & White to...reflect on what has happened," Jaqen had told her with a grin when they were being directed to head back to their dressing rooms. "I would very much like it, if you would join us."

"Reflect? Or, get drunk?" she'd teased.
Jaqen had laughed. "Well, then...I will be reflecting in moderation!"

Glancing past his elbow, Arya had seen Gendry watching them, and she'd known that she would have to decline.

"I'm sorry, Jaqen," she'd apologized, "I actually should be getting home...it's been a long day."

Her excuse wasn't much of an excuse. It was only nine in the evening, but, as he always seemed to, Jaqen appeared to understand more than what her words could express. Another shade of disappointment tinged the smile he'd given her, before he'd leaned over and pressed a quick kiss to the top of her head.

"Then goodnight, lovely girl."

He'd given her one last lingering look, before letting Ky and Izembaro lead him away. By then, Gendry had disentangled himself from his foster-family, and Arya had gone to stand before him, smiling at him shyly.

"I'll spare you from having to repeat whatever you've just said to console him," Gendry had said quietly, "I know you're sorry we didn't win, and I already know you think we rock."

She'd bitten her lip then, chagrined, yet unable to blame him for the sarcasm she'd heard in his voice. It had been the truth. The entire night, as she'd swapped between their dressing rooms, she'd repeated similar words of support and encouragement to both of them. *I must have sounded like a recorded message by the end of the night,* she thought.

In the end, she'd told Gendry the same thing she'd told Jaqen when he'd asked her if she'd wanted to go with him to The Hollow, and she'd gone home by herself, so as not to play favorites with either one of them until she'd had a chance to sort her emotions out. Her parents had been surprised to see her home before midnight, but all they had wanted to know was whether she'd had a good time. She'd then lain awake on top of her bed, replaying the day's events in her head. The kiss Gendry had given her had made her stomach do flip-flops, while remembering Jaqen caressing her neck had made her warm all over, and the combined effects of both had just served to make her feel woozy.

She had still been wide awake when she'd heard Sansa climbing up the stairs just before midnight, and heard as she'd paused just outside Arya's room, but before Arya could ask her what she wanted, she'd heard Sansa close the door to her bedroom.

"What's caused you to frown so early this morning?" her father now asked her as she got into his car.

Sansa had been picked up by her friend Randa earlier that morning. Things between Arya and her sister were rather...awkward. Ever since Sansa's bizarre confession on Sunday morning, which Arya had found almost unbearably uncomfortable.

"Oh, just stuff...school stuff," Arya replied vaguely.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes, father."

"How's your friend, Gendry?"

She quickly turned to look at her father, but kept her expression neutral. "He's fine."

"Is he still upset about his band not winning that competition?"
Arya wondered at her father's sudden interest in Gendry. "No. He's fine."

"So, you really are just frowning about school stuff?"

"Yes, father."

"Nothing complicated?"

"No, father." She shot him another look, rolling her eyes for good measure. "Nothing complicated."

Yet, that wasn't the truth. If she had thought that things couldn't get more complicated after the Battle of the Bands competition, then she was so wrong. Arya recalled that she'd just about fallen asleep, still thinking about Gendry and Jaqen, when her phone had started to buzz on her nightstand. She'd managed to drop the phone on her face before successfully answering it.

"Hello,"

"Arya," a deep voice had rumbled over the line.

"Who's this?"

"Me," had been the response, "can you talk?"

"Sandor?"

"Who were you expecting to call you at two in the morning?"

"It's two?" she'd squawked, sitting up on her elbow and glancing at the digital clock by her bed. "What do you want at this hour?"

"Can't sleep," he'd said.

"So, you thought you'd make me lose sleep, too?" she'd demanded. "You're a jerk."

"Shut up," he'd snapped, "I have to tell you something, and you're not going to believe me."

"Can't this wait?"

"No, I have to tell you before she does."

"What? Who?"

"Meet me outside your gate in two minutes."

"Where are you?" she'd finally thought to ask.

"Outside your house," he'd confessed, "I've been parked out here for the last half hour."

"You're here?" She'd sworn then. "I'll be down in a moment."

She'd hung up, before rolling off her bed and grabbing the first jacket she came across and shoving boots onto her feet, all while trying to keep her noise level down.

"What's so urgent he couldn't wait until daylight to tell me?" she'd muttered to herself as she'd stuck her head outside of her bedroom, making sure the coast was clear.

She'd then tiptoed downstairs, and out of the front door. The moon had been out that night, and Arya
had used its light to guide her down the driveway. Sandor had been standing just outside of the
electronic gate, leaning on his Mustang.

"Sandor," she'd called his name to get his attention, "what are you doing here? Have you gone
crazy?"

He'd turned to look at her, and she frowned when she saw how disheveled he looked. His hair had
appeared knotted in places, and his clothes had been creased and rumpled.

"Told you…I've got something you need to know," he'd replied.

Looking closer, Arya had realized that Sandor was still in the same clothes he'd been wearing when
he'd picked her up for the Battle of the Bands the day before. He looked like shit. Clearly, something
had happened to disconcert him.

"What's going on?" she'd demanded, "where've you been?"

"Nowhere." He'd shrugged. "Just been driving around."

She'd continued to frown at him, before finally deciding that they couldn't talk in the middle of the
street. Sighing, she'd grabbed a hunk of his shirt sleeve and pulled him towards the house.

"Come with me."

He hadn't argued, and quietly, she'd led him to the rear of Chateau Maegor and into the rarely used
pool house behind the mansion. She'd shoved him into one of the woven reed outdoor sofas before
coming to stand in front of him with her arms folded.

"Out with it, Hound."

Sandor had pushed his fingers through his knotted hair angrily, before glancing at her. "Sansa kissed
me."

Arya had blinked. "What?"

"Listen carefully, little bitch," Sandor had rasped, "your sister made a pass at me tonight."

"I heard you the first time," she'd returned, though she still doubted she'd heard him correctly.
"What…how did it happen? You were supposed to take her back to Joffrey…I thought you'd gone
home!"

"Well, I stayed," he'd spat. "Turned out to be a bad decision, didn't it?"

"Sansa kissed you?" She hadn't been able to help her incredulous tone.

"Believe it."

She'd frowned at his sullen demeanor. "Isn't this a good thing? Sansa kissed you."

"No," he'd disagreed, "it's the worst fucking thing she could have done."

He'd then quickly brought her up to speed on what had led to it, and Sansa's reasoning behind her
action.

"I don't understand…she turned vampire and went for your neck, because Joffrey was ignoring her
for another girl? Do you have any idea how pathetic that sounds?"
"Her words, not mine," Sandor had said, "I thought I'd better let you know, before she goes and confesses it all to you."

"Confess?"

"Are you forgetting I'm your boyfriend?"

"Oh, man!" she'd whined.

"Exactly." He'd released a sigh. "Keep that in mind and at least try to act angry, not just at her, but with me as well."

"Why would I be angry with you?"

"Because I didn't try to stop her."

For some moments, Arya had pondered at the things Sandor had just told her. Sansa's actions did not make sense, and the reason she'd given Sandor was pitiful, but clearly Sandor had reacted badly to Sansa's careless act.

"She doesn't know how you feel about her," she'd found herself saying, "she can't have known you'd be...like this."

Her sister had definitely messed with the guy's head...and heart.

"I don't want her anywhere near me," Sandor had stated roughly.

"You don't think that there's a slight possibility that she might have -"

"Don't even dare completing that sentence!" he'd interrupted.

Arya had sighed. *No, I don't suppose Sansa might have those kinds of feelings for you,* she'd thought. She would see what explanation Sansa would give her for her actions, before writing her off as completely demented.

"Okay, then. I'm, er... sorry for my sister."

He'd snorted at that. "That girl's school you went to teach you that? Apologizing for things that aren't your fault?"

"She shouldn't have done it!" Arya had hissed. "What kind of boyfriend are you? You should have stopped her!"

"Well, I didn't!" he had hissed back, "you don't know how sorry I am about that."

"We only just started talking again...what were you thinking?"

"I wasn't...you shouldn't have left me alone with her!"

"So, now you're saying it *is* my fault?"

"You ditched me! After dragging me to the damned competition in the first place, you ditched me for the Bull and the *Faceless* punk!"

"I didn't have a choice!"
Neither did I!

Arya's eyes had widened at the confession Sandor had just made, realizing just how strongly he felt for Sansa. He'd just told her that he couldn't have stopped Sansa even if he'd wanted to. The knowledge somehow made her feel worse. She felt bad for him. Deflating a bit, Arya had slumped into the seat beside him.

"This is stupid," she'd eventually said, "maybe, we should end this."

"What?" Sandor's head had snapped up.

Arya had shrugged. "What if we broke up?"

"But, we only just got together."

In the darkness, Arya had still seen the mocking expression on his face and the twitching of his burned lip.

She had not been in the mood to kid around. "I'm serious. You and me, it's not working —"

"No, we're not breaking up."

"But — " Gossip Spyder hasn't said anything about Sansa, or the guy she was seen with at the pizza place, Arya had wanted to say. Sansa is old news.

They'd only pretended to get together so that the Gossip Spyder's eye could be deflected away from Sansa, and now that the Gossip Spyder was no longer gossiping about Sansa, it had made sense to Arya that she and Sandor stop pretending to be dating each other.

"No, Arya." Sandor had grabbed her wrist. "I don't want to break up."

"Sandor?" She'd been surprised at the pressure he used to grip her arm.

"I still need...it's important that..." His grip was starting to hurt, but Arya had felt him shaking as he'd tried to explain himself. "Just, no. I need you...to make this work. Please."

Frowning, Arya had put her other hand on top of the one gripping her, and immediately his hold had relaxed. Sandor had been pleading with her. The tables had turned somewhat, and now he needed her to help him.

"Why?"

"I just need her to see..." he'd broken off again, but Arya could guess who 'her' was.

Sandor wanted to keep pretending to date her, for Sansa's benefit. She couldn't see how this was going to help the big brute get over her sister, but in his voice, she could hear that it cost him some of his pride to ask for her help. She would be a bitch to turn him down, and she didn't have the heart to do it at that moment.

"Okay." She'd patted his hand awkwardly. "Okay."

"Just keep your sister away from me," Sandor had muttered.

Later that morning, long after Sandor had gone, Sansa had indeed come to her with her confession. It had been among the most painful twenty minutes Arya had ever experienced. Her sister had apologized repeatedly, and vowed never to do it again, and Arya had hoped she'd responded
appropriately. Sansa had given her the same excuse that Sandor had told her, about feeling neglected by Joffrey. Arya had sensed that her sister had been withholding something, but didn't think Sansa would tell her what it was even if she asked. Things had been strained with Sansa since. Again. Regrettably, but no matter how much Arya wanted to tell her that she wasn't mad and that she didn't care, Sandor's gag order had made her bite her tongue.

After her father had delivered her at the school gate and as she made her way to her first class, Arya had to wonder how she would have acted if Sansa had made a pass at a real boyfriend of hers. *Yeah, how would you feel if she made a move on Gendry...or Jaqen?* She asked herself, and an uncomfortable burning immediately flared in her belly. *Good to know you do feel a certain possessiveness for them, Arya.*

Yet, she knew that she could only claim one of them. She needed time to think, and perhaps her fake relationship with Sandor would buy her some extra time while she was trying to figure things out. After all, it wouldn't do for her to be seen going out with Gendry or Jaqen, while she was still publicly known to be 'dating' Sandor Clegane. Arya only hoped that by the time she and Sandor 'broke up', she would be closer to knowing which boy to claim.

At lunch time, she made her way to their recently reclaimed table at the far end of the quad, and found Gendry and Hot Pie already there waiting for her. They were joined, a short while later by Sandor, who sat himself down beside her without a word and proceeded to eat his lunch in silence. Gendry had glared at him, the first day that Sandor had come to sit with them, but Arya had reasoned with him, and reluctantly he'd relented.

"I still don't understand why you can't end this bullshit relationship," Gendry had said, "you said it yourself. Gossip Spyder isn't targeting your sister anymore."

"It won't be for much longer. Something happened between him and my sister. You don't need to know the details."

Gendry had stared at her intently for some time, but Arya wasn't going to break Sandor's confidence this time. She'd seen him with his defenses down, and in the days that had followed his early morning visit, she'd come to sense that he was uncomfortable with having revealed such vulnerability around her.

"Fine, then. Be all mysterious."

Gendry tolerated Sandor's presence at their table, but kept a close eye on him. Arya watched Gendry just as closely. If anyone was being mysterious, it was him.

She'd finally gotten her chance to speak with Jory Cassel about Gendry over the weekend. The opportunity had presented itself when Jory had joined her family for dinner on Sunday night. Arya had cornered him before he'd left, but Jory hadn't been too helpful. He'd been honest with his answers, confirming the things that Arya knew were fact, like Gendry having grown up in Flea Bottom, and that he had recently come into money. If Jory had been surprised at the things she knew, he hadn't shown it. However, his responses had been vague towards the more specific and intrusive questions she'd asked, which only convinced Arya that he was hiding something. She was convinced that Jory knew something big, something important, and he was keeping it from her.

She glanced at Gendry from across the table then. He was observing Sandor, who at that moment, was glaring in the direction of the table across the quad where Sansa was currently sitting.

*I'm going to find out, Gendry. Whatever my father knows about you, I'm going to find out.*
Sansa

"What the hell is the matter with you?"

Sansa turned her head to find Joffrey frowning at her. "Sorry, did you say something?"

"You haven't been listening to anything I've been saying, have you?" Joffrey demanded.

She suddenly realized that everyone at the table was now looking at her, and she flushed in embarrassment. She hadn't heard anything Joffrey had said. She hadn't heard much of anything anyone had been saying.

"I'm…I…" she began to stammer.

"Sansa, are you feeling okay?" Jeyne gave her a meaningful look. "You don't look so well."

"Um…I think I'm –"

"Oh, poor thing." Jeyne came to her side and gently pulled her to her feet. "Let's go to the nurse's office. You might be coming down with something."

"You're sick?" Joffrey made a look of disgust. "Go on, then."

Jeyne's hand on her arm tightened, and Sansa allowed her friend to pull her away from the table.

"I hope you feel better soon, Sansa," Randa said as they walked away.

Silently, Sansa followed Jeyne from the quad into the cafeteria, then down the hall, but when they neared the corridor that would lead to the nurse's office, Sansa had to look at Jeyne when her friend continued pulling her down the hall.

"Jeyne?"

"You're not sick," she said, smiling at her. "But there is something on your mind."

"Then where are you dragging me to?" Sansa asked her.

"Somewhere we can talk."

Sansa sighed.

"Or, at least somewhere you can drop your guard." Jeyne eventually pulled her into an empty classroom, and ordered her to sit down at one of the desks. "What's going on with you, Sansa? Is there something wrong with you and Joffrey? You've been acting funny ever since the riot, and you've been really detached the last few days."

"I'm fine, Jeyne," Sansa replied, unconsciously tucking her fingers into the folds of her skirt so they wouldn't betray that she was shaking.

"No," Jeyne insisted, "you're not. You don't have to lie to me."

Sansa looked up and met Jeyne's earnest brown eyes. "Is it obvious?"

"It's obvious to me that you're hiding something."

"What about the other girls?"
Jeyne shrugged. "Randa's been asking questions, and the other girls just think that you and Joffrey have had another fight."

Sansa's shoulders dropped, and she looked away from Jeyne. She'd been keeping things to herself so long, worrying about what people would think of her, and pretending that nothing was wrong. She hadn't really been fooling anyone, and she knew that now.

"You can talk to me, Sansa," Jeyne said softly, "whatever it is, I won't tell anyone if you don't want me to."

"It's complicated," Sansa admitted.

"Then, start with the first thing on your mind," her friend urged.

Sansa didn't even know where to begin. She'd allowed all of her worries and emotions to build up to the point that she was a festering mess of guilt and frustration…and it was poisoning her. She was sick of bottling everything up. She was tired of having real conversations with no one but herself, and she was just sick of being lonely.

She looked up at Jeyne, and opened her mouth. "I don't want to be with Joffrey any longer," were the first words to come tumbling out.

Jeyne merely tilted her head, and Sansa exhaled heavily. There, I've said it. She didn't expect her next inhale to be easier and deeper than any breath she'd taken in weeks. She'd uttered nine words, and the difference it made to the weight on her shoulders amazed her, as though admitting her feelings out aloud had somehow unburdened her.

"How long have you felt this way?" Jeyne asked quietly.

"A few weeks," Sansa replied, "since the riot, but I think longer than that. I just didn't realize it."

"What made you change your mind?"

Sandor Clegane, she thought.

"A number of things," was what she said, and hesitantly she began to tell Jeyne about what made her start having second thoughts about Joffrey, but without mentioning Sandor's name. "He doesn't care about me, Jeyne. He only cares about being popular."

"But, that's not all, is it?" Jeyne prompted.

Sansa looked at her closely, and realized that Jeyne had not seemed shocked by anything she'd just told her.

"None of this surprises you?"

Jeyne gave her a sad sort of smile. "It's been obvious to me that you're unhappy, and I've seen the way you act around Joffrey. Everyone saw the fights you had, and the way he accused you of cheating on him with that pizza parlor guy –" her friend paused as Sansa flinched. "What is it?"

"I never cheated on Joffrey." Sansa winced. "But I did go to a pizza parlor with a guy, but that's all. We just had pizza."

"Sansa, who was it?"

Taking a deep breath, Sansa managed to squeak out his name. "Sandor."
"Sansa!" Jeyne's eyes went round, the news taking her by surprise.

"Nothing happened, I swear! Jeyne, nobody can know," Sansa stressed. "If anyone...if Gossip Spyder finds out then I'm dead!"

"No one's going to find out, Sansa! I promise," Jeyne vowed, reaching out to squeeze Sansa's forearm.

Relaxing a bit, and sensing the next question that her friend was about to ask, Sansa told Jeyne why she was with Sandor, and why she'd chosen to lie and not reveal his name when Joffrey demanded to know the pizza guy's identity.

"He'd just saved me from the riots, and I just wanted to thank him," Sansa explained, "I never meant for him to be gossiped about, and I certainly didn't want him dragged into my problems with Joffrey."

When Sansa finished speaking, she found Jeyne watching her with that curious expression back in her brown eyes.

"I didn't know that Sandor saved you during the riot. Why would you keep something like that quiet?"

"Because, I didn't want to bring attention to Sandor," Sansa replied, "he doesn't like people looking at him, as it is."

Jeyne's eyes only narrowed further. "And, why does that matter to you?"

Sansa sat back, and then proceeded to open and close her mouth, though nothing came out.

"Sansa..." Jeyne leaned forward in her seat. "Do you have feelings for Sandor?"

"No! I don't..." Sansa started shaking her head vehemently. "Really, I –"

Jeyne gave her arm another squeeze. "It's okay if you do."

"No, it's not!" Sansa denied. "He's my sister's boyfriend, how could that be okay?"

With that outburst, the truth was out, and Sansa looked at her with eyes that shone with tears, pleading for understanding and daring Jeyne to judge her.

"So, that's it," Jeyne said softly, "that's what this is about."

"That's not all of it," and as though a dam had been breached, Sansa spilled it all out while tears began to run down her cheeks. "I did something awful, Jeyne...I kissed Sandor."

Jeyne gasped at this, and silently she listened as Sansa told her what had happened leading up to that moment during the Battle of the Bands, and the things Sandor had said to her after he'd pulled away from her.

"He hates me, Jeyne," Sansa sobbed, "he said he wants me to stay away from him."

"He told you that?"

Sansa shook her head. "No, I...I overheard him and Arya...Oh, God! Arya couldn't even look at me!"
"Sansa, breathe," Jeyne soothed. "When did you hear them talking?"

"He came to her that night, afterwards," Sansa recalled, "I followed them, and I know I shouldn't have but..."

Sansa remembered the way Sandor had been so angry with her right after he'd pulled away from her arms. He'd been so confused as well. She'd seen it in his grey eyes and all over the taut lines of his face. Then had come the anger he'd directed at himself, and the guilt. She'd forced him into a compromising position. She'd put his relationship with Arya at risk...although, it seemed like things weren't so rosy between them.

"My girlfriend is backstage with Jaqen and Gendry right now, not with me. Doesn't really boost a guy's confidence, does it?" he'd said.

Yet, that was beside the point. Whatever issues they were having was between them and didn't concern her. The point was, she shouldn't have touched him, and any reaction he'd had to her kiss did not matter. He pulled away first, she reminded herself.

Then he'd taken her back to Joffrey, and walked away without another glance. Afterwards, she'd been forced to act like nothing was wrong in the company of Renly Baratheon and the Tyrells while the rest of the Battle of the Bands competition had played out. Unfortunately, Joffrey seemed to remember that she was his girlfriend, and Sansa had found herself fighting hard to keep her wits about her, particularly when one of the Tyrell's would direct a question her way. Sansa could only hope that her behavior had not seemed too distracted.

When Renly had offered her a ride home, she'd had to reign in her eagerness to accept, but inside she'd been laughing when Joffrey had insisted she take him up on it.

"Renly's going in your direction. It makes more sense for him to take you rather than me having to make a round trip."

She'd been silent on the ride home, but she'd excused herself as being tired when Renly had commented on it. In reality, her mind had been in turmoil, worrying about how she was going to explain herself to Arya. She'd paused outside Arya's door when she'd reached home, tempted to knock on it and just get it over with, but she'd changed her mind at the last minute. Instead, she'd lain awake in her bed, unable to sleep.

She'd been surprised to hear movement in Arya's room some hours later, and even more surprised when she'd heard Arya's door open and close. Curiosity had made Sansa get out of bed, and she'd poked her head out the door just in time to see the top of Arya's head disappear down the staircase. She'd heard the soft click of the front door closing shortly after. She'd then ignored the voice in her head telling her to forget about it, and had followed after Arya.

In the garden, Sansa had concealed herself in the dark shadow of a tree, and she'd seen that it was Sandor who'd been the reason for Arya sneaking out of the house at two in the morning. She'd had to tuck herself further into the shadow when Arya had grabbed Sandor and led him through the gate, and beyond the mansion. Again, she'd ignored the voice telling her to mind her own business and she'd followed them some minutes later, hiding behind one of the decorative columns in front of the pool house, just within earshot of where she could see Arya standing in front of a seated Sandor. She'd been dismayed to hear that they were arguing, and to her utter humiliation and shame, she'd listened as they argued about her.

"I don't want her anywhere near me," Sandor had said.
Sansa had bitten her lip at his words. She knew that he'd been referring to her.

"You don't think that there's a slight possibility that she might have –"

"Don't even dare completing that sentence!"

"Okay, then. I'm, er… sorry for my sister."

Sansa had heard him snort then. "That girl's school you went to teach you that? Apologizing for things that aren't your fault?"

"She shouldn't have done it! What kind of boyfriend are you? You should have stopped her!"

"Well, I didn't! You don't know how sorry I am about that."

"We only just started talking again…what were you thinking?"

"I wasn't…you shouldn't have left me alone with her!"

"So, now you're saying it is my fault?"

"You ditched me! After dragging me to the damned competition in the first place, you ditched me for the Bull and the Faceless punk!"

"I didn't have a choice!"

"Neither did I!"

Sansa had covered her mouth at the bitterness in his tone. She'd forced herself on him. It hadn't been his choice, and she'd gotten him into strife because of it. There'd been a moment of silence, and Sansa had stuck her head further around the column to see her sister take a seat beside her boyfriend.

"This is stupid," her sister had said quietly, "maybe, we should end this."

"What?" Sandor had asked sharply.

"What if we broke up?"

"But, we only just got together."

"I'm serious. You and me, it's not working –"

"No, we're not breaking up."

"But –"

"No, Arya." Sandor had then reached for her sister's arm. "I don't want to break up."

"Sandor?" Arya had sounded surprised.

"I still need…it's important that…" Sandor had been struggling to find his words, but Sansa nonetheless, heard the desperation in his voice. "Just, no. I need you…to make this work. Please."

Sansa hadn't been able to listen to anymore. She couldn't listen to Sandor pleading with Arya not to break up with him. She couldn't bear hearing another word confirming that Sandor was not hers.

She'd run back to her room, and after grabbing her towel from the bathroom to stifle any noise she'd
make, she’d proceeded to cry herself to sleep.

In the morning, she’d made herself knock on Arya’s bedroom door. The look on her sister’s face when she’d opened her door had told her that Arya had been expecting her.

"I already know, Sansa," Arya had said, her voice tight, "I don't need you to tell me again."

"I'm sorry, Arya. I truly am!"

"I'm sure you are," Arya's voice had been flat.

"Please, you have to hear me out," Sansa had pleaded, "I never meant for it to happen…it's all a huge mistake."

"You don't have to tell me again, I said," Arya had repeated, "Sandor already told me what happened."

"Please, don't break up with him because of me…it wasn't his fault!"

"He's as much to blame as you are."

"No, no! He pulled away, Arya," Sansa had been quick to point out, "he didn't do anything!"

"You're right." Arya had looked at her feet. "He did nothing to stop you."

"He pulled away!" Sansa had repeated. "He didn't reciprocate!"

"Why'd you do it, Sansa?" her sister had finally demanded. "He's my boyfriend."

"I…I don't know how to say…I was lonely, and Joffrey was being a jerk and flirting with Margaery, and —"

"That's pathetic, Sansa," Arya had bit out, "even for you, now tell me the truth!"

Sansa had lowered her eyes then, unable to meet Arya's gaze while she lied to her. "He was being nice to me…and I took advantage of his kindness. I'm so sorry."

"If your boyfriend's such a jerk, maybe you should dump him and find someone else…and leave mine alone."

"I'm sorry, it won't happen again," had been all Sansa could say.

"Just…just stay away from Sandor."

Sansa now wiped at her cheeks and looked at Jeyne. "I couldn't tell her the truth."

"She's your sister," Jeyne said, understanding, "it's a lie you had to tell…so you won't hurt her further."

Nodding, Sansa smiled wanly. Telling Arya how she really felt about Sandor would only hurt her more.

"Do you think she'll forgive me?"

Jeyne gave a small shrug. "That's up to her. You can only show her that you're sincere about not going after Sandor."
Sansa sighed, and she spent some moments calming down so that she would stop crying.

"What do I do now, Jeyne?"

She felt so foolish then, once again thinking about how much effort she'd put into pretending that nothing hurt her, and that everything was all rainbows and fairytales. Thinking back on it, there had been a number of times that Jeyne, Randa and even Mya had observed her curiously. As though they'd been reading her thoughts. Perhaps they were, she thought.

"Well, maybe you can start thinking about how you're going to break up with Joffrey."

"It's not that easy." Sansa winced. "In case you didn't notice, he's kind of...possessive."

Also, violent and psychotic, she thought.

"I thought you said he basically ignored you for Margaery Tyrell."

"He did, but it doesn't mean he'll let me go easily. Joffrey won't break up with me, unless it's on his terms."

"He's never...hit you, right?" Jeyne asked, worriedly.

"No," Sansa replied, "he's never hit me."

Even as she denied it, the memory of him crushing her wrists that day in the quad came back to her, as well as the threat he'd uttered into her ear.

"I don't like hurting you, Sansa," Joffrey had said as his fingers had cut into her wrists. "I just hate being made a fool of, do you know what I mean?"

Somewhere, deep down, she felt that all she would have to do was give Joffrey the smallest of reasons to hurt her, and he would do it without hesitation.

"Well, since you can't seem to fix that situation immediately, let's start with something you can."

Jeyne stood up and held her hand out. "Come on, let's go wash your face and do something about your puffy eyes."

Sansa accepted her hand and smiled at her friend. "Thanks, Jeyne. For listening to me."

"Hey, that's what friends do." Jeyne returned her smile. "Now, will you be going to the party at Boros' place after the game this Friday?"

Sandor

He needed to beat something up.

The urge to cause damage wasn't new. It came when he was frustrated or stressed. It was either beat something up, or get raging drunk. But, he had a game that night, and he was in the middle of English class, which meant he had little option but to stay in his seat and bear it. Worse still, they were studying Shakespeare. Hamlet, to be precise. Ordinarily, he didn't mind Shakespeare, but he was too wound-up to focus on the wordy tome in front of him.

There were two reasons for his short-temperedness. The first came courtesy of Coach Selmy, who had sent for him first thing that morning to tell him of a change in that evening's line-up.
"I need you to play on the offensive line-up tonight, Clegane."

"Coach?"

"Brune's come down with the flu, didn't you hear?"

"No, sir."

"Well, now you do," Coach Selmy had said, matter-of-factly. "And you're taking his spot tonight."

"But, sir –"

"No arguments, Clegane!"

Sandor had walked away from Coach Selmy's office grumbling and swearing. He did not like playing on the offensive line. He avoided it if he could help it, and the reason for this was because people compared him to his brother Gregor, who played on the offensive line in college, whenever he did. Few things could anger him more than comparisons to his much-loathed older brother.

The second and predominant cause of his foul mood could be credited to a pretty, red-haired little bird. Even after almost a week since she'd kissed him, Sandor was still feeling anger and bitterness towards Sansa, and also with himself…for letting her become his weakness. He'd never reacted like this to any girl before, and he hated feeling as though he'd lost control of his emotions. Everyone knew the Hound as this bad-tempered tough guy, but Sansa had him whimpering like a lost puppy, and he didn't like that at all.

After he'd returned Sansa back to Joffrey's side and fled Baelor's Arena, he'd gotten into his Mustang and had driven around aimlessly for hours. He'd first driven to Trident's Bend, then to Flea Bottom, even heading to the port at Braavos where he'd sat by the water's edge for a time, replaying the incident with Sansa in his mind again and again. Then somehow he'd found himself outside Chateau Maegor, staring up at the blackened windows of the mansion, and wondering which one belonged to Sansa. He had no recollection of driving to the mansion, but eventually he'd regained some of his senses, and seeing as he was already outside her house he decided he'd wake Arya up and tell her what had happened.

He'd expected merciless ridicule from the little bitch, especially as their friendship – if he could call it that – was somewhat unorthodox, and she'd spent more time loathing him than not, during their acquaintance. However, she'd shown him a level of understanding that he truly wasn't expecting. Sandor also never expected her to agree to keep pretending to be his girlfriend, either. He'd actually been prepared to blackmail her, if necessary, but instead she'd patted his hand and readily agreed. He needed her to keep pretending, for his benefit. Sansa already thought they were together, and she could keep right on believing it until it no longer suited him to keep pretending…or until the little bitch stopped feeling generous towards him, whichever came first. His life had suddenly become a joke. If it had happened to someone else, he might have laughed.

But, it's never funny when the joke is on you, he thought. Over the past few days, he'd come to a decision about Sansa's behavior. He'd had to find a way to make sense of her actions, because he couldn't allow himself to think she'd kissed him because she wanted to.

"I didn't mean to," she'd said to him, "I just wanted...Joffrey's been such a...he was flirting with Margaery and...I got carried away...you've been nice to me and –"

He'd thought about what she'd been saying to him before he'd interrupted her, and of the conclusion he'd made at the time, thinking she was just looking for some kind of comfort because of how badly
Joffrey treated her. Sandor decided that it really was the only way to explain her uncharacteristic behavior.

Sansa was confused, neglected and taken for granted by Joffrey. She would be much better off dumping the blonde jerk...and therein lay part of the blame for his frustration. Sansa, stupid little bird that she was, and for reasons known only to her, still had not broken up with Joffrey.

Knowing that Sansa hadn't been thinking straight when she'd kissed him did not lessen his anger or bitterness, but it did provide him with a new target where he could channel some of that negativity.

He ran into Joffrey in the hallway during mid-morning break.

"I heard you're playing offense tonight, Hound."

"Coach Selmy's orders," Sandor confirmed, "Brune's sick."

"Shouldn't make much of a difference to you," Joffrey observed, "you'll still be grinding faces into the ground!"

"Coach probably thought the same thing." Sandor shrugged.

"You just make sure you do your job and keep their defense off my back," Joffrey told him, "anyway, have you seen Sansa?"

"No."

"She's been avoiding me, and she's kidding herself if she thinks she's fooling me."

"Avoiding you?"

"She's been missing my calls," Joffrey explained, "and she hasn't sat with the group the last couple of days."

"Is that all?"

"I still think she's cheating on me," Joffrey spat. "I thought she had something going with that Theon Greyjoy, but I'm starting to think the Gossip Spyder was right."

"What are you talking about?" Sandor frowned.

"Remember that post about Sansa being seen with some douche at a pizza place?" Joffrey replied irritably. "I've been trying to work out why Sansa's been acting so strange...I mean, she won't have sex with me, and she's barely let me touch her lately."

Sandor huffed. "Because of that, you think she's cheating on you?"

"If she's not giving it up to me, then she must be giving it up to someone else!"

"That's bullshit."

"It makes perfect sense," Joffrey insisted, "why are you defending her? Do you know something that you're not telling me?"

Joffrey whirled around to face Sandor with his eyes narrowed suspiciously, and Sandor kept his fist clenched tightly around the strap of his backpack in case the temptation to hit something grew too strong.
"Fuck off," Sandor rasped as he narrowed his eyes in return, "you must be mistaking me for the Spyder, how should I know what's going on with your girlfriend?"

Joffrey wasn't so easily intimidated by the tone of Sandor's voice. "You're banging Arya -"

"I am not banging -"

" – and she must tell you things, right?"

"Wrong." Sandor stood to his full height and towered over Joffrey. "And, don't ever talk about Arya like that, again."

"What the hell's your problem?" Joffrey demanded.

"I'm not the one with a problem," Sandor said gruffly, "where did you say Sansa was?"

Joffrey's mouth had formed a thin line, and Sandor knew him well enough to see his stance shifting, as though preparing to attack.

Go on, take a swing at me! Sandor, thought, knowing he was purposely baiting the jerk. However, instead of taking a punch at him, Joffrey unexpectedly smirked.

"I know what this is," he said, "you're keyed up about tonight's game."

Sandor said nothing, knowing full well the exact reason for his foul mood.

"Save it for tonight. The Lhazar High Rams have a strong team this year."

"Whatever." Sandor shrugged, before he shouldered past him.

"Coming to the after-game party at Blount's tonight?" Joffrey asked before he turned to head down another corridor.

"No," Sandor replied honestly.

"Why, not?"

"I'm not in the mood to put up with assholes tonight," Sandor spat, before turning on his heel without waiting to see Joffrey's reaction.

At lunch time, Sandor detoured by Arya's locker in the hopes she would be there, and when he found her, he grabbed her hand after she'd slammed her locker shut.

"Hey!" she yelped as he yanked on her arm. "What's your problem?"

"Why does everyone think I have a fucking problem?" he grumbled, leading her to the cafeteria with her hand clutched in his.

"Because you look like you want to rip somebody's head off," she replied, turning her face up to his. "Who pissed you off, and what did he do?"

"Joffrey Baratheon," Sandor said loud enough so only she would hear. "And he pisses me off just by breathing."

Arya cackled with laughter, and she was still breaking out in fits of giggles when they joined Gendry and Hot Pie at their usual table in the quad. Sandor sat down beside her, and scowled back at Gendry
when he found the guy looking on disapprovingly at how close he was to Arya.

Earlier that week, Arya had told him briefly what had happened between her and Gendry.

"Gendry kissed me, but that's all I'm saying about it. And he doesn't get why we're still pretending to be a couple."

"So, you're going to choose him?" he'd asked.

Arya had flushed. "I…uh…"

"Here's a simpler question; do you like him?"

"Yes."

"Jaqen, too?"

Arya's flush had deepened, and Sandor had laughed. He'd laughed because the little bitch was looking at heartache one way or another, and he'd laughed because he couldn't believe the kind of conversations he'd been having with her the past couple of weeks.

"You're playing against Lhazar High tonight?" Hot Pie asked him.

The fat junior had, much to his surprise, accepted him into their group quite readily, after he'd wrested a promise out of Sandor that he wasn't going to do anything to hurt Arya, that is. The guy had quite understandably, had reservations about him, especially knowing what Sandor had done to their ginger-haired friend.

"Yep," he replied, "you guys coming to watch?"

"Of course." Arya grinned. "Right, Gendry?"

Gendry shrugged. "Just don't expect me to start cheering for you."

"You have a game plan for tonight?" Hot Pie ignored Gendry and carried on like he hadn't spoken.

"I'm on the offensive line tonight." Sandor frowned, his displeasure evident. "Coach Selmy's gone through some plays with us, but it could all change on the field."

"Offense?" Arya looked at him questioningly.

"Brune's sick, and I'm the human bulldozer Coach Selmy's chosen to take his place."

"Hmm…I've got a game plan for you," Arya said with an evil grin. "I think you should let some of their linemen through."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course!" Her evil grin widened. "What do you think will happen if you did?"

"They'd go for our Quarterback…" Sandor suddenly understood what she was hinting at, and he found himself regarding her with respect. "We could lose the game, you realize?"

She waved her hand in the air dismissively. "You guys are going into the finals anyway. What's one game?"
"Arya, did you just suggest what I think you just suggested?" Gendry looked at her with a frown between his brows.

"I did, and I stand by it."

Gendry nodded, and even he couldn't contain his smile. "I thought so…this, I have to see!"

That night, knowing full well that Coach Selmy would rip into him afterwards, Sandor suppressed his natural athletic prowess and allowed the Rams' linemen to get past him every now and then, just to watch them take down his own team's Quarterback…Joffrey. The only thing better than watching Joffrey eat dirt, he thought, was if he could have been the one shoving his face into it, instead. Sandor had looked on with sadistic amusement each time the blonde jerk went down. It was worth the six-point loss, in his opinion.

Unfortunately, it only put Joffrey in a foul mood as he now had to nurse some scrapes and bruises.

"What the hell is your problem, Hound?" Joffrey screamed at him in the locker room. "Were you letting them through on purpose? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"It wasn't my night." Sandor shrugged, unconcerned.

Joffrey had been about to launch into another tirade when Coach Selmy barged into the locker room. "Clegane!"

Sandor braced himself, and for the next fifteen minutes, he nodded and said 'yes, sir' obediently while their Coach proceeded to give him a thorough dressing down about his conduct on the field that night. After he'd been dismissed, he showered and changed, and did his best to avoid Joffrey on his way out.

"Hound!" Blount called after him, "are you coming to my place tonight?"

"No,"

"Why, not?" Blount asked, "you can bring your little girlfriend."

"Forget him," Joffrey said from behind Blount, "we lost the game, no thanks to him."

Blount ignored him and turned back to Sandor. "Come around if you change your mind."

Sandor made no comment as he walked out of the locker room. Arya, Gendry and Hot Pie had stuck around to wait for him, and he was certain it had been at Arya's insistence, but all three of them were looking pleased to see him.

"I can't believe you really did it!" Arya exclaimed, "Joffrey got creamed!"

"I didn't think he was going to get up after that last time he went down!" Hot Pie added.

Sandor bared his teeth in a feral sort of smile. "Worth losing the game and definitely worth the fifteen minutes Coach Selmy spent shouting in my face!"

"Come on," Gendry said, "let's go get some food."

With no better place to be, and not particularly wanting to be alone, Sandor had gone with them.
They ended up at The Hollow, a first for Sandor, and was surprised to find that no one gave him a second glance at the place. The Hollow catered to a different crowd than he was used to, and with the memory of Joffrey's face as he'd been tackled for the fifth time still fresh in his mind, Sandor found himself in a slightly better mood. Even though his companions were carrying on a conversation around him, and he wasn't participating, he didn't feel excluded. Gendry might be cool towards him, but his attitude towards him had become much, much less hostile...as long as Sandor didn't touch Arya in front of him.

Arya's phone buzzed on the table in front of her as she received a new message, and Sandor watched as she quickly swiped it from the table and into her bag after she'd read it. The widening of her eyes and the tinge of pink in her cheeks allowed him to deduce who the message had been from.

"Is it from him?" Gendry too had been observing her closely.

To her credit, Arya did not deny it. "Yes."

She didn't elaborate, but Sandor shared a look with Hot Pie as if to say 'there will be trouble' if they didn't break the tension. Glancing at his watch, Sandor decided it was late enough to call it a night.

"It's late, I'm taking off." He stood up and looked at Arya. "Want a lift home?"

"I can take her –" Gendry began.

"Thanks, Sandor." Arya quickly stood up from the table. "You live closer."

That was bullshit, and they all knew it, but Sandor could understand why she wanted to avoid a confrontation with Gendry. The guy clearly was unhappy with Arya's decision, but he didn't try to stop her. Sandor normally did not feel sorry for people, mostly because he normally didn't give a shit about anyone. But, at that moment he thought he might feel some pity for the guy.

Sandor knew where he stood with Sansa; it was never going to happen. Gendry however, had to deal with the uncertainty of not knowing which way Arya's affection would sway, and all the jealousy that went with knowing another guy was after her, and each day hoping that she would choose him over Jaqen. Sandor did not envy him. In his opinion, it was better to know exactly where you stood with a girl, rather than clinging to hope. Hope could drive a person mad, he thought.

After Arya had strapped herself into her seat, and Sandor had pulled away from the parking lot, he was taken by surprise at Arya suddenly dropping her face into her palms.

"What am I going to do?" she asked herself, her voice muffled by her hands. "Oh, my god...what should I do?"

"Let me guess," Sandor rasped, "the Faceless punk asked you to do something?"

"A third date," Arya nodded, still not removing her hands from her face. "He's claiming a third date! I don't know what to say!"

_Third date...what?_ Sandor did not want to know. It was enough that the little bitch was losing it beside him.

"Um...you're asking the wrong person," he said, and stayed silent for the rest of the drive.

He ended up driving through the gates of Chateau Maegor and delivering Arya at her door, where he noticed the torn expression on her face.
"Sandor." She turned to him, her hand on the door handle. "Do you think I'm leading them on? Am I a bad person?"

Sandor could have said all kinds of mean and mocking things in response to her question, but there had been such a vulnerability in her eyes that he'd bitten back the retort he'd been about to say.

"You're not a bad person," he said instead, "you're fourteen, and I don't think anyone could blame you for being unsure."

She stared at him a moment longer, also seeming surprised by his response, before giving him an awkward smile. "Thanks...goodnight, Sandor."

He gave her a nod, before driving away. At the end of her street, he looked at the clock on his dashboard and decided it was still too early to go back to his dark and silent house. He dialed Blount's number on his cell phone.

"Hound, are you coming over or what?"

"Party still going?"

"Sure is!"

"Joffrey still there?"

"I don't know, maybe...I haven't seen him in a while."

Sandor hung up and decided to risk it. There would be booze, and he could do with a drink. He still needed a distraction from his own depressing thoughts, and if it meant putting up with assholes for a while, then he was willing to pay the price. Reaching Blount's place some fifteen minutes later, he found the driveway lined with cars, and people still milling about in the yard and in the living room. Sandor navigated his way through the crowd and grabbed a bottle of beer from an ice-filled cooler in the kitchen, and found Blount and Trant in the backyard with some other guys on the team. A quick survey around him did not reveal Joffrey, and Sandor was pleased about that.

However, his eyes did land on Sansa's friend Jeyne Poole, who was sitting with the cheerleaders called Randa and Mya at the other end of the yard. He frowned slightly, but did not want to entertain the thought that Sansa would be around, too. If she was, then he would do his best to ignore her, as he'd done the entire week at school.

"Hound," someone called out to him, "don't bite my head off, okay? But, what happened tonight?"

Though that was exactly what Sandor now wanted to do with the guy who asked, he controlled his temper by breathing deeply.

"Like I said, it wasn't my night," he replied, and refused to be drawn into it further.

He'd just finished his first bottle of beer, and was starting to mellow out while listening to the inane conversation around him when he caught sight of Sansa. Joffrey was holding her hand and leading her from the living room, into the yard. Sandor paused to watch them, noting the straight line of Joffrey's mouth which indicated that he was unhappy.

The pair of them stopped at a bench close to where Jeyne and the cheerleaders sat, and Joffrey shooed one of the occupants of the bench away, before taking a seat, and pulling Sansa down into his lap. For her part, Sansa stayed silent, but Sandor could see that she did not look happy either.
Joffrey had told him earlier that Sansa had been missing his calls, and had avoided sitting with the group recently. Maybe they'd had a spat? He wondered.

*Not your problem.*

He got up to get himself another beer, taking the long way through the yard to get back into the kitchen, and when he got there, he took his time. Inadvertently, he overheard parts of conversations around him.

"Did you see them? They were arguing in the living room!" he heard one girl say to her friend.

"Really? Did you hear what they were arguing about?"

"He was accusing her of cheating on him again..."

Sandor knew exactly who the girls were talking about, confirming his earlier suspicion. He sincerely hoped that the Gossip Spyder would not hear of this. Slowly, Sandor made his way back out into the yard, but he paused just inside the doorway of a room that looked out into the yard. He had a good view of Sansa and Joffrey from where he stood, and unable to help himself, he stared at Sansa.

She was wearing dark, skintight jeans and a white long-sleeved blouse that was made if some floaty, semi-transparent fabric. When she moved and the light from the portable floodlight nearby hit her at a certain angle, he could make out the outline of her breasts and the curve of her waist underneath. His mouth suddenly felt parched.

Sandor took a sip of his beer, but it didn't help. *You shouldn't have looked, you idiot!* He had been about to turn around, when Sansa suddenly jerked in Joffrey's arms. Sandor paused, and frowned when he saw one of Joffrey's hands curl into Sansa's upper arm...and he found himself moving closer, hiding himself behind a pillar, wanting to hear what they were saying.

"...Who is it, Sansa?" Joffrey was hissing.

"There's no one, Joffrey," Sansa hissed back, "how many times do I have to repeat myself?"

"Then why won't you let me touch you?" Joffrey's other hand slipped down the side of Sansa's thigh.

"You're drunk." Sansa flinched from his touch, which only angered him further.

"See? That's exactly what I'm talking about!" Joffrey's voice was starting to rise, and Sansa started to get up from his lap, but Joffrey held her down. "Stay right where you are."

"I want to get up, Joffrey," Sansa said quietly.

Sandor now saw that people around them were starting to notice what was going on, and Sansa was doing her best to ignore them. Joffrey was gearing up for another public confrontation.

"I didn't know you'd be such a prude," Joffrey took her face in between his hand, making her look at him. "Don't you find me attractive, Sansa?"

"Don't be stupid, Joffrey!"

"Stupid? You're calling me, stupid?" Joffrey clearly, had had too much to drink, and Sansa had just said the wrong thing.

"Let me go." She tried getting up again, only to have his fingers tighten around her wrist. "Please,
"I'm not letting you go until you start telling me the truth," Joffrey seethed, bringing his face close to hers.

"There's nothing to tell...I never cheated on you!"

"Why don't I believe you?" Joffrey squeezed her wrist, and Sansa yelped.

"Joffrey, stop it..." With obvious effort, Sansa twisted herself out from Joffrey's lap, but his grip on her wrist only got tighter. "You're hurting me!"

"Where are you running to?" Joffrey demanded, pulling her back to his side. "Why are you so eager to get away from me?"

"Joffrey...stop!" Sansa's voice was high and sharp, and Sandor grew concerned when he realized she was beginning to cry.

People were openly watching now, and Sansa was looking around, her eyes darting around the crowd as though hoping for someone to come and help her, but no one made a move.

"Enough."

Sandor realized that the rasping voice had come from his own mouth, and that he'd stepped out from behind the pillar. All eyes, were suddenly now on him.

"You?" Joffrey turned to Sandor, noticing him for the first time. "Mind your own business, Hound."

"She told you to stop," Sandor said, doing his best to keep his voice from rising.

He looked down to see where Joffrey was still gripping Sansa's wrist. *Let her go, you piece of shit!*

Sansa's eyes flocked to him in shock at his sudden appearance, but Sandor kept his eyes firmly on Joffrey.

"Let her go, Joffrey," he said calmly, "you're drunk, and you're creating a scene. You'll regret this when you're sober."

Sandor saw his grip on Sansa's wrist loosen slightly, and he looked at her pointedly. "Move it."

Sansa made to obey him, managing to free her arm, but she'd only taken two steps away from Joffrey when he suddenly stood up and reached out towards her. He caught the front of her blouse, and as he pulled, Sandor heard the delicate fabric of Sansa's blouse tearing and ripping, the sound of it seeming to echo in the silence that suddenly fell across the yard.

"She can go when I tell her to!" Joffrey shouted.

Sansa cried out in dismay as her blouse fell open, briefly revealing a scrap of pink lace. Sansa sobbed and tried to tug the material back together in vain.


Joffrey glared at Sandor angrily, then back at the sobbing girl beside him. His face contorted with rage, and Sandor had a momentary fear that Joff was going to strike her, but he didn't. Instead he shoved her away from him, and caught off-balance, Sansa fell to the ground.
There was a collective gasp, before everyone became silent again, waiting for whatever came next.

"Frigid bitch!" Joffrey yelled down at her. "I don't know why I'm wasting my time with you!"

Then, ignoring everyone around them, Joffrey marched into the house.

In a few short strides Sandor was kneeling in front of Sansa. He shrugged his letterman jacket off and quickly draped it around her shoulders, noting how it engulfed her small frame completely. She clutched at the white wool, pulling it across her chest to cover herself. She didn't look at him, and he didn't touch her.

Looking around, he made eye contact with Jeyne and Randa who had yet to recover from their shock.

"Jeyne…Randa, get her out of here."

Both girls snapped out of it and quickly came running to Sansa's side. Sandor stood up, then glared at everyone still staring at him.

"What the hell are you all still looking at?"

He spared one last glance at the still sobbing Sansa, before he stalked off into the night. He didn't want to stick around just in case he did something foolish, like taking her into his arms. He'd done what he could for her, and now there was nothing left for him to do but walk away.
Hi everyone! So I finished this chapter earlier than expected!

I have some thank you's to go out to 'sandorspotato', 'karlybing' and 'noodlesplease' over on Tumblr for some more fabulous fanart! The links are on my profile over on ff.net if you wish to see them (and I reccomend that you do!). There's no room left on my profile here unfortunately... This was a tricky chapter to write, but seriously, when have I ever posted a chapter that didn't have drama in it?

I hope you like it, and thanks again for your reviews and patience!

Gossip Spyder

Breaking news everyone! Have I got some shocking gossip for you this fine, Saturday morning!

Several guests at Boros Blount's party last night have emailed and sent text messages talking about another very public confrontation between Sansa Stark and Joffrey Baratheon.

My sources say that an intoxicated Joffrey was overheard accusing Sansa of cheating on him (again!), and that they were witnessed in a brief scuffle, that resulted in Sansa's top being torn. My sources also say that the quarrel was ended only by the intervention of the Hound, Sandor Clegane!

Oh. My. God!

Will this spell the end for Sansa and Joffrey? I'll let you know if I hear anything more!

…This so totally overshadows the loss suffered by our White Knights to the Lhazar High Rams…

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

Sansa

It was barely past ten in the morning, and the usual Saturday morning atmosphere within Chateau Maegor was uncharacteristically subdued. Sansa was sitting on top of her bed with her legs crossed under her. She'd been in the same position for the last hour, clutching a stuffed toy from her childhood to her chest, and staring at Sandor's letterman jacket which was folded over the back of her chair.

There was no sound coming from the TV room where most Saturdays, her brothers could be found watching cartoons. Arya was with them, ensuring that they did not disturb their parents.

The silence was, every now and then, punctured by the sound of raised voices coming from the direction of her father's office. They were arguing about her…or rather, what they had discovered about her earlier that morning.
The day had started much as it usually did on a Saturday morning, with the entire family gathering in the informal dining room for breakfast. Sansa had been quiet, avoiding Arya's eyes, only answering questions directed at her and not contributing much to the conversation at the table.

Everything had begun normally…until Rickon had asked her to pass the bacon, and the sleeve of her jersey cotton sweater had slid up her arm, revealing a large, purplish bruise covering most of her wrist and forearm…all under her father's nose.

"Sansa, what is that on your arm?" he'd asked.

Sansa had immediately tried to snatch her arm back, but her father proved to be faster than her, and his own hand had flashed out to grab her, keeping her arm in the air. He'd given her a glance, before purposefully pushing back her sleeve.

Her mother had gasped loudly, and at the same time Arya had hissed 'that jerk'.

"Sansa?" her father's tone had then become forbidding. "Who did this to you?"

She had lowered her eyes and hadn't been able to respond. Instead, she'd tugged her arm out of her father's grasp, and hid it under the table. An uncomfortable silence had settled over her family, but her father had no intention of letting her go without an answer.

"Cat, will you excuse us," her father had said to her mother, before standing up from the table. "Sansa, come with me."

Obeying, she had followed her father into his office where he had her sit down in one of the armchairs by the fireplace, before he'd pulled up a footstool in front of her and taken a seat. There had been a frown between his brows, and concern in his grey eyes.

"I'm not blind, Sansa," he'd said, "someone hurt you, and I want to know who it was."

Her breath had snagged then, and a hundred different thoughts had flashed through her mind, but only one thought stood out, brighter and louder than the rest.

\textit{Joffrey will never lay his hands on me again.}

"Father," her voice had come out wobbly, "Dad, I'm so sorry…"

"Go on, Sansa," he'd coaxed, "you're not in any trouble, I promise you. I just want to help you."

"I should have said something…I should have listened to Arya when she tried to warn me about him…she knew all along what kind of person he was and I didn't listen!" Sansa had started shaking, and her father had reached out to take her hands.

"Are you saying that…that Joffrey did this to you?"

"Yes." Sansa had looked up to see the look of shocked horror written all over his face, and she found herself continuing. "He did this, because he thought I was cheating on him…but I never cheated on him! I swear it! I never did anything to him, but he's got this awful temper!"

And then suddenly she'd been crying, and her father had been pulling her into his arms like he had when she'd been a little girl, patting her back to try and soothe her.

"Did he hit you? Has he \textit{ever} struck you, Sansa?" her father had asked, and she'd felt the tension in him as the words had left his mouth.
She'd shaken her head against his shoulder, and some of that tension had eased, but only marginally.

"No, he's never hit me. He just blows up so easily...and he gets so jealous, and he kept accusing me of things I never did!"

"How many times has he physically hurt you?"

"Twice, dad...just twice," she'd replied.

"That's twice too many," he'd returned. "Sansa, a true gentleman will never harm a woman."

"I know." She'd nodded, suddenly feeling disappointed with herself. "I don't know why I let him get away with it."

"He won't be getting away with it," her father had said grimly. "Trust me on that."

After he had extracted the details of what had transpired during both instances that Joffrey had hurt her, Sansa had been sent to her room, and her father had then called Arya into his office.

"Sansa," her sister had stopped her in the hall as she'd passed her on the way. "Sandor called me last night, so I knew...but, Gossip Spyder's just posted about it. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Sansa had said, before brushing by her to get to her room.

Everyone at school would now know about it before the weekend was out. The Spyder's post would make sure of that. Sansa knew that her father would be questioning her sister about what she might know about Joffrey's physical violence towards her, and she knew Arya would not be dulling it down by any means.

Sometime later, their mother had gone into the office with her father, and soon after that came the sound of their raised voices.

"You have to do something about this, Ned!" Sansa had heard her mother say.

"I intended to, but we have to handle this right!"

Sitting on her bed, Sansa imagined that her parents were probably wondering where they had failed her, and why she hadn't come to them sooner to ask for their help. She wouldn't be able to say anything to them to let them know that they hadn't failed her. She had failed herself. Joffrey might have been the cause of her misery, but she could have chosen to end it much sooner, if she hadn't been so caught up with worrying about rumors and gossip, and what people at school would think of her.

If only she hadn't let herself become so consumed about her crush on a guy who was dating her sister...and if only she hadn't become so intent on letting everyone know that everything in her world was just perfect. Sansa collapsed on her bed and buried her face in her pillow. How did I get like this? I don't even recognize me anymore! I'm better than this...I know I am! The same thoughts and questions had been going through her mind ever since Jeyne and Randa had brought her home the night before. It seemed that it had taken her being pushed to the ground - literally, being pushed as low as she could go - for her to realize just how much she had suppressed her true self.

For what? For the sake of popularity? For the sake of saving face? For the sake of pretending that I don't care and that nothing can hurt me?

"I can't believe he did that to you, Sansa!" Randa had exclaimed. "You can't let him treat you like
that any longer."

"Sansa, you have to do something," Jeyne had said in a voice that shook, "for a moment there I thought he was going to...I thought he might..."

"So did I Jeyne," Sansa had said truthfully.

There had been that one moment, right before Joffrey had pushed her aside, that she had thought he was going to hit her. She wondered if he would have, had Sandor not been there. Sandor's appearance at her side had taken her by surprise that night. She'd believed he wouldn't be going to Blount's party, but he seemed to have a habit of showing up whenever she needed saving, and she was thankful for whatever had brought him there. She would find out in the morning that Arya had not been with him, and she had been thankful that her sister did not have to witness the incident, too.

Sitting in the back of Randa's car, engulfed in Sandor's letterman jacket, Sansa had finally...finally...come to a decision about herself.

"Enough," Sandor had said.

*Enough indeed,* she had agreed. She had to do something, and she decided it was time she got her identity back.

There was a knock on her door, breaking her out of her reverie. Sansa sat up to find her parents at the threshold, and she looked at them expectantly.

"Sansa," her mother began, "we've contacted Joffrey's father. He said that he can be here in an hour, if you feel up to discussing Joffrey's actions towards you."

"Joffrey's not going to be with him, is he?" Sansa asked with some alarm. "I don't want him here."

"No," her father was quick to assure her. "Robert will deal with him on his own."

"Fine." Sansa nodded. "I'll speak to Mr. Baratheon."

When Robert Baratheon arrived an hour later, he was accompanied by Joffrey's uncle Tyrion Lannister, much to Sansa's surprise. The dwarf had nodded to her politely, and something in the way he looked at her told Sansa that he was well aware of what was going on, and that he was not surprised. *He knows,* she thought. *He knows exactly what Joffrey is capable of.* Ever since the day of the riot, when he and Renly Baratheon had stayed behind to ensure that she and Sandor were safe, she'd regarded Tyrion Lannister with a certain level of respect. He was accompanying Robert Baratheon for a reason, and she didn't mind his presence.

"Cersei insisted I bring him along," she heard Robert say to her father, "he's more diplomatic than I am, she says."

"This is no joke, Robert," her father had rebuked.

"Believe me, I'm not taking it as such."

In her father's office, with her mother by her side, Sansa revealed her bruised forearm. There had been silence while Joffrey's father and uncle took in the evidence of his violence, before Tyrion had spoken.

"There were witnesses to his behavior, you say?" Tyrion directed the question to Sansa's father.
"Dozens of students," her father replied, "both at the school, and again at the party last night."

Robert had sighed, before turning his attention to Sansa.

"Please accept my apologies, Sansa. The boy will not go unpunished," Robert declared, and looked at Sansa with a determined expression in his eyes. "I gather you won't be Joffrey's girlfriend anymore after this, and I can't blame you for that. He will not lay another finger on you. If he does, I'm shipping him off to military school. That, I promise you."

Sansa had excused herself after that, and the adults had closed the door to discuss what had to be done next. Later still, after Joffrey's father and uncle had left, her mother had come to her room to make sure that she was okay.

"Sansa," her mother began as she'd sat on the edge of her bed. "I need you to speak to me. I need you to tell me what's going through your mind."

Sansa knew what she really meant. Her mother wanted to know if she was okay, mentally. She smiled at her mother.

"Mom, I'll be fine now," she assured her, "I've had a chance to think, and I've realized that I've spent so much time pretending to be someone that I'm not, and I could have stopped this so much sooner… I won't make that mistake again."

"I'm glad to hear it." Catelyn returned her smile gently. "But I want you to understand that nothing excuses Joffrey's behavior. You are not to blame for anything that he has done to you. You did not deserve to be treated that way, no matter what he has told you."

"I know, mom," Sansa assured her, "I promise you, I will be fine."

After offering her more words of assurance and comfort, her mother eventually left her alone.

Sansa had always known that Joffrey's treatment of her, and behavior towards her had always been lacking. At the start, she might have been attracted to him because he was handsome, athletic and popular. He was, seemingly, the perfect boyfriend. But now, she realized she had only been attracted to the idea of the perfect boyfriend…she'd never really been attracted to Joffrey to begin with. I never wanted him, she thought. Not in the way that I want Sandor.

Sansa's eyes drifted to Sandor's jacket that still hung over the back of her chair. In three short steps, she'd picked it up and buried her nose in it, trying to catch the faint traces of his scent that clung to the fabric. Embarrassingly, she'd done the same thing for most of the previous night. His jacket had been warm when he'd first draped it around her shoulders, carrying the heat of his body, and warming more than just her chilled skin. She'd wrapped herself in the white wool, seeking comfort in its confines the way she wanted to seek comfort from its owner. She hadn't been able to bear taking it off after she'd snuck into her room the night before, and she'd fallen asleep on top of her covers still wearing it. It had been almost a physical pain to her that morning when she'd had to take it off to shower and change.

The fabric was cold now, and she sighed. Wanting someone who doesn't want you back isn't healthy, either. She thought, and hung the jacket back over the chair.

Arya

Arya paused at the landing outside Sansa's bedroom. She'd come to let her know that the chef had prepared lunch, if she was hungry, but the sight of her sister – or more accurately, what she saw her
Sansa was clutching what was unmistakably a letterman jacket to her chest, with the lower half of her face buried in the folds of the collar. Sansa was standing at an angle that allowed Arya to clearly read the name embroidered on the back…CLEGANE.

Whoa…Arya's jaw dropped a little, and a sudden thought came to her mind. No…she couldn't possibly…could she? Just the week prior, Sansa had been confessing to her about kissing Sandor. Now, Arya was standing there watching her sister hugging Sandor's jacket. Oh, my God! Arya had to cover her mouth to stifle her gasp. She likes him!

All of a sudden, Sansa's recent odd behavior began to make sense, and Arya had an almost overwhelming urge to barge into her room and demand the truth out of her. It's so obvious! Why didn't I figure this out when she told me she'd kissed him? Could it really be possible that Sansa had a crush on Sandor? If there was even the slightest chance, and by the way her sister continued to cling to his jacket, Arya was willing to bet that there was a good chance, then there was a possibility that it could change everything.

I have to be absolutely certain about this. It went against everything she thought she knew about her sister, and she hesitated. Sansa developing a crush on a guy like Sandor Clegane was just so uncharacteristic of the sister she had grown up with, and Sansa had enough going on with all the mess about Joffrey. She didn't want to jump to conclusions, and Arya decided to hold her tongue for the time being. She needed to know for sure, and when she did find out…well, she would decide what to do then, she thought.

If I tell Sandor and I end up being wrong, it could fuck him up even more. Should I tell him? Should I tell Sansa about him? They could end up together! Arya couldn't quite comprehend that she was actually contemplating the idea of Sandor and her sister dating, but she realized that if she had to see Sansa with a guy, then Sandor wasn't a bad choice. True, he could be rude and bad-tempered, but underneath his badass persona the guy had proved surprisingly considerate.

Her time as his fake girlfriend had, at least, shown her that Sandor was capable of caring and defending the people that he cared about. Arya antagonized him on purpose whenever she could, and yet the big brute seemed to watch out for her, like he had the previous night when he'd stepped in before Gendry could start questioning her about just what it was that Jaqen's text message had read. He was almost brotherly towards her, at times. There was also that night he'd saved her from those two drunks in Flea Bottom, and though they never talked about that night, they were both well aware she'd been in deep shit until he'd come along.

He cared about her sister, too. There was no denying that.

"Joff and your sister had another public fight," was all he'd said to her, in clipped tones over the phone the night before. "He grabbed her and tore her blouse –"

"He, what?"

"Accident, I think," Sandor had spat. "But it was bad. I had to step in."

"Sandor, what the hell happened –?"

"Just check on her, okay? I've got to go."

"Sandor?"

He'd hung up without going into detail, and she'd had to try and figure out what had happened by
herself. She'd heard her sister's footsteps on the landing not too long after Sandor's hurried call, but she hadn't heard a car pull into the driveway, which meant Sansa had made whoever dropped her off let her out at the gate. Sansa hadn't wanted anyone to hear her come home.

Even after reading Gossip Spyder's post, it wasn't until she'd seen the bruises on Sansa's forearm that she understood what had made Sandor step in. He really cared for Sansa. Despite whatever heartache he was suffering because of her, he still came through for her when she needed him, whether Sansa knew it or not. Sandor Clegane would be an infinitely better boyfriend to Sansa than Joffrey Baratheon.

She watched Sansa fold the jacket back over the seat, and Arya finally knocked on her door before sticking her head in.

"Arya," Sansa said, then looked to the jacket that she was still touching. "I was going to give this to you...so you can give it back to Sandor."

"Oh." Arya thought quickly. "You can hold on to it...you can give it back to him yourself. I imagine you'd...um, want to thank him, or something."

"I'm sure he knows I'm grateful—"

"It would still be better if you told him yourself," Arya insisted, and she was glad that Sansa chose not to argue further.

"Yes, of course. You're right."

Sansa withdrew her hand from Sandor's jacket, and folded her arms across her stomach. She looked self-conscious, and uncomfortable in Arya's presence, but Arya felt she had to say something else.

"So, what are you going to do now?" she asked.

Sansa gave her a look. "I thought it would be obvious...I'm going to break up with Joffrey. I can't be with him after what he's done to me."

Arya already knew that Sansa was going to break up with Joffrey. She'd overheard their parents make a comment about it earlier, but hearing it from Sansa's own lips made her feel such an immense sense of relief.

"Aren't you going to say it?" Sansa asked her.

"Say what?" Arya gave her a questioning look.

"I told you so," Sansa replied, "aren't you going to say it?"

Arya did not have it in her to feel affronted by the fact Sansa would assume she would do something like that. She'd done it so many times in the past about so many different things, but this time it was different. She sighed, and shook her head.

"No." She looked her sister in the eyes. "You deserve better. You didn't deserve to be treated the way he treated you."

And before Sansa could say anything more, Arya backed towards the door. "Anyway, I just came to let you know that lunch is ready, if you're hungry."

She fled Sansa's room and headed back down to the kitchen for lunch. It had become uncomfortable
being in the room with Sansa, too. She was sick of all the subterfuge and lies, and quite frankly, she couldn't wait until she could put it all behind her. Sansa was going to be a single girl again, soon. *I've got to end this bullshit with Sandor,* Arya decided. If her hunch was right about her sister, then it was best that Sandor was also a 'single' guy again as soon as possible.

She sighed. It wasn't just because of Sansa that she had to 'break up' with Sandor. She couldn't make Jaqen or Gendry wait indefinitely for her to make up her mind. Jaqen had texted her, and reminded her of her promised third date. He now wanted her to name a day.

"I am missing you, lovely girl. I am hoping that you have by now, chosen a day...I hope also to continue what we started that day, backstage..."

Jaqen's message had made her blush as she'd remembered just what had happened that day, and as her mind had conjured up the memory of his fingers against the skin of her neck. Knowing that Gendry had been watching her read Jaqen's message had made her blush deeper, feeling embarrassed, and just a little guilty.

She'd spoken to Jaqen over the phone several times that week, but on each occasion she'd managed to avoid committing to a day.

"I am jealous, Arya," he'd said during one conversation, "it is hard knowing that each day the Bull gets to see you at school. I wish I could see you even just half as often."

Arya knew that it would only take a hint of encouragement, and Jaqen would drive to King's Landing to see her. She could tell that an invitation was all he was waiting for, but she was mindful of his busy schedule, and of possibly leading him on, so she said nothing. She didn't need to tell him that outside of school, she purposely made sure she wasn't in Gendry's company alone.

Yet, she had to make a choice, so she resolved to give him his third date...and after that, she would wait and see. *My heart is supposed to know, right? My heart is supposed to tell me which guy is right for me?* Arya mused as she finished her lunch, and wondered why her heart was choosing not to communicate with her head.

"Arya." She looked up and found her father standing in the dining room doorway. "When you've finished eating, could you please come and see me in my office?"

"Yes, father." Arya nodded, and hoped she wasn't in some kind of trouble.

He and her mother had already questioned her about everything she knew about Joffrey's treatment of Sansa, and she hoped this wasn't more of the same. Nevertheless, after she'd finished her meal, she made her way to her father's office.

"You wanted to see me, father?" she asked, pausing just inside the door.

"Come and take a seat, Arya." He indicated the same seat that Sansa had occupied earlier that day. "I wanted to discuss something with you."

"What is it?" She closed the office door behind her, and sat down in front of him.

Her father looked at her seriously, and Arya got the distinct feeling that whatever he had to say to her was important.

"I heard you've been asking some questions, Arya." His grey eyes, an exact match to hers, fixed her to her chair. "I'd like to talk to you about your friend, Gendry Waters."
Gendry

The entire school was abuzz with talk of the latest Joffrey and Sansa public fight, and speculation was rife about what really happened that night at Blount’s party. Gendry had heard three versions of the fight, from three different people who all swore that they were there and who'd witnessed it for themselves. Some believed that Joffrey had purposely torn Sansa's blouse, others believed he’d pushed her to the floor, and still there were others who believed Joffrey actually had struck her that night.

"What's the deal?" Gendry asked Hot Pie when he saw him during homeroom. "Have you spoken to Arya?"

"Yeah, I picked her up this morning."

Hot Pie quickly brought Gendry up to date on what actually happened between Sansa and Joffrey, as told to him by Arya.

"She's finally had enough, huh?" Gendry asked, referring to Sansa. "She's really going to dump him?"

"That's what Arya said," Hot Pie confirmed.

"It's about time," Gendry said, though he didn't express that he was relieved for more than the obvious reason.

Sure, he was relieved that Sansa was finally going to get out of a poisonous relationship, but he was also glad because it meant Arya would be able to put an end to her fake relationship with the Hound. He might have stopped wanting to slug the guy, but he still did not like seeing them hold hands on the rare occasions that they did, or seeing Sandor sit next to Arya everywhere they went. He did his best *never* to remember the images of Arya and Sandor kissing, because they just made him want to punch walls again.

He seriously couldn't wait for Arya to be free again, because once it was public knowledge, he'd be stepping up his pursuit of her. He was going to make it known that he was after Arya Stark. He wasn't just going to step aside and give her up for Jaqen H'ghar. *Arya will have to convince me that she doesn't want me*, he thought. *That's the only thing that will make me stop.*

Gendry saw Sansa several times that morning, in passing in the hallway and once when she was exiting a classroom he was heading into. She nodded at him in the hallway, and smiled at him as she exited the classroom. There was nothing in her body language, or expression on her face that betrayed her awareness of the gossip surrounding her, or of her imminent break-up with Joffrey Baratheon.

In all honesty, he'd never really given Arya's sister much thought, but since Sandor Clegane had started sitting with them at lunch time, he'd actually found himself wondering what drew the guy to her. He would admit that she was pretty, and she was polite enough when their paths did cross, but from the things Arya had said about her, he couldn't imagine her as more than the shallow, giggly and foolish girl he saw at school.

At lunch time, on his way to his usual table, he happened to glance towards the 'popular' table and noticed that Sansa and her girlfriends Jeyne, Randa and Mya were missing. He found them seated at a smaller table away from their usual group. People in the quad were talking about them, and pointing out the obvious. Clearly, he wasn't the only one who'd noticed.
"Hey," he said to Arya who was already at their bench. "Notice something different?"

She'd been watching him as he'd approached their table, and as though she'd just realized he'd asked a question, she hastily glanced in the direction of her sister's group. "Oh, yeah."

Arya turned back to stare at him, and he ran his hand over his face self-consciously.

"Is there something on my face? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"There's nothing on your face." She shook her head and looked away again. "I was just thinking."

Hot Pie turned up a short time later, and Sandor was not far behind him. Gendry watched as people whispered behind their hands as the guy walked passed them, and wondered how he could manage to remain outwardly oblivious to it all.

Tellingly, the guy did not even spare a glance in the direction of Sansa's table, and this seemed to spur more talking amongst the students in the quad. Sandor took his seat beside Arya, and promptly ignored them all. Awkwardly, the rest of them tried to carry on a normal conversation around their silent companion, but they could not drown out the sound of conversations around them, and every now and then they would hear Sandor and Sansa's names being mentioned.

Gendry had been on the verge of suggesting they all just go for a drive until the hour was up, when Joffrey Baratheon, who had so far been absent from the quad, came barging through the cafeteria doors. He paused just outside of the cafeteria, and Gendry watched him look around the tables, until he found Sansa.

Gendry kicked Arya and Hot Pie under the table to get their attention, and caught Sandor's eye. The four of them then turned to watch whatever happened next.

"Sansa," Joffrey said as he approached her table, "we need to talk. Now."

Sansa turned in her seat, and even from across the quad, Gendry could see the determined set of her jaw, and a glint of something steely in her eyes. It was a look Gendry hadn't seen on her face before, at least, not the previous times he'd seen her confront Joffrey.

"Whatever you have to say to me, you can say in front of my friends." Sansa nodded to the three girls with her.

She kept her voice moderated, but it carried across the now largely silent quad. Everyone had stopped what they were doing, and were now watching Joffrey and Sansa. Noticing all eyes on them, Joffrey took a step closer to Sansa.

"You had to bring my father into it, didn't you?"

"It was my father's idea," she corrected him.

"So, things got a bit rough and you went running to daddy?"

"He saw what you did, Joffrey," Sansa replied, "he saw my arm."

"I barely touched you -"

"You know what you did," Sansa spoke over him, and stood up from her seat to face him. "You were fully aware of what you were doing to me, and I'm not going to take anymore from you."

Joffrey stared at her as though she'd grown wings and a tail. "What the hell are you talking about?"
"I don't want to be with you anymore, Joffrey," she declared flatly, and clearly so that there was no mistaking what she was saying. "I didn't want to have to do this publicly, like this, but you haven't given me a choice."

"You're breaking up with me?" Joffrey's face clouded over, and he took a step towards her.

"Stay back," Sansa held her hand up. "Touch me again, and all I have to do is say one word to your father."

There was a threat in her comment, and though none of them knew what it might entail, it was clear from the fury that suddenly stole over Joffrey's face that he understood what she meant.

"You're going to regret this," Joffrey hissed, "you're nothing without me!"

With those final words, Joffrey spun on his heel and stomped back towards the cafeteria. Everyone kept watching Sansa, and she herself seemed to be trying to compose herself. Her eyes landed on someone, and Gendry only had to follow her gaze to realize she was looking at Sandor Clegane.

Suddenly, Sansa was grabbing her belongings and heading back towards the building as fast as her feet would take her.

"Sansa, wait!" her friend Jeyne called, running after her.

"I'd better go after her," Arya said across the table from Gendry, and a second later she was dashing after her sister.

There was a moment's pause after Arya disappeared through the cafeteria doors, and then as one, everyone in the quad began talking.

"She dumped him!"

"I can't believe it!"

"Did you see that?"

"What did she mean about her arm?"

"Her father got involved?"

About a minute later, there was a chorus of beeps and chimes in the quad as phones went off almost simultaneously. Gendry shook his head.

"That was quick," Hot Pie muttered, before reaching for his phone and reading out aloud. "Yep, it's Gossip Spyder...breaking news, Sansa Stark has broken up with Joffrey Baratheon...details to come."

Gendry turned his attention to Sandor. The guy still hadn't said a word, but Gendry could see his hands balled into fists on top of the table, and felt the tension rolling off him in waves.

"It's official now," Gendry said, "Sansa's single again."

Sandor's flexed his fingers, and he finally returned Gendry's stare. "So?"

"I thought you'd be happy about this." Gendry frowned.

Sandor snorted. "She's rid of that jerk, but she'll be some other guy's girl again, soon. Girls like Sansa
don't stay single for long."

"Why can't her next guy be you?"

"Me?" Sandor gave him an incredulous look, before he pointed at his face. "Do you see this face? Girls like Sansa do not go out with guys with faces like mine."

"So, you're saying that she's shallow? You're telling me that she won't be able to look past your scars?" Gendry challenged.

Steely grey eyes narrowed at him in a warning, but not before Gendry had seen the uncertainty written in them. Gendry could see that he'd stumbled on a sore spot for the Hound. The guy genuinely feared that Sansa would not be able to get beyond his physical disfigurement.

"Stay out of it, Waters." Sandor stood up, but Gendry blocked his path before he could take a step. "Move."

"End it with Arya," Gendry said quietly, and watched Sandor's eyes narrow even further. "Her sister's safe. You don't need to keep pretending."

Sandor scowled at him. "When it suits me."

The guy shouldered past him, and Gendry released a frustrated breath. He'd been trying to understand why Arya had agreed to keep pretending to date Sandor, even after the Spyder had stopped talking about Sansa and her supposed mystery date, but Arya hadn't been willing to elaborate.

"He's using Arya, like a shield," Hot Pie suddenly said.

Hot Pie had been watching his exchange with Sandor. Gendry had chosen to come clean about his feelings for Arya the week before. He had not wanted to continue hiding the truth from his friend. When told, Hot Pie had barely batted an eyelid, proving Gendry's earlier hunch that the guy had, at least, already suspected his true feelings.

"I knew it," his friend had said, "you've been acting funny around her for weeks, but something happened at the Battle of the Bands, because now you're both tiptoeing around each other."

"I kissed her," Gendry had confessed, and his friend had merely smirked in response.

So far, Hot Pie had been pretty good at boosting his confidence where Arya was concerned, and Gendry was grateful to have someone to talk to.

"What do you mean by that? He's using Arya like a shield, how?" Gendry now asked, still not understanding.

"I mean, I think he's hiding behind Arya." Hot Pie's expression turned thoughtful, but it just made him look like he'd eaten something that made his stomach queasy. "He's hiding something."

"Hiding what? Besides his feelings for Sansa, that is, and who would he be hiding it from?"

"That could be it." Hot Pie nodded as something clicked in his head. "Maybe he's hiding his feelings for Sansa, from Sansa."

"But, we already knew that," Gendry pointed out. "He doesn't want anyone to know, especially Sansa."
"I didn't say it made sense." Hot Pie scratched his head. "I'm just telling it how I see it."

Gendry thought back on something Arya had said to him. "Something happened between him and my sister. You don't need to know the details."

He then recalled the expression on Sansa's face just moments after breaking up with Joffrey, when her eyes had found Sandor and her whole cool and collected demeanor seemed to crumble and she'd fled the quad. Evidently, there was more to their story than met the eyes, and he was wondering whether it was in his best interest to find out. If it meant Arya would be 'free' from Sandor sooner, then he would do what he could, if given the chance, he thought. He gave Hot Pie a look.

"You might be onto something." He nodded at his friend. "When did you get so perceptive?"

"Hmm...you know that thing I like to do in my spare time?"

"What? Baking?"

"Yes," Hot Pie agreed. "Well, when I'm working the pastry or stewing the fruit filling, I get a lot of time to think."

Gendry rolled his eyes.

Arya sent him a text message during class later that day to tell him that her sister was okay, and that between herself and Jeyne, they had been able to calm Sansa down after her very public breakup with Joffrey. Arya had also told him that she had a paper for English to finish, and she'd be heading straight home after school.

"Have fun at band rehearsal," she'd signed off.

He'd noticed that she had been avoiding him, if the situation meant she would have to be alone with him. The surprisingly perceptive Hot Pie had told him it was because Arya didn't want to seem like she was favoring him over Jaqen, and vice versa, so she'd been avoiding both of them. That was little consolation to him, because it meant she was still sitting on the fence, and her indecision worried him. He was just a regular guy from an extremely humble background, and he didn't feel that he had the same confidence and charisma that Jaqen H'ghar wielded. All he had to offer Arya, was right there for her to see. He just hoped that he would be enough.

When the final class of the day ended, Gendry stopped to chat to Edric Dayne for a few minutes about some things related to an up-coming gig, before telling him he'd see him at The Hollow later for practice. He then made his way to the performing arts building where he'd commandeered one of the full-sized lockers to store his Les Paul in while he was in class. He had been about to exit the building after collecting his guitar, when he thought he heard music coming from one of the music rooms. He paused to listen, and after some moments, he heard the unmistakable sound of a badly tuned acoustic guitar, and someone trying to play it. Curiosity as well as pity for the poor instrument, made him seek out both instrument and musician.

Gendry never expected to find Sansa Stark, but by the time he recognized the red hair and its owner, she was already looking at him, and it was too late for him to back out of the classroom.

"Gendry." She offered him a weak smile. "Hi."

"Uh...hi." He spotted the guitar in her arms. "I heard music."

Sansa nudged the instrument she was balancing on her knee. "I wouldn't call what I was playing music."
Gendry laughed. "Okay, I came to rescue the poor guitar." He walked across the room and pulled a chair over next to Sansa, before he indicated that she hand the instrument over. "It's not tuned, that's why it sounds awful."

Sansa watched him work on tuning each individual string, before he experimentally ran through a few chords and some improvised tunes until he was satisfied with the sound.

"Here you go." he offered the guitar back to her, but she held her hands up in refusal.

"Are you kidding?" she asked him, finally giving him a genuine smile. "My attempts do not compare to your awesomeness. I'd just embarrass myself!"

Gendry laughed again, but kept hold of the guitar and strummed more chords absently to avoid plunging the room in silence. He wasn't exactly sure what he was doing, but he was conscious of the fact he'd interrupted a private moment. Sansa's expression had been glum and she'd clearly been very unhappy when he'd first walked in, but now, she was smiling and she continued to smile as he played.

It occurred to him then, like it hadn't before, that they had music in common.

"Uh...what were you trying to play earlier, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Was it really that unrecognizable?" Sansa made a face, before reaching for some sheets of paper on the table next to her. "I was trying to play Daydreamer."

Gendry took the sheets of paper, and found he was looking at guitar tablature. "Adele, huh?"

"Do you know it?"

"I've heard it a few times." Gendry shrugged. "Have you played guitar before?"

"Not really," Sansa admitted, slightly embarrassed. "Someone left the tablature behind, and the guitar was here when I came in."

Gendry read the tabs and began to pluck the opening bars, picking up the tune very quickly.

"Do you know the lyrics, Sansa?" he asked her.

"Yeah," she replied, "I guess."

"Then, what are you waiting for?" He grinned at her. "Start singing!"

With a laugh of her own, Sansa waited for Gendry to repeat the intro, before she began to sing.

"Daydreamer, sittin' on the sea, soakin' up the sun..."

Gendry had only heard her sing once before, on the day that she auditioned for the school choir, and he recalled being stunned by the sound of her singing voice. He marveled at the sound of it again as he sat there listening and accompanying her. Then there was more to marvel at than just her voice. Gendry watched in pleasant surprise as a physical change came over Sansa as she continued to sing.

Her face seemed to light up, her blue eyes sparkled, and the tension in her shoulders vanished. The girl sitting next to him, at that moment, was almost unrecognizable to the girl he'd been seeing walking around school the past few weeks.

Is this the Sansa Stark that Sandor sees? He wondered. There was an openness and honesty about
her then, and for a moment he was able to glimpse past the artifice and shallowness, and he saw something about her that he found attractive. *If this is how Sandor sees her, if this is who she really is, then maybe I've judged her too quickly.* Gendry hoped that he would get to see more of the real Sansa Stark, now that she had broken up with Joffrey.

The song ended, and Gendry let the notes of the guitar fade into silence, just as he watched the light that had briefly shone in Sansa fade away. Gendry stayed quiet, and eventually it was Sansa who spoke first.

"Thanks, Gendry," she said, "that was fun."

"You're welcome." Gendry stood up and placed the guitar into the stand he saw nearby.

"I probably should have gone to choir practice," she continued, "I skipped it today, because… well..."

"Yeah, I understand. You don't have to talk about it, if you don't want to."

Gendry could understand the whole being unsociable after a break-up thing, but frankly he wasn't certain he wanted to be having this conversation with Sansa, yet leaving her right when it seemed like she needed someone to talk to would make him look like an ass.

Sansa gave a humorless laugh. "I'm sure you've heard all about it, though. What with Gossip Spyder posting about it two seconds after I broke up with him, and Arya being your friend…"

"Actually, Arya hasn't told me much," Gendry said, "she only ever tells us enough to get our facts straight. Gossip Spyder doesn't always get it right, you know?"

"You got that right," Sansa agreed.

"Are…are you okay, though?" he asked rather awkwardly, and shifted from one foot to the other. She gave him the same weak smile she'd given him earlier. "Yeah, I'll be fine."

"Good. That's great." Gendry nodded, and had been about to excuse himself when Sansa suddenly turned inquisitive eyes on him.

"Gendry, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Um…sure, I suppose." He didn't see how things could get any more awkward than they already were.

"I hope you'll be honest with me," she said.

"I'll try to be,"

"How long have you had feelings for Arya?"

*Right, things just got more awkward.* He thought, and he felt blood rush to his cheeks. "I…um…"

"I can tell that you like her, Gendry," Sansa continued, "I've been able to see it for some weeks."

"I didn't know that I was being obvious," he responded nervously, "I haven't really told anyone about it."

"Relax, your secret's safe with me," she assured him.
"How did you know?"

"The way you look at her," she replied, "I can't really describe it, but it's in your eyes."

"Oh." Gendry's cheeks grew warmer, and he couldn't believe that he was actually blushing.

"Can I ask another personal question? You don't have to answer this one, if you don't want to, so no pressure."

"Okay, bring it on," he said, though he was still trying to recover from her first question.

"How did you feel when you found out that Arya was dating Sandor?"

He raised a brow and gave her an odd look. It was an odd question, but there was no reason for him not to answer her.

"I felt like breaking his jaw," he answered honestly, remembering the anger and jealousy that had raged through him at the time.

"And, do you still feel that way? I mean, he sits with you guys at lunch, now."

Gendry also remembered that Sansa knew nothing about the duplicitous nature of Arya and Sandor's relationship, and he sighed before finding the words with which to answer her. He still felt like breaking someone's jaw, but it was Jaqen H'ghar he pictured now, not Sandor.

"I still feel that she would be happier with me," he answered ruefully.

"Hmm." She shifted in her chair, and she lowered her gaze to the floor. "Does…does he treat her well?"

She'd spoken to the floor, and Gendry almost didn't hear her last question. He would have thought it a normal thing for a concerned sister to ask, but there was something in her tone that made him second-guess the intent behind her words.

"Sandor's okay," he replied quietly, "I had my doubts about him, but I have to admit, I don't think he would intentionally hurt her."

"That's good," Sansa acknowledged with a voice that seemed tremulous, before she looked back up at him. "Thanks for staying and talking to me. I didn't mean to keep you."

"Don't mention it." Gendry saw that as his cue to leave, and he picked up his guitar before stepping towards the exit. "Hey…I had fun, too. You're a great singer."

"Thank you." She offered him a final smile, letting him glimpse the real her again for a second. "See you later, Gendry."

After leaving the music room, he ran a hand through his hair, shook his head as though to clear it, and reached for his cell phone. He dialed Arya's number.

"What's up?" she greeted him.

"I've just had an odd conversation with your sister," he told her.

"What? You've been speaking with Sansa?"

"Yep, and it was strange…she was asking about Sandor."
"Did she? Did she really?" Arya's voice peaked with interest. "Tell me everything."
Okay, so this update has been a long time coming - almost a year in fact, so I want to dedicate this chapter to everyone who has waited so patiently, and everyone who has continued to encourage me during my extended hiatus. Thank you all!

Gossip Spyder

All right peeps!

Unfortunately, there's still no further news about Sansa and Joffrey's break-up. I'm still not sure what she meant by that comment about their respective fathers, but Joffrey's been keeping a low profile these past few days.

Perhaps the embarrassment of being so publicly dumped has been getting to him? Who can say for certain? But, what I do know is our Prince of the Playground is not the type to be kept down for long!

In other news concerning the Baratheon clan, don't forget, there's the party being held at The Red Keep this Saturday night for the Tyrell's. I heard a rumor that all three of the Tyrell brothers will be in town for the event, as a show of family unity. The Starks will all undoubtedly be in attendance as well...maybe Joffrey's on orders to stay on his best behavior!

Let's see what new gossip the weekend will bring!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

Sandor

She's done it. The little bird has finally freed herself from Joffrey. The thought had continued to enter his mind for most of that day, and indeed, he'd thought of little else in the next few days. Despite his seeming lack of reaction, and less than thrilled response when Gendry had asked the question, Sandor was undeniably relieved that Sansa had finally split from the blonde jerk.

The news of Sansa's public break up with Joffrey had spread ridiculously fast, aided by Gossip Spyder's post, of course. In the coming days, subsequent posts revealed that the Spyder hadn't been able to dig up any further details regarding the break up, or anything that would explain Sansa's mention of her father's involvement, and what had caused Joffrey to back off when Sansa had made mention of Joffrey's father.

Sandor had to admit that he'd been curious, but Arya had not been very forthcoming with information, and when he'd thought to press her for details, she had seemed somewhat distracted. He'd seen her, on more than one occasion, staring intently at Gendry and biting the corner of her lip as she did so.
"Still can't decide, huh?" he'd asked her during lunch that Friday as they watched Gendry and Hot Pie approach their table, carrying loaded trays.

"It's nothing to do with that!" she'd snapped at him, "there's just stuff…I learned…mind your own business."

"You're going to burn a hole through the back of the Bull's head," he continued, "staring at him like that."

"Drop it before I smack you -" Arya's threat at bodily harm was cut short when her phone buzzed with an incoming call. "Hello...Oh. Hi, Mom..."

Gendry and Hot Pie took a seat at their bench while Arya engaged her mother in what sounded like a tense conversation. Sandor heard the words formal and gown followed by a lot of resistance on Arya's part, and by the time she'd ended her call, all three guys had unconsciously shifted half a foot away from her.

"Argh!" Arya thumped the table top in frustration. "Stupid...I can't believe...ugh!"

"Dare we ask?" Hot Pie ventured.

Arya took a few deep breaths, and slowly her fist unclenched. "My mother has decided that the dress I was going to wear to this stupid party at the Red Keep tomorrow wasn't appropriate, so she returned it and got me something else, and now it's too late for me to do anything about it...She's making me wear lace...lace!"

The boys looked at each other, unsure how to respond. Arya never talked about fashion around them, but Sandor figured it had to happen sometime. It was inevitable, if you hung around a girl long enough, it was bound to happen.

"Um...I'm sure you'll still look nice," Gendry volunteered.

Brave, Sandor thought, giving the guy a look of disbelief. Either that, or he's unbelievably stupid.

Arya was staring at Gendry again, and the retort Sandor had been half-expecting from her never came. Whatever Arya had on her mind, whatever she'd supposedly learned about Gendry was making her act strange, but Sandor had enough problems of his own, and he stood up when he'd finished his meal so he could go and fix one of them.

"Where are you going?" Arya asked him.

"To see Coach Selmy," Sandor replied, fishing in his pocket and showing them the note he'd been handed during his last class. "He wants to talk to me about tonight's game, to make sure there's no repeat of last week."

This brought a smirk to the little bitch's face. "You'd do it again, wouldn't you? If you could do over, you'd still choose to watch that jerk get pounded into the ground?"

Sandor did not reply, but the glint in his eyes and the evil smile-sneer on his lips was answer enough. Certainly, he would do it again, he thought. Even if we lose the fucking Championship, I'd lose every game on purpose just to see Joffrey eat dirt! Watching Sansa dump the jerk's ass in public had been just as sweet, but he'd had to control his reaction at the time, considering how his name was already connected to the incident at Blount's party.

His visit to Coach Selmy's office went as he'd expected. The football coach had been quiet, but stern,
asking him if there was a problem, and whether his performance that night would be affected. Sandor suspected that a lot of the teachers were aware of Gossip Spyder, and that some followed the gossip just as closely as the students. He wondered, as we walked out of Coach Selmy's office, if that was part of the reason for him being called in to see his coach. At the end of the school day, just as Sandor was stowing his unwanted books back into his locker, he was perplexed to see Joffrey heading his way.

"How are you feeling about the game tonight?" Joffrey asked as he approached. "Are you feeling lucky?"

Sandor looked around him, just in case Joffrey was directing the question to someone else.

"You're talking to me?" he asked with uncertainty.

"Why wouldn't I be talking to you?" Joffrey frowned.

"Thought you'd be mad at me." Sandor shrugged. "For what happened at Blount's party."

"Mad at you?" Joffrey did look surprised at this, and confused. "You saved my neck, why would I be mad at you? I was drunk, man! If you hadn't stopped me and made me let her go..."

Joffrey let his sentence go unfinished, and Sandor found himself getting very angry about that. The jerk had just admitted that things might have gotten a lot worse with Sansa, but he believed Sandor had saved him from himself.

"I should have guessed she'd do something like that," Joffrey suddenly stated, "breaking up with me in public and humiliating me like that? How dare she!"

Sandor did not comment, he just flexed his fingers at his sides, and forced himself to stay calm.

"She's a frigid bitch, anyway," Joffrey continued, "I was wasting my time with her, just because her name is Stark...I'd be better off with Margaery Tyrell, she's hotter than Sansa, that's for sure!"

Stop talking. Just, stop talking. Sandor willed the blonde to shut his mouth, before he lost his cool and punched him in the face. He was finding it harder and harder not to give in to the urge lately.

"You're coming to the party at my place this weekend, right?" Joffrey asked.

"I didn't know I was invited," he remarked flatly.

"Didn't your girlfriend invite you?" Joffrey smirked. "I still don't get why you're with Arya, but I'm inviting you. Should be a good party, and you should come just for the hell of it."

"I'll think about it."

"Sansa and Margaery are both going to be there." Joffrey grinned.

"So?"

Joffrey's grin took on a quality that Sandor did not like. "So, I'm going to show that little red-headed bitch that she's not irreplaceable."

Joffrey left to collect his football gear, and for the rest of the afternoon as they prepped for that evening's game, Sandor was unable to shake the feeling that Joffrey was planning something to get back at Sansa. Later, at the actual game that night, Sansa's absence from the stands was noted, which seemed to put Joffrey in a bad mood. By the end of the game, which they won, Sandor had decided
he would be going to that party. *You're going just to observe, you're not going to interfere.*

Despite his better judgment and completely ignoring the voice in his head telling him to forget it, whatever it was that Joffrey had in mind, Sandor wanted to be there in case Sansa Stark needed him.

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**Arya**

Her mobile phone was ringing again. She'd just walked in through the door, having returned from watching the football game with Hot Pie, and she fumbled in her bag to try and answer the call before whoever was calling hung up.

"Hello,"

"Lovely, girl."

*Jaqen.* Arya paused half-way up the flight of stairs in recognition of his voice.

"Hello," she said again, but this time the recognition was evident in her tone. "I expected you would call."

Jaqen chuckled, and the sound of his laughter sent a shiver down her back. "Did you, really?"

"Well, yeah…" Arya replied, shutting her bedroom door behind her and placing her backpack on the floor next to her bed. "You've been calling me almost every Friday night these past few weeks, Jaqen."

"It seems you are my habit, now," Jaqen stated. "You went to the football game, yes?"

"I did," she replied, and for the next five minutes Arya gave him a play by play account of what had happened during the game. "…We won, so the *Knights* are definitely going to the play-offs."

"Your friend, the Hound, must be very excited."

Arya laughed, both at the way Jaqen had said the word *friend*, and at the image of Sandor's animated face as he'd celebrated with his team earlier that evening. His already mangled features had become even more twisted, which only made him appear more intimidating.

"Yeah, you could say that," she agreed.

There was a moment of silence, and Arya could guess the direction the conversation would take.

"Arya…"

"Jaqen…"

Both had spoken at the same time, and they laughed nervously.

"You first," he conceded.

Arya released a breath and began again. "Jaqen, I know that you're about to ask me to name a day for our third date, and I know that I've been making you wait a long time."

"I do not mean to push you, Arya," Jaqen said, seeming to sense her agitation over the phone. "That was never my intention."
"I know, and I don't think that at all…in fact, you've been so patient with me, and it's really been unfair of me to keep you waiting…"

"Arya…"

"…so I'm going to say, next Saturday."

"Lovely, girl!" Jaqen exclaimed. "You are certain?"

"Yes, Jaqen." Arya laughed at the surprise and uncertainty in his voice, and she didn't try to hide how shaky her own voice had become. "I'm naming next Saturday for our third date, and you can decide what we do."

"Leave everything to me," Jaqen said, "I promise that you will have a good time."

They chatted for some minutes longer, before Jaqen let her go so that she could prepare for bed, promising to call her again during the week. After she'd hung up the phone, Arya collapsed onto her bed, grabbed the nearest pillow and screamed into it. By no means was she any closer to deciding which guy she liked better, but she knew that Jaqen deserved to have his third date…considering the non-event their second date had turned out to be. Avoiding him wasn't going to help, in the long run. She realized that if she was ever going to find out which boy was right for her, then she actually needed to spend more time with Jaqen and really get to know him.

"Shit," she suddenly said to her ceiling, "I've really got to tell Sandor, now."

She couldn't keep up their stupid pretense, and it wasn't benefitting either of them any longer. She couldn't keep Jaqen or Gendry at bay because they knew the truth about her and Sandor, and really, Sandor needed to use the balls he'd been born with and man up. He had two choices, as far as she was concerned; either get over his obsession with Sansa, or take his chances and ask her out. Sansa was free of Joffrey, so there was nothing stopping Sandor from finally making a move.

She thought back to the brief conversation she'd had with Sandor earlier at lunch that day, during which he'd observed her staring at Gendry. Sandor had mistaken the reason why she had been staring at Gendry, but she hadn't been able to stop staring at him ever since the day her father had called her into his office, and told her the truth about him.

"I heard you've been asking some questions, Arya," her father had said to her, "I'd like to talk to you about your friend, Gendry Waters."

She'd been sitting in her father's study at the time, the same day that Sansa's bruised arm had been discovered. She thought her father had wanted to question her further about what she knew of Sansa and Joffrey's relationship, so she had not been prepared for her father mentioning Gendry's name.

"Gendry?" she'd asked, stupidly.

"Don't try to deny anything, Arya," her father had warned her, though his tone had been gentle. "I know about your visit to Flea Bottom, and that you've been to the 'Lucky 8'."

Arya had been expecting him to say he knew about her run-in with those two drunks as well, and her brain had already been coming up with all kinds of possible punishments he might dish out, but it never eventuated. She had not been prepared her for what she would find out.

"Why are you asking questions about Gendry, Arya? What are you hoping to find?"

"The truth, dad," she'd replied, "Gendry doesn't say much about his life before he came to King's
"And, what else?" Her father meant to have the entire story out of her, and Arya had realized that he was already aware of everything that she knew.

"And, Gendry looks so much like Renly Baratheon – you must have noticed, too, dad. I just wondered if he might, somehow, possibly…or as impossible as it might be…I wondered if he could be…"

"….Related to the Baratheon's?" her father had completed her question for her when she'd continued to ramble.

She'd met her father's eyes then, and she'd seen something in them that had silenced her, and made her sit up.

"Dad?"

His eyes had pierced her in a way he'd never done before, and Arya knew that whatever he was going to tell her was big.

"What would you do with the truth, Arya?"

She'd frowned. "I don't understand…"

"If you knew the truth about Gendry, would you tell him?"

"I hadn't really thought…"

"What if knowing the truth, would do more harm than good? What if Gendry doesn't want to know? More importantly, what if Gendry would prefer to keep the truth a mystery to everyone?"

"Dad, what do you know?"

"I need you to understand a few things, Arya," her father said soberly. "First of all, you need to realize that with the truth, comes responsibility. Do you understand what that means?"

Arya had grown slightly alarmed at the seriousness in her father's tone, and this alone was enough to convince her that whatever truths she learned, she would be keeping to herself.

"It means I need to know when to keep my mouth shut, because the truth is not always nice, and people could get hurt."

"I'm glad you can see that." Her father's tone did not change. "Secondly, you need to understand that knowing the truth can change things irrevocably."

"I promise I won't tell anyone,"

"I mean, change things for you, Arya," he'd clarified, and at her questioning look, he had elaborated. "Knowing the truth about Gendry, could mean that you never look at him the same way again, and this could change your friendship. You will know something that could change his life, but you have to understand that perhaps he is better off not knowing, or that perhaps he has no interest in finding out the truth. Can you handle that?"

"But, why wouldn't he want to know the truth?"

"I cannot speak for him, but it is his life…his personal life that you need to respect, and if it means
keeping the truth from him, then you must do it."

Arya had then recalled more than one instance where Gendry had said he didn't want to know, or care to find out who his father was.

"Dad," she'd said again, purposely. "Is Gendry related to the Baratheon's?"

"Yes, he is."

There had been a moment of silence where Arya had done nothing but blink, taking it in.

"Okay," She'd managed to say. "Why are you telling me this?"

"You've come so close to the truth, and in your quest to uncover it, I feared you would find yourself in trouble."

"Trouble?"

"I don't want you venturing into Flea Bottom unaccompanied again, understand?" her father had demanded, and she'd acquiesced readily. "You must also promise not to go around asking anymore questions about Gendry. If you have anything to ask, come to me."

"I promise,"

Arya understood what it would mean if it ever came out that Gendry was really a Baratheon. Granted, the situations were different, but she knew for a fact that people still talked about her father behind his back regarding her brother Jon, and she was aware of the continued suppositions regarding Jon's birth and his mother. Her father had chosen to admit Jon's paternity, but Gendry's father had not. A secret son – a seventeen year old son of a Baratheon, coming out into the public eye would cause an uproar of epic proportions.

"Do you know who Gendry's father is?" she'd blurted out.

Her father had given her that piercing stare once again. "Do you really want that kind of responsibility, Arya? I want you to really consider your reply, before you say anything."

Arya had bitten her tongue, curbing her curiosity. She wanted to know, for the sake of knowing, but the longer she stayed silent, the reasons for maintaining her ignorance mounted up. There really were only two men who could have been Gendry's father; one was Steffon Baratheon, although she knew he had passed away some years before, and the other was Robert. Gendry could either be Renly's brother, or Joffrey's. *Does it matter whose brother he is?* She'd asked herself, and she'd realized that she didn't care. Gendry only shared Renly's looks, and she'd thanked God that he had no physical or behavioral characteristics in common with Joffrey. But, he was a Baratheon by blood, and that was big enough news for her to handle.

Plausible deniability was her second reason. If Gendry ever asked her if she knew who his father was, she could honestly say that she didn't.

Thirdly, she now had enough answers. Enough dots had been joined that she could piece Gendry's story together, and be quite content with what she knew. She could suppose that someone from the Baratheon family had known of, or discovered Gendry's existence and had taken it upon themselves to bequeath him all that money. Someone had chosen to take care of Gendry, in the end.

"I guess, I don't really need to know who his father is," Arya had eventually said, "I know enough… maybe, too much. I don't need to know anything else."
Her father had nodded at her, pleased with her response. "Good."

After she had left her father's office, having again promised to keep her new knowledge a secret, she'd gone straight to her laptop and onto Facebook, where she'd done nothing but stare at pictures of Gendry, shocked that no one else had picked up on Gendry's resemblance to Renly Baratheon, especially since Gendry's profile had become more public after the Battle of the Bands.

When she had next seen him at school, she understood what her father had meant when he'd said she might view Gendry differently. She began to wonder how different his life could have been, how his personality and outlook on life might be different, if he had been born into and grown up amongst the Baratheon family.

It had been so hard for her to keep her mouth shut the first few days after finding out. The truth was there, on the tip of her tongue, ready to blurt out if she wasn't careful, but she'd managed to stay quiet. It got easier as the week had passed, and in the end it was her concern for Gendry, and her father's words reverberating in her ear to respect Gendry's personal life that made certain she kept the truth to herself.

Arya now shoved the pillow she'd been screaming into aside, sighed, then rolled over. Nothing had changed about how she felt about Gendry. She still liked him, and she was still as undecided between the two boys as ever.

It was while she was mulling over her upcoming third date with Jaqen that she spied the black dress bag that had been hooked onto the front door of her wardrobe. The name of an expensive couturier was printed across the bag. Frowning slightly, she got up to investigate.

"Ah, shit..." she swore, seeing the wispy lace encased within the bag. "Mom was serious!"

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Sansa

"Are you sure it's wise to allow Sansa to attend the party tonight, Ned?"

Sansa stopped in her tracks as she approached the doorway to the kitchen upon hearing her mother's tightly muttered question. It was mid-afternoon and the party was only a few hours away. Sansa's appetite had returned, and she'd wanted a snack before she began to dress for the party.

"You've asked her this question on numerous occasions, Cat," her father began to reply, "and each time, she has replied that she definitely wants to attend."

"Perhaps she's just too afraid to say otherwise," Sansa wondered.

"Perhaps," her father seemed to agree, and Sansa then heard the soft whoosh of the fridge door opening. "But we also need to consider that she might need to attend?"

"What do you mean?" her mother asked.

Yes, father. Sansa wondered. What do you mean?

There was the sound of various jars connecting with the marble countertop, and the rustling of wrappers as her father prepared himself something to eat. Sansa pressed herself against the wall to make sure her parents didn't catch her eavesdropping. She knew her parents were concerned for her, and she didn't blame her mother for wanting to protect her, but she also didn't want them worrying unnecessarily about her. If she was behaving in some way that made them worry, then she wanted to know about it so she could reassure them that she was going to be okay.
"You do remember that the breakdown of her relationship with Joffrey happened very publicly, in front of all of their classmates?"

"How could I forget that?" her mother demanded. "I cannot even begin to imagine what that would be like...to have so many people watching, and judging...and teenage girls can often be so cruel."

"So, you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"I was a teenage girl once myself, Ned," her mother quipped, "and if you value your head, you will not remark on how long ago that was!"

Her father chuckled lightly, and even Sansa had to cover her mouth to stifle a giggle.

"Make your point, Ned," her mother finally urged her father.

"All right," he said, "what I'm trying to say is that Sansa might feel that she needs to go to the party, to prove that she is fine, and that her breakup with Joffrey doesn't affect her anymore."

"But, she doesn't have to prove anything to her classmates," her mother pointed out.

"I didn't say anything about her classmates," her father quickly corrected her mother, "I'm talking about Sansa, proving to herself that she is fine."

Sansa's eyes widened at his words, surprised at her father's perceptiveness. She hadn't said anything to anyone about what she was thinking, or how she was feeling, but her father had somehow peered into her head and seen exactly what was on her mind. Her mother's initial assumption was not altogether incorrect, Sansa admitted. It was on the back of her mind that part of the reason she wanted to go to the party at The Red Keep was so she could walk into the room, head held high, wearing a killer dress and a smile so bright that no one would have any doubts that she was well and truly fine.

The moment right after she had broken up with Joffrey had been one of the most daunting, and yet most liberating moments of her life. Joffrey had stomped off, leaving her standing by herself in the quad. Everyone had been watching her, and she had not been oblivious to the buzzing whispers around her. Her heart had been pounding so hard, both from nervous adrenaline, and from the sheer joy of being free of Joffrey.

Without really realizing it, she had sought out Sandor, and when she'd caught his gaze all she had wanted to do was run to him. Except, she had turned around and fled in the other direction.

Jeyne, then Randa and Mya, then Arya had followed her into the nearest girls' bathroom.

"I'm fine," she'd said to all four of them as she'd splashed her face and rinsed her hands. "Really, I'm okay."

"That was insane!" Randa had exclaimed as she'd shooed out a couple of freshmen girls from the bathroom.

"I can't believe you just did that," Mya had said, before leaning against the door to make sure no one else walked in.

"We weren't expecting that...not so soon." Jeyne had moved to stand beside her.

"But, it was expected." Sansa had looked at her friends, before looking at Arya who stoodunsurely to the side.
"After what happened at Blount's party, we kind of knew that you weren't going to put up with anymore of Joffrey's behavior," Jeyne had continued.

"Sansa, no one would be surprised by this," Randa added.

"It had to happen, Sansa," Arya had said softly.

"Of course it had to," Sansa had agreed, "it should have happened sooner."

At that point, she'd fished out her lipgloss and reapplied, before finding her brush and dragging it through her hair.

"What are you going to do now?" Jeyne had asked, noticing how Sansa's hands had shook.

Sansa had shrugged. "I don't know…lay low for a while, I guess. I'm sure Gossip Spyder's going to be all over this any minute now."

All of their phones had chimed at that moment, and Sansa had laughed humorlessly. "Right on time."

"Are you really going to be okay, Sansa?" Arya had asked again, awkwardly, though her concern was genuine.

"Definitely." Sansa had managed a smile then, small and tremulous, but real. "You can tell Mom and Dad that I've done it."

"Okay, I will." Arya then made to leave, satisfied that Sansa was fine. "I'll see you at home."

After her sister had left, Sansa was not surprised to see that her friends were curious to know what involvement her parents had to do with her breakup with Joffrey, and very briefly, she'd told them what had happened.

"Oh, my God!" Appalled, Mya had covered her mouth when Sansa had pushed her sleeve to her elbow to reveal the bruise on her arm, which had turned yellowish at the edges as it started to heal. "That's awful,"

"Your father really asked Joffrey's father to come to your house?" Jeyne asked as Sansa had pulled her sleeve back into place, once again hiding her bruised forearm from sight.

"He did," Sansa nodded. "His uncle came as well, and Mr. Baratheon promised me that Joffrey would be disciplined."

"How?"

"I don't care how." Sansa had shrugged. "I'm free of him, and that's all I care about right now."

Her friends had sensed that she wasn't quite ready to discuss things further, so they found a bench in a quieter part of the school until lunch was over, and Sansa spent the rest of the day attending classes, and ignoring the whispers that followed her wherever she went.

Indeed, she had spent the next few days trying to lay low, and trying to avoid fueling further gossip about her, but as the days went by, she'd found herself getting angry. Why the hell should I be laying low? Why should I be hiding? I don't care what people say about me, I have nothing to be ashamed of. I broke up with Joffrey, and I'm happy about it, so why shouldn't I show it?

Sansa backed away from the kitchen and made her way back to her bedroom, her hunger forgotten. Her mind was made up. There would be no more hiding away for her, not anymore. From now on,
people were going to see Sansa Stark as she was before Joffrey Baratheon ever came into her life.

Back in her room, she took out the couturiers bag that held her dress for that evening, and the new Louboutin's her mother had surprised her with, and she began to get ready. No one was going to stop her from going to the party, and she had every intention of enjoying it.

_I'll give you something worth talking about, Gossip Spyder._

---

_Sandor_

That night, Sandor arrived at The Red Keep dressed in the same black jacket and pants he'd worn for the party thrown in the Starks' honor, but paired them with a dark blue dress shirt, instead of the black he normally preferred. Joffrey had seen that his name had been added to the guest list, and he passed through the gates without question. He was early, but that was normal for him. The Baratheons' security team knew him, and one of them told him where he would be able to find Joffrey. Sandor figured that the sooner he made his presence known, the sooner he could get out of the guy's way.

"So, you made it after all," Joffrey said when he saw him.

Sandor shrugged. "I never said I wasn't coming."

"Trant and Blount will be here soon," Joffrey continued, "you want a drink? The bars are all fully stocked."

Sandor accepted, and followed Joffrey towards a part of the mansion that wasn't overrun with caterers and event organizers. The room he was led into looked like one of the many sitting rooms in the place, but from prior experience, Sandor knew that this room was predominantly used by Joffrey, and the liquor cabinet was always stocked with the brands that the guy preferred.

Sandor poured himself some Scotch, neat, which he quickly downed before going for a second shot.

"Planning on getting drunk, Hound?"

"It's a good plan," Sandor replied.

Joffrey smirked. "Your little girlfriend probably won't be impressed."

"Fuck," Sandor swore, he'd forgotten about Arya.

Sighing, he sipped his second glass of Scotch more slowly, and figured at least the little bitch would be better company than Joffrey, Trant or Blount. The door to the sitting room opened and, for a second Sandor thought that the door had opened on its own, before he saw Tyrion Lannister appear from behind the high-backed chair near the door. He had to smother the laughter that suddenly threatened to escape his throat.

"Ah, nephew," said the dwarf, who was dressed in a made-to-measure tuxedo. "I was hoping to have a word with you before the guests arrived."

"What is it, uncle?" Joffrey asked, his tone revealing his irritation.

"Is that whisky?" his uncle asked in disapproval, eyeing the glasses in Joffrey and Sandor's hands. "You're both getting head starts. Do not overdo it, especially you, Joffrey."
"I'll drink as much as I like," Joffrey snapped, "no one tells me what to do."

"What a marvelous attitude you have, nephew." Tyrion's voice was heavy with sarcasm. "And such a fine young man you are. What did your mother have to say about your treatment of Sansa Stark?"

Sandor's only reaction to the mention of Sansa's name was a slight twitching of the fingers that held the glass of whiskey. He watched as Joffrey glowered at his uncle.

"Don't you dare bring that up."

"And why not?" Tyrion raised a brow. "I can't imagine that your mother would have been very impressed. I'm here to remind you to be on your best behavior tonight."

"You think you can to tell me what to do -?"

"I am telling you to be on your best behavior, not merely thinking about it," Tyrion corrected him, his expression growing serious. "Don't forget, you only need to put one foot out of line tonight, and in addition to confiscating your car, your father won't hesitate to freeze your spending account."

Joffrey's expression darkened. "All of this is that bitch's fault -!

Slap!

Quick as a flash, Tyrion had swung his arm up to land a blow across his nephew's cheek.

"Aargh!" Joffrey glared at the dwarf incredulously. "What did you do that for?"

"You will refrain from referring to Sansa Stark as a female dog, do you understand?" Tyrion's gaze on his much taller nephew was unwavering.

"You hit me!"

"Yes, and I'll do it again if you don't start listening to what I'm saying."

"Where's my mother?"

"Getting ready to meet your guests," Tyrion replied, "now, when people begin arriving, you will stand at the foyer beside your parents and smile -"

"I don't have to do anything I don't want to!"

Slap!

Tyrion struck Joffrey's face again with the back of his hand. "You will do as I say, boy!"

Sandor watched in partial shock, and bemusement, as the dwarf continued to rain blows across both sides of Joffrey's face. The blonde did not seem to know how to react.

"I'll tell my mother -!"

"Go ahead! One word from me and she will be the one that takes your car away from you."

Slap!

"You can't treat me like this!"

Tyrion kept his arm raised toward Joffrey, but his fingers curled until he had one finger pointed in
Joffrey's face.

"Then listen closely, nephew!" the little man shouted at the blonde. "You seem to be forgetting that your actions toward Sansa were carried out in public. You are forgetting just how many of your classmates have parents who are here tonight. You are forgetting just how badly your actions reflect upon your family, and especially on your father. You are forgetting that this party is in honor of the Tyrell's, and without their financial backing your father's business could collapse, also you are forgetting that there is a clause allowing either party to back out of the contract if at any point it can be demonstrated that being associated with your family is in any way detrimental to the other party."

Sandor watched as uncle and nephew stared at each other, and as a vein pulsed at Tyrion Lannister's temple, while Joffrey's nostrils flared angrily. It was some minutes before Joffrey backed down, seeming to have understood his uncle's words. Tyrion must have sensed the change in Joffrey's demeanor, as Sandor saw his stance relax a fraction in turn.

"Good," Tyrion said, before taking a step towards the door. "Be ready to greet your guests in thirty minutes, and do not be late."

Joffrey began swearing as soon as the door had shut behind his uncle, and it took another shot of whisky before the blonde regained his cool.

"Who the hell does that midget think he is?" Joffrey muttered as he placed his now empty glass on the countertop, "Fuck! Look what he did to my face!"

Sandor turned to find Joffrey gripping the bar in anger. The jerk had caught sight of his reflection in the mirrored wall behind the bar. Not only was his hair disheveled, both his cheeks were glowing bright red from the repeated slaps his uncle had given him. Sandor wanted to laugh so hard, and he did, which earned him a nasty glare from Joffrey.

"Fuck, you!" the blonde snapped at him.

Sandor only laughed harder, the deep sound of it echoing loudly in the wood-paneled room.

"Your face looks like a monkey's ass," Sandor commented, "you know the kind...the ones with the shiny, red butts!"

Joffrey whirled around. "Shut the hell up, Hound!"

His comment had further aggravated the blonde jerk, and it resulted in Joffrey's face turning even redder.

"Shit!" Joffrey had his palms up to his cheeks. "How the fuck do I get the redness to go down?"

Joffrey grabbed some ice from a nearby ice bucket and held it against his face.

"You're gonna need more," Sandor advised him.

He then watched as Joffrey grabbed the entire bucket, and as he fled the room without another word to him. Sandor assumed that the jerk was fetching more ice so he could shove his face into it. Sandor laughed at the image, before he refilled his glass and walked out of the room so he could wander and observe the goings on from the shadows.

Sansa
The limousine approached the gates of The Red Keep, and Sansa was unable to prevent the unwelcome twinge of anxiety that fluttered in her belly. She reasoned with herself that it was natural to feel nervous, after all, it would be the first event she and Joffrey were both attending outside of school after splitting up, and she knew that everyone would be watching. The kids at her school were like sharks in the water when it came to gossip. *It's an appropriate, if somewhat clichéd simile,* Sansa thought. *They can smell blood. They circle around, waiting for some unsuspecting victim to make a wrong move, and then they attack, making biting comments, ripping your character to shreds, making mince-meat of your reputation, until there is nothing left, not even the truth.*

She was prepared for this. Sansa smiled inwardly. She'd worn armor that evening, care of Dolce & Gabbana, and Christian Louboutin. Her dress was 50's style, sleeveless and made of light blue brocade. It had a demure, square neckline, a bodice that was fitted at her waist and a skirt that flared down to her calves in gentle pleats. She'd accessorized by adding a crystal embellished belt around her waist, diamond earrings and a bracelet to match. On her feet, she wore silver, pointed-toe heels with stud detailing, and the bright red soles that Louboutin was known for.

She'd worn her hair in a simple fish-tail braid that draped over one shoulder, and kept her make-up light and fresh. Her bruise had healed quite well during the week, leaving only the faintest shadow that would shortly disappear, and Sansa was glad for it, although the memory would never fade from her mind.

The limousine eased smoothly around the curved driveway, stopping directly at the entrance, where an efficient attendant opened the passenger door. Her father stepped out first, before holding his hand out to her mother. As usual, her mother was nothing short of elegant and refined in a long dress, made of a dark grey silk that draped loosely over her shoulders and hips. She wore diamonds at her neck, ears and around her wrist, and had styled her auburn hair into a simple twist. Looking at her mother in awe, Sansa had to remind herself that this woman had borne five children.

She met her father's questioning gaze when he held his hand out towards her.

"Are you all right, Sansa?" he asked as she stepped out of the limo.

"Of course, father." Sansa smiled at him, and she continued to smile as the rest of her family gathered at the entrance.

"Bran, please make sure you keep an eye on Rickon…Arya, please do not pick at your dress," her mother muttered quietly to her sister.

"But, it itches!" Arya whined.

"Just, do not make it so obvious…"

"…If you hadn't insisted on changing my dress, I wouldn't be itching now!"

"Arya, I will not warn you again…"

The exchange between her sister and mother only widened Sansa's smile, and even the whispered comments of the younger guests waiting at the entrance was not going to remove it.

"She is here…"

"I was half expecting that she wouldn't attend…"

Sansa ignored them, and followed her parents into the brightly lit saw Joffrey before he spotted her, but she didn't flinch when his eyes finally landed on her. There was an unbecoming redness to his
cheeks, and the hair about his face appeared damp. He looked stunned for a moment when he saw her, and certainly less than his usual polished self, but Sansa promptly turned her gaze elsewhere. She'd wasted enough of her time on Joffrey, and he didn't deserve anymore of her attention.

She greeted his parents and his uncles with beaming smiles, and the pleasant words she'd been taught to recite at such occasions. *Courtesy is a lady's armor.* As perfect as she knew she looked in her designer dress, Sansa understood that a gracious demeanor, perfect poise and composure would serve her better, if she hoped to get through the night unscathed.

Her family was subsequently ushered through the house, and into the ballroom.

"Ah, Stark!"

A fat man with curly brown hair and a greying beard separated himself from a group of guests gathered at one side of the room and made his way towards them. At the sound of her father's name being called out, heads turned towards the doorway where Sansa and her family were standing. Murmurs broke out, and Sansa observed that most of the murmuring came from the younger guests in the crowd.

"Vultures," she heard Arya mutter.

The fat man stopped directly in front of their father, who reached out to shake the man's outstretched hand.

"Mace, good to see you this evening."

"And you, Ned," said the man, who then turned to their mother. "You look beautiful, Catelyn."

"Thank you, Mace." Her mother smiled in return. "Will Alerie be joining us this evening?"

"She's currently making the obligatory rounds, but she will be with us shortly."

"Mace, I'd like you to meet our children,"

Sansa, her sister and brothers were introduced to Mace Tyrell, and Sansa recognized him to be Margaery's father. She could see that he had once been a handsome man, but asides from the color of his hair, Sansa could see little resemblance to his dashing sons. He occupied her parents in small talk for some minutes, before they were interrupted by the arrival of a tall young man dressed in a tuxedo, and holding a cane.

"Willas, good of you to join us, son." Mace clamped a hand on his son's shoulder. "Willas, I'd like to introduce you to Ned and Catelyn Stark, and their children."

Willas Tyrell stood next to his father and shook hands with Sansa's parents, then greeted her siblings in turn.

"We've met before," Arya said to him.

"At the Battle of The Bands, I remember." Willas nodded with a smile, before turning to Sansa. Sansa remembered him to be handsome, but until that moment, she'd forgotten just how good looking he was. She'd likened him to Loras the first time she had met him, and seeing him again reinforced her opinion that in addition to being an older version of Loras, Willas also appeared more self-assured. There was a decidedly masculine air about him, whereas Loras seemed somewhat effeminate in comparison, Sansa decided.
"It's nice to see you again, Sansa." Willas took hold of her hand, and held her fingers longer than required.

"Likewise." She smiled at him brightly.

"I hope we get the opportunity to really talk tonight," he said. "The Battle of The Bands wasn't the most conducive of atmospheres, conversation wise."

Sansa's smile froze for just a second as images of herself and Sandor, and what happened between them that night flashed into her mind. Conversation had not been possible with Sandor either, but it hadn't really been necessary at the time.

"I'm looking forward to it," she made herself say instead, before she amped up the wattage of her smile and promptly changing the subject. "Forgive me if I'm being nosy, but why do you need to use a cane?"

Sansa recalled he'd been using his cane the first time they had met, but her mind had been elsewhere, and she never thought to ask him. She hoped he didn't think she was being rude.

"Oh, this?" Willas tapped the black, lacquered cane against his leg. "I was in a riding accident some months ago, and I broke my leg, but recovery has been slower than I'd like,"

"So, it's temporary?"

"I certainly hope so!" Willas laughed. "Horses are a passion of mine, and I can't wait to get back to riding,"

"We have stables at Winterfell Manor," Sansa found herself saying with a note of wistfulness in her voice. "I miss riding. I used to ride almost every day,"

"Well, perhaps your parents will let me take you riding some time. Once I'm fully recovered, of course."

"You would do that for me?" Sansa's eyes widened at his offer.

"It would be my pleasure."

Willas then engaged her in a conversation about breeds of horses, and competitions he'd participated in, before they were joined soon after by the rest of his family. They were led by a little old lady who carried herself like a Queen, Sansa thought. She was small and frail looking, with snowy white hair, but there was something about the way her eyes gleamed that hinted at strength that went beyond size and muscles. Sansa was reacquainted with Margaery, who looked superb in a daringly low-cut dress, as well as Loras and Garlan, who both greeted her politely before speaking with her parents.

"It's nice to see you again, Sansa," the gorgeous brunette said.

"And you, Margaery," Sansa returned the older girl's greeting, before she was introduced to Margaery's grandmother.

"Who is this darling creature?" demanded the old lady.

"Gran, this is Sansa Stark," Willas replied.

"Olenna Redwyne," the old lady placed her hand in the one Sansa held out.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am."
"Do call me Gran." Olenna squeezed her hand. "Might I say, that is a lovely dress you're wearing this evening."

"Oh, thank you —"

"It's most becoming on you, my dear. It reminds me of the dresses I used to wear when I was a girl." Olenna then gave her granddaughter a measuring glance. "I don't understand the fashion these days. The amount of flesh you young things display is obscene."

"Gran!" Margaery's arms fluttered over her chest. "It's not that low cut,"

"Really, Margaery," Olenna continued, "I don't understand why you feel the need to flaunt so much bosom, you're leaving nothing to the imagination. Come along now Sansa, meet my daughter-in-law Alerie."

Sansa could only smile in empathy at the flustered expression on Margaery's face, and noted briefly that Willas was not bothering to hide his mirth, at the expense of his sister, before she was drawn into conversation with the adults.

"Let's head to the marquee, shall we? I'd you to meet some of my key managers, Ned." Mace Tyrell then led the entire party outside to the garden.

Sansa noted that the decorations were similar to the night of their introduction to King's Landing society. She caught her sister looking around at the guests, as though she was looking for someone.

"Are you expecting someone?" Sansa couldn't help but ask.

"No," Arya replied, "my friends wouldn't be invited to a party like this."

For a crazy second, Sansa had been tempted to ask if Sandor had been invited, but she squashed the urge. Looking out over the crowd properly for the first time since they had arrived, Sansa recognized many faces of kids from school. Joffrey's hangers-on, she realized, whose parents worked for Baratheon Corp. Trant and Blount were in a corner chatting up some girls she didn't know. She saw other guys from the football team, as well as some girls from the cheer squad.

*I wish the Hound were here*, Sansa thought. It occurred to her then, that every party she had ever been to, Sandor Clegane had always been present. She didn't see him now, in fact she didn't even know if he was still friends with Joffrey, given what had happened at Blount's party. The thought of Sandor no longer attending the same parties seemed strange to her, and unnatural. Wherever Joffrey was, the Hound would not be far behind. That's how it was.

She wasn't sure why she wanted Sandor there. It wasn't like she could just walk up to him and start talking to him. Even if all they could have was friendship, there was too much awkwardness between them, and too much wanting on her part that would get in the way.

*It's better this way*, she thought. *It's best that he's not here.*

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**Sandor**

The little bird had arrived. He'd been watching the limousines pull up at the entrance from a darkened balcony overlooking the driveway, and he'd done nothing but follow her with his eyes from the moment she had stepped out of the limo. He'd lost track of her when she and her family had been led into the house, but it hadn't taken him long to find her again, and he'd stood in a shadowy doorway outside the ballroom where he could watch as Sansa smiled at the oldest Tyrell son. He
didn't like the way she was smiling at the cane-toting college boy, but there was nothing he could do to stop her, or the jealousy rising in his gut. She looked stunning, and Sandor had felt a tightening in his chest when he'd first seen her. She was dressed far more demurely than the other girls from school, but that only seemed to work in her favor. Sansa stood out from the crowd, in the best possible way.

He almost didn't recognize Arya. From the back, he couldn't even tell that it was her. She'd put her hair up in some kind of bun that hid her purple tips, and it wasn't until she had turned around that he'd recognized her. He'd wanted to laugh at the sour expression on her face, but he didn't want to startle the people around him, so he settled on having to heckle her later.

He then observed as the rest of the Tyrell clan approached the Starks. They were led by the matriarch of the family, a tiny old lady with white hair called Olenna Redwyne, who Sandor had learned was the mother of Mace Tyrell. She was closely followed by a tall woman with platinum-silver hair, Margaery and her two other brothers. There were more handshakes, and air-kisses as the group made more introductions and small talk, but Sandor's focus was drawn mainly towards the Tyrell girl, and how she seemed to be sizing Sansa up. Of course, he wasn't sure that's what Margaery was doing, but there was just something about the way she smiled at Sansa that made him wary.

He continued to watch them for a time, but then he found himself scrambling for cover when the group began to move towards the doorway. He jumped from shadow to shadow, and followed them outside towards the marquees that had been set up in the garden. It wasn't long after that the group got separated. Sandor watched as Ned Stark was led off by Mace Tyrell and his son Willas in one direction, Catelyn followed the tall, silver-haired lady in another. Arya and her younger brothers followed the two other Tyrell brothers, Loras and Garlan, while Sansa was taken by the arm by Olenna Redwyne, and led away by Margaery.

Sandor frowned and tried to catch up to the trio who were heading back towards the house, but swore when he saw the three ladies disappear behind a door that was promptly closed. What are they up to? He wondered, but with no other choice, he grabbed a glass of something alcoholic from the closest passing waiter, and went to find himself another dark balcony to haunt. He found one that overlooked the garden, and he saw that he had found the two other Tyrell brothers who were now in a group that included Renly Baratheon and some other college guys on the football team that Sandor recognized.

Below the balcony, Sandor heard the chatter of children's voices. A section of the garden had been purposely dressed and decorated specifically with the youngest of guests in mind. There were toys aplenty to keep the kids entertained, and even a small refreshment stand with juice and fresh fruit at the ready. There were minders on attendance to keep an eye on the dozen or so kids that Sandor could see. On closer inspection, he found himself observing Rickon Stark playing with a little girl.

"Can there be dragons?" the little girl asked Rickon.

"Of course," the little boy replied, "how can it be a game about knights and castles if there aren't any dragons?"

"What about witches? Can there be an evil witch, too?"

Rickon looked to be giving it some serious thought, before coming to a decision. "Okay, Shireen. There's an evil witch who owns a big, mean dragon. She's trapped you in the dungeon, and I have to come and rescue you."

"Can I be a princess?" the girl asked excitedly, before her tone quickly saddened. "Oh, no. I can't be a princess."
"Why not?" Rickon asked her.

The little girl sighed. "Because…princesses are supposed to be beautiful…and I'm not beautiful."

It was then that Sandor realized the identity of Rickon's little playmate. Shireen Baratheon. Shireen was Robert Baratheon's niece, Joffrey's cousin. He'd only seen the little girl a handful of times before, but he felt a sort of empathy towards the girl, for she had a facial disfigurement, too. Most of the left side of the girl's face and neck was afflicted by a terrible scarring, courtesy of an illness the girl had suffered as a baby. He'd heard that the girl was often teased at school, and aside from one friend whom she referred to as 'Patches', he deduced that Shireen led a lonely childhood.

"Who said that you're not beautiful?" Rickon Stark demanded, taking a step closer to the little girl, who stood half a head taller than he.

"The other kids at school make...make fun of me," she stammered, "they call me a freak,"

"Well, they're stupid," Rickon stated, "you have very nice blue eyes, and you're fun to play with. Don't listen to mean people, Shireen."

"Really, Rickon?"

"Of course,"

Sandor had to chuckle at the exchange. The little boy was sincere in his praise about Shireen, and it seemed that the seven year old knew more about girls than most of the teenage boys Sandor knew.

He wondered if Rickon's big sister Sansa had the same ability to see the good in the scarred freaks like him.

He went back to scanning the garden, hoping to find Arya among the crowd, but somehow the little bitch had disappeared. He figured she'd gone to find a dark corner of her own, and he decided he'd find her before the night was through so he could go about heckling her as he'd determined to do earlier. He finished the alcohol in his glass, which had turned out to be white wine, just as his stomach grumbled reminding him he hadn't eaten, and he was wondering how far away dinner was from being served when he saw Joffrey making his way over to Renly Baratheon's crowd, with Margaery hanging onto his arm. He frowned. Where was Sansa? He'd seen the little bird disappear with Margaery and the old lady – said old lady was now back in the garden marquee – but Sansa had not reappeared.

The curtain that separated the balcony from the room behind him parted without warning – and suddenly, Sansa was there, standing right before him. She looked flustered, and upset, but her expression quickly turned to shock upon seeing his face.

"Oh!" She took a hasty step backwards, stumbling on the threshold behind her.

Sandor caught her arm and steadied her before she fell. "Careful now, little bird."

He made sure she had her footing back, before releasing her arm. He put some distance between them, and only when he stood about three feet away from her did her expression change from shocked, to flustered again.

"You're here," she said, her voice higher than normal.

"Want me to leave?" he asked gruffly, "I'm sure I can find another balcony,"
"No! No…I meant, you're here…at the party,"

"He invited me." Sandor nodded towards Joffrey in the garden below.

"Oh." She looked uncertain. "I just thought…"

"His brain doesn't work the way you expect it would," Sandor grunted. 

*That's what makes the bastard crazy, and dangerous.*

"You're right." Sansa nodded, shifting from one foot to the other. "I'll get out of your way –"

"What's the matter with you?" Sandor blurted out.

It was the first time he was in her company since the night of Blount's party, and he wasn't ready to let her go just yet. He ignored the voice in his head telling him it was a bad idea.

"I'm sorry?"

"When you came in." He put his empty glass down onto the wrought-iron table near him. "Something's upset you,"

"It's nothing."

"Liar," he said softly, but the rasp of his voice made the word sound harsher than he intended, so he clarified himself. "Margaery and her grandmother, what did they want with you?"

"You saw?" She only had to see the twitch of his burned lip to know the answer. "Oh…I'd rather not talk about it,"

She turned her head towards the group in the garden below, and Sandor followed her gaze, landing on Margaery, who had tucked her hand into the crook of Joffrey's arm.

"That's tomorrow's gossip, right there," Sansa murmured quietly, "I hope she knows what she's doing."

Sandor frowned, before something Joffrey had said to him clicked into place.

*I'd be better off with Margaery Tyrell…I'm going to show that little red-headed bitch that she's not irreplaceable."

Sandor's forehead furrowed as he took a closer look at Joffrey and Margaery. Indeed, Joffrey was behaving like a child showing off a new toy. He was flirting with Margaery, caressing the top of her arm, and Sandor was certain the jerk was ogling Margaery's cleavage.

"He doesn't waste time," Sandor muttered.

"It's her I'm worried about," Sansa said tightly, her eyes still fixed on Margaery. "They asked…I had to tell her about him, but I don't think she listened."

"Tell her what?" he prompted, but she was already shaking her head.

"Forget I said anything, okay? He's not my problem anymore." She turned to leave again, but for the second time he stalled her.

"Sansa." She stopped immediately at the sound of her name on his lips. "Are you…you know?
Okay?"

She didn't pretend to misunderstand him, but she did lower her eyes for a second. When she raised them again, their blue depths shone with a confidence he couldn't recall seeing before.

"I'm fine," she stated, then she met his stare. "Actually, I wanted to thank you. I probably should have said something sooner, but I never –"

"Thank me, for what?"

"For what you did for me that night,"

He didn't pretend to misunderstand her.

"I couldn't just stand there and watch," he growled, the memory of her frightened expression and tear stained cheeks angering him anew.

"You were the only one who helped me," she continued, her voice filled with gratitude and something else he couldn't put a name to.

It made him want to reach out and hug her. She'd looked so helpless that night, and his anger deepened when he recalled how no one else had gone to help her. Sandor became uncomfortable with her stare, and he lashed out because he didn't know how else to react.

"Yeah…well it took you long enough to dump him. Did you really have to let yourself sink to that level before you finally had enough? Why the fuck did you stay with him all that time?"

She looked surprised at his outburst, but he was in for a bigger surprise when she answered him.

"I made a mistake, okay?" She looked up at him defiantly. "I'm the girl with her head in the clouds, remember? Butterflies and zebras, fairytales and moonbeams, that's all I ever thought about…"

_Why the hell is she quoting Jimi Hendrix?_ Sandor wondered, but he held eye contact with her, understanding that this was a big deal for both of them.

"…I didn't know Joffrey was a total jerk, and by the time I realized he wasn't going to change, I was too embarrassed and too afraid –" She broke off suddenly. "– Why do I have to explain myself to you?"

She turned around sharply, and had managed to take three steps into the darkened room behind her, before Sandor caught her elbow and spun her around.

"Sansa, I'm sorry…I didn't mean to…fuck!" he swore above her head. "I'm no good at apologies."

"You're not much better at accepting gratitude, either," she bit back.

Sandor looked down at her and again met her blue eyes. A second later she was giggling, and she covered her mouth with her hand. Sandor allowed himself to relax a fraction, but her change in mood did not mean he could drop his guard.

"I guess I'm not." He released her arm, then scratched at a spot on his chin. "People don't usually…it doesn't happen often."

She regarded him silently for a moment, and it was his turn to shift uncomfortably, but he was determined not to lash out again just because he was uncomfortable. She wasn't going to forgive him so easily a second time.
"You've helped me out a few times now, Sandor," she said at length, "I know it wasn't always your choice sometimes, but you helped me all the same." She reached out and touched his hand with her fingertips, and he couldn't help but notice that her hand shook. "Thank you."

She was smiling at him. The little bird was smiling, just for him, and Sandor thought his heart would break at the beauty of it.

"You're welcome," he managed to utter.

Sansa finally made her way across the room to leave, but she turned back to face him just before she reached the doorway. "Oh, I forgot…um, I still have your letterman jacket."

He frowned. His jacket? He'd forgotten about it.

"Right, just give it to me at school."

"Okay." She gave him a small nod, and another smile. "I'll, uh…talk to you later."

"Okay."

She turned back at the door. "Sandor."

"Yeah?"

"I'll tell Arya that you're here, okay?"

_Arya?_ He'd forgotten about her, too. _Fuck!_

"Okay."

Sansa finally left, and only then could he allow himself to breathe properly. He didn't want to admit that their brief encounter had shaken him, but it had. He wondered if being near her would always have that effect on him. His skin tingled where she had touched him. _Am I always going to burn like this?_ He knew all about being burnt, but Sansa's touch and nearness burned deeper, and at times, more painfully than anything he'd ever known.

He needed more wine, so he left the sitting room in search of more. Red, if he could help it.

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_Arya_

Green lace. She was wearing green lace in a pattern that was decidedly too floral for her liking. She scratched at a spot on her shoulder where the material was irritating her skin. _Burberry Prorsum_, her mother had said, as though that would make all the difference.

"Stop scratching, Arya…"

"It's itchy, mom…"

"It's silk, it's all in your head…"

"Still itchy…"

Her feet ached, too. She was wearing nude heels with ankle straps that scraped her skin every time she took a step. And, she was hungry. _When are they going to serve dinner?_ She'd taken her brothers to the children's play area as she'd been instructed to do earlier.
"Oh, I can't do this," Bran had said upon seeing that the play area was populated by kindergarteners and grade-schoolers. "I'll catch you later, Arya,"

"Where are you going?"

"The library, they have an awesome collection here," he'd replied, "I'll turn up for dinner, don't worry."

After seeing that Rickon was settled, she had tailed the waiters carrying trays of canapés around and had managed to sample everything twice, before she started getting curious looks. So she'd grabbed one more handful, and found a quiet place where she could nibble at the smoked salmon in peace.

She also ended up drinking more virgin-cocktails than was wise, which was how she found herself back in the house in search of the ladies' room. The guest bathroom on the ground floor had been occupied, and a caterer had told her where she could find another one on the next floor.

Afterward, she didn't feel like returning to the garden, so she set out to find the library, figuring she could keep Bran company. Her visits to The Red Keep had been scarce, and she didn't really know where the library was, so it was no surprise that she soon found herself lost. What did surprise her was the sound of voices when she pushed open the door that led into a dimly lit sitting room, and the unmistakable rasp that could only belong to Sandor Clegane.

"…I'm sure I can find another balcony," she heard him say.

She was about to exit the room, thinking she'd find him later when he wasn't occupied, when she heard Sansa's voice. She stopped. She listened. She stayed too long. She heard too much. *Nope. I cannot…I should not be listening to this!*

But then she heard the shuffling of footsteps on the balcony, and then came Sansa's muffled cry, "– why do I have to explain myself to you?"

Arya dove behind the settee, thankful that the floor was thickly carpeted, and her fall made no noise. Then it was too late for her to leave, and Sandor and her sister were in the room. She could only hope that neither of them sat down, or walked behind the settee. She heard *everything.*

She risked a peak underneath the settee, and she watched as her sister reached out to touch Sandor's hand while she thanked him. Sandor's voice was thick when he finally spoke, and hesitant, as though he couldn't trust himself to speak. But, it was the sound of her sister's voice that really intrigued Arya. There was something in Sansa's tone, an unspoken something that she couldn't place just yet. Sansa sounded sad…*No, that's not what it is.*

She listened as Sansa ended the conversation with Sandor, "I'll tell Arya that you're here, okay?"

*Fuck!* Arya thought. She didn't make a sound, or even dare to breathe while Sandor paced the room for some minutes after Sansa had left. She stayed where she was even after Sandor did leave, thinking over everything she had heard. Eventually, she figured out what it was that she could hear in her sister's voice; *longing.*

Sansa used to have a similar tone in her voice when she talked about other crushes she'd had in the past. She'd even had it when she used to speak of Joffrey all those months ago. But hearing her speak to Sandor, Arya recognized that there was a huge difference. There was something raw, and deeper about the longing she now heard in Sansa's voice.

"That has to be it," she whispered to herself, "she likes Sandor. *I know it.*"
She had pieced together all the little clues she'd somehow overlooked, ignored or completely misunderstood in the past, like Sansa making a move on Sandor at the Battle of the Bands, and witnessing her hugging Sandor's letterman jacket. Then there was the odd encounter Gendry had told her about.

"I've just had an odd conversation with your sister…it was strange…she was asking about Sandor," Gendry had said to her.

Gendry had found Sansa in the music room the same afternoon as her public break-up with Joffrey.

"I couldn't just walk away like I'd never noticed her, you know?" Gendry had continued when Arya had prompted him for further details. "She asked how Sandor's been treating you…but, it was the way she asked that felt odd to me."

Gendry hadn't been able to give her a proper explanation about what he meant by that, only that it had been enough to prompt him to call Arya.

"Who knows? Maybe she likes him?" Gendry had asked, flippantly.

Now, Arya considered that Gendry might have been onto something, and if he was proven to be correct, then Arya had to remove all and any obstacles that would stand in Sansa and Sandor's way.

Dinner was served buffet style that evening, and Arya saw Sandor take a plate piled high with food before skulking off to eat in private. She had no choice but to sit with her family until dinner was over. Arya watched her sister closely during the meal, but aside from the occasional covert glances Sansa kept throwing around the tables, Arya saw nothing peculiar about her sister's behavior. She'd expected her sister to be nervous, especially with Joffrey nearby, but she was the picture of calm and perfection. It made Arya wary, for some reason.

Arya ended up sending Sandor a text message after dinner. "Tell me where you are. I don't want to run around trying to find you."

He replied shortly after. "Pool house."

She found him drinking red wine from the bottle.

"Are you planning on getting shit-faced drunk?"

"When did you start dressing like a school teacher?" Sandor shot back, eyeing her green dress.

"Jerk," she said as she sat beside him. "This was my mother's idea,"

"What was your original dress?"

"Short and purple, to match my hair,"

"Your mother has better taste,"

"Shut the fuck up,"

"Your sister told you I was here?"

"Yep, and I saw you at the buffet tables earlier,"

"Right,"
"So, you talked to Sansa?" she asked, sort of hoping he'd confide in her.

"In passing," he wasn't going to share.

Arya sighed.

"Well, it's a good thing that you're here, actually." She turned to look at him. "I need to talk to you about something."

He frowned at her, before taking another drink from the bottle. "I'm not going to like what you're going to tell me, am I?"

"Probably not."

"Then I don't want to hear it."

"Well, suck shit," she swore at him, "I told Jaqen I'd go on a date with him next weekend."

"Really?" He gave her a curious look. "What about Gendry?"

"I haven't totally made up my mind."

"But you're still going on a date with Jaqen Whatshisname?"

"Yeah..."

"So, what's that got to do with me?"

"I'm telling you that I'm not going to be your fake girlfriend anymore."

"And, why not? Your Faceless punk knows it's not real between us."

"I mean it," she told him, her tone adamant. "Jaqen may know it's not real, but the rest of the school don't, and I want everyone to know we're not together anymore before gossip about me and Jaqen get out there."

"So, this is all about you, then? Your reputation."

"Of course, this is about me." She rolled her eyes. "It's pointless, and you're an idiot to keep insisting on this stupid boyfriend-girlfriend charade when there's no reason to keep it up. Sansa's free now, and you can't keep hiding behind me."

"Hiding? Why would I be...? Did you call me an idiot?" Sandor looked at her, his good eyebrow raised incredulously, and Arya figured not many people dared to call him that to his face.

"The biggest," she agreed, "so, I'm ending it."

"Just like that, huh?"

"Just like that."

"What if I don't agree?"

"It's too late for that," Arya said matter-of-factly, "come Monday morning everyone at school is going to know about our break-up."

Sandor turned his upper body so he could look at her directly. "What the fuck did you do?"
Arya brandished her phone in the air. "I've left an anonymous tip on Gossip Spyder's page. It's the fastest way to make sure everyone hears about it."

Sandor stared at her in shock, but he could only shake his head at her in response. "You're a crazy little bitch."

"I know, you say it all the time." Arya stood up and dusted-off her skirt. "Now, excuse me while I go and get dessert!"
Hi everyone! First of all, I cannot thank you enough for waiting and being so patient between updates. 2014 has been a life changing year for me and my family, with the early arrival of our little baby girl, who was born 8 weeks premature. I’m very pleased to say that she is healthy, and is fast catching up in her development.

I have continued to receive reviews and messages from new and existing readers, and I want to express my sincere thanks for your encouragement, as well as constructive criticism. I have to say, Gossip Spyder is being written pretty much for the fans...as much as I love these characters and writing, the story is in my head, complete, so I already know how it ends...I want you to know the ending too, so I will keep writing!

Gossip Spyder

Breaking news! Breaking news!

I received an anonymous tip that Arya Stark has broken up with Sandor 'The Hound' Clegane!

Yes, you read that correctly. Arya Stark is a single girl once more. Oh, my God!

On Saturday evening, an anonymous witness saw Arya breaking up with the Hound. Both were at the party at the Baratheon mansion. Watch out everyone, there’s no telling how the Hound is going to react to being dumped!

I had a feeling that the party at the Red Keep was going to be a major event, but this surpasses my expectations!

My sources also tell me that the ever gorgeous Margaery Tyrell was seen flirting and laughing with Joffrey Baratheon. Meanwhile, Sansa Stark was spotted getting cozy with debonair college man, Willas Tyrell. It certainly looks like there is no love lost between exes Joffrey and Sansa!

With both Stark sisters now back on the market, everyone will be watching who these ladies will date next!

Finally, I also have news that Margaery's transfer to KL Prep is effective as of this Monday. Welcome to KL Prep, Margaery!

TTFN

Gossip Spyder

Gendry

It was true. Gossip Spyder's news about Arya and Sandor was true. Hot Pie had confirmed it with Arya that morning as soon as the post had gone online, and he'd let Gendry know the moment he'd found out. Her stupid, fake relationship with Sandor is over, and it's about fucking time!
He got dressed in a rush, wolfing down his breakfast, almost forgetting to grab his guitar on his way out the door in his haste to get to school. It seemed that the moment he got out of his car, the chatter all the way from the parking lot to his homeroom was all about Arya's breakup with the Hound, or Sansa flirting with some college guy, or this Margaery Tyrell, whoever she was. Hot Pie was already in his seat, waiting for him, and the guy gave him a smile as he sat down at his desk.

"It's crazy, huh?" Hot Pie began, "it's as though the entire school was just waiting for her to break up with him."

"What do you mean?"

"Dude, weren't you listening to all that talk out there?"

"I heard some, but I wasn't really paying attention." Gendry leaned forward and lowered his voice before continuing. "Besides, we both know the truth."

"Well, yeah," Hot Pie agreed, "it's just that, Sandor seems to be getting a rough deal."

"What?"

"Those girls over there, they were saying it was unbelievable that Arya stayed with Sandor so long, and that she finally must have had some sense knocked back into her. I heard some other girl say that no girl in her right mind would choose Sandor Clegane over Jaqen H'ghar, and someone else said that Sandor was lucky to have any girl want him as a boyfriend at all."

"Yeah, rough." Gendry did not really care.

"Dude, have a heart,"

"Dude," Gendry returned, "I honestly think the guy can handle it. It's not like he hasn't had shit said about him before."

Hot Pie sighed. "Well, are you gonna make your move or what, dude?"

"Call me dude one more time, I dare you,"

"Duuuuude!"

A scuffle ensued, with Gendry attempting to backhand his friend, while Hot Pie laughed and dodged as best as he could. They were shortly interrupted by the appearance of their homeroom teacher.

"This conversation is to be continued, and you will tell me what you plan to do about Arya," Hot Pie declared.

"My only plan involves talking to her first," Gendry stated, "what comes after that...well, it all depends, doesn't it?"

Carrying out his plan proved much trickier than he anticipated when his morning classes passed by without one glimpse of Arya. By the time lunch hour arrived and Arya was not in line at the cafeteria as he expected, he sent her a text message.

"Are you having lunch with us today?"

He had almost reached the end of the queue before she replied back to him.

"Not today. Keeping a low profile. Too much gossip."
Gendry frowned at her words. It wasn't Arya's style to hide from gossip, especially when he knew that she was the one responsible for that bogus anonymous tip to Gossip Spyder. Yet, he chose to give her the benefit of doubt. Perhaps it would be better to let the worst of the gossip die down before he made his move. After all, it would look bad if Arya were to hook up with another guy immediately after breaking up with Sandor Clegane.

He'd waited many long weeks for his chance to be with her. He could wait a few more days.

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Sansa

Her face hurt. More specifically, the muscles around her mouth and cheeks that she'd been using to hold up the fake smile she'd been wearing all morning. Arya and Sandor had broken up, and she didn't know how to react to the sudden news. In addition, Margaery had swept into the quad as though she had always been part of the KL Prep scene. She'd walked in wearing a gorgeous teal knit-dress that Sansa had seen in the Fall edition of *Vogue*, greeting people, thanking everyone who welcomed her and gracing people with her dazzling smile.

"As though she owned the place," Jeyne had commented.

Sansa could not have cared less about Margaery Tyrell, and neither did she care about the sudden whispers about Margaery taking over as 'Queen' of the playground and replacing her as Joffrey's girlfriend. What she wanted to hear about was Sandor Clegane; more specifically, how he was handling the breakup with her sister. She couldn't ignore the gossip in the corridors, and it wasn't as though people were trying to be discreet about it either. There was little sympathy for Sandor, and it seemed the consensus was that he deserved to be dumped.

"Heartbroken?" one girl scoffed, "you're implying that the Hound has a heart?"

People laughed at the idea that Sandor Clegane could have feelings that could be hurt. Sansa wanted to find him. She needed to see him, although she had no idea what she might want to say to him. What could she say? In any case, it probably wouldn't be deemed appropriate for his ex-girlfriend's sister to be consoling him, especially when that sister was harboring a secret crush. *I just want to see that he is okay,* she told herself. *I'm not going to speak to him.*

The break-up seemed so sudden. Sandor had not given any indication that anything was wrong between him and Arya when Sansa had spoken to him at the party, and she concluded that he probably had no idea that Arya was going to end their relationship that night. Arya had not mentioned anything to her either. Not before, and not the day after the party. But, Arya wasn't really the type who would share things like this, and Sansa wouldn't have known what to say to her sister either if Arya had chosen to talk to her about it.

"How hard is it to find a guy that's nearly seven feet tall?" Sansa muttered under her breath as she scoped out the hallways. A glimpse was all she was after. "I'm not asking for much." She sighed.

Yet, there was a voice in the back of her mind that called her a liar. Being honest with herself, her heart had skipped a beat when she had read about Sandor and Arya breaking up – Sandor was single again – but this was swiftly followed by the crushing realization that she could never act on her feelings for Sandor, under any circumstances. A girl could not go after her sister's ex-boyfriend. There was a rule about that. Sansa remembered reading something about it in a magazine. To be precise, the rule applied to ex-boyfriends of your BFFs, and apparently it was a much greater sin to date the Ex of a sibling.

Secondly, it would be extremely arrogant to think that Sandor would even see her as anything more
than the annoying redhead who had brought him nothing but constant trouble from the time they had met. He had been occasionally nice to her in the past, but at those few times, perhaps he had felt obligated to be civil towards her. She had been Joffrey's girlfriend, and they spoke to each other due to their connection with Joffrey. When Sandor started dating Arya, she'd just been the sister of his girlfriend. But, now she was no longer with Joffrey, and Arya was now his ex-girlfriend. The truth was that they had no connection with each other at all, and no longer had any reason to speak to each other.

Sansa had once called him a friend. It had been the night of her birthday, and he'd taken pity on her after being abandoned by Joffrey. Sandor had taken her to see the view from the top of Serpentine Alley, had bought her dinner and then introduced her to the quaintest little cake shop serving the most delicious lemon cakes she'd ever had.

"Thank you, Sandor," she had said to him after he'd delivered her home afterwards.

"For what?"

"For letting me be your friend."

"What?"

"It's true...what you did for me tonight, only a friend would have done something like that. Thank you."

She remembered him staring at her for a long moment before he'd finally nodded.

"Friends," he had said.

Looking back on it, Sansa now realized that he had not sounded convinced. Perhaps her words had meant nothing to him then, and they were never friends.

Sansa glanced down at her watch, grimacing when she realized she'd been dawdling and would be late to her next class if she didn't hurry up. She glanced back up just in time to see a broad chest encased in a black sweatshirt. She managed to stop her feet before she could smack face first into it.

A coarse grunt above her head let her know that she'd found the guy she'd been searching for. She took a hasty step back, and looked up.

Sandor's expression was fierce. His eyes were partially covered by his hair, but nonetheless she saw the glint in their silvery depths. The line of his jaw was hard too, and she sensed the tension radiating from him. She stared at him, for that was all she could do at that moment. He was irritated, and it appeared his patience was wearing thin. Sansa was familiar with him expressing both of these emotions, and that was no surprise. What caught her off-guard was how not heartbroken he seemed. Sandor looked grumpy. He looked like his normal self, and it was completely not what she had been expecting.

"Got something you want to say?" he muttered.

"N-no." She shook her head.

"Then, would you mind moving aside? You're blocking my locker."

"Oh!" Sansa hastily stepped to the side as he'd asked. "Sorry."

Sansa was surprised to find herself at his locker. Her feet must have brought her there without her
noticing. She watched him grab several books from his locker and stuff them into his backpack. He then took out a black bomber jacket and shrugged it onto his massive shoulders. He appeared to be preparing to leave. Sandor glanced at her.

"Is there a reason you're hovering around me?" he asked as he lined up the zipper fastening of his jacket.

"Classes aren't over," she said the first thing on her mind, "are you going somewhere?"

She was rewarded with a look that told her exactly how pointless he found her question to be.

"Obviously." He slung his backpack over his right shoulder and shut his locker door. "You're gonna be late to class if you don't get going."

Without saying goodbye, Sandor started walking down the hallway that was fast emptying of students, and Sansa knew that it was just as pointless to ask where he was going.

"Sandor," she called out to him, "how are…is everything okay?"

He turned back to face her and she saw that the unburned side of his mouth had lifted into one of his so familiar, mirthless smiles.

"Everything is fucked up, little bird," he replied, "as it should be."

He started laughing then; low, gravelly, without humor, and he continued to laugh as he turned his back on her and walked out of the building.

She hadn't been able to stop herself from asking him, and in the end her concern for him had come up with nothing. Sandor's answer to her question told her nothing about how he actually felt. *Everything is fucked up*, he had said. The guy had never been good at showing emotions other than anger and annoyance, and Sansa figured that the sentiment was the closest he was going to come to admitting he was upset about his break-up with Arya. Regardless, Sansa was kind of relieved to see that he wasn't moping around. His shoulders were more than broad enough to handle this sort of stuff. It saddened her somewhat to realize that he was probably used to rejection.

Sandor didn't need or want her concern. He'd brushed her off quite readily. It seemed he didn't need or want her friendship, either. Could she take that to mean she'd been rejected, too, in a way?

Sighing, she hurried and made her way to her own classroom, wondering how she was going to get over Sandor's rejection.

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**Sandor**

Why the hell did he bother going to school that day? Sandor asked himself as he got into his car. Exiting the school parking lot a moment later, he let out a breath of relief, glad to be away from the prying eyes and audible whispers that had followed him around all morning. He had known it was going to happen, and yet he'd still gone to class. He'd glared and scowled at anyone who dared to look at him, but eventually his annoyance had reached the point of wanting to punch something, so he decided he would leave before he got violent.

Arya had been nowhere to be found, and his text message that morning expressing his displeasure about the current situation had been met with an equally curt text message from his pretend ex-girlfriend.
“Stupid little bitch, happy now? You're dead if this shit doesn't stop soon,” he had texted.

"Did you lose your balls? Stop being such a pussy," Arya had texted back.

Her response had only riled him up, because she had been right.

Sandor bought Mexican takeout, and then headed home where he consumed two burritos and a quesadilla while watching ESPN. He would have happily washed it all down with beer, but he had to settle for soda. He still had to go to football practice that afternoon, and Coach Selmy was watching him closely as it was, especially with the play-offs being so close. Belching loudly, he crumpled up the empty food wrappers into a ball beside him, before he leaned back into the couch.

I did not run away with my tail between my legs like some scared puppy. The sudden thought made him scowl deeper still. I left before my temper got the better of me…it's a completely different issue. Although, there was an annoying voice in his head that was laughing at him, and he decided that if ever that voice in his head somehow developed a physical body, he would punch its lights out. He then wondered if other people ever felt that way about their internal voices. Fuck, I'm thinking crazy things.

He rubbed his hand across his jaw. He had not expected to run into Sansa. In front of his locker, no less. God, she looked beautiful, he thought. He had seen her approaching him. She'd had her head down, and she had almost walked into him. For a moment she had been close enough for him to smell the citrusy shampoo scent in her hair, close enough that he could have touched the fiery strands with his hands. And yet she was as far from his reach as always.

What had she been doing near his locker anyway? Without wanting to seem like a stalker, Sandor knew her class schedule, and he knew she had no reason to be walking down that particular hallway. He didn't want to believe that she had been purposely looking for him, because he wasn't delusional, and the idea was just ludicrous. Had her concern been genuine? She'd asked if everything was okay, and he'd replied in truth. Everything was fucked up, and had been from the moment he had first met her.

Though his life had been far from rosy before Sansa Stark had walked into it, there had been something reassuring in his monotonous existence. School, football, beat up some unfortunate bastard that had gotten on Joffrey's bad side, sleep, and repeat. Routine and predictability kept him calm. Sansa had obliterated that calm. She'd had his heart pounding the instant she'd looked up and gasped at the sight of his face. At the time, he thought it was irritation that had accelerated his heart beat, because a pretty girl had looked at him in fear. Now, he knew that it hadn't been irritation. Simply, it had been attraction at first sight.

Being attracted to Sansa Stark had brought him nothing but endless trouble ever since, and quite bluntly, he was tired of it all. He was glad Sansa had broken up with Joffrey because he was tired of having to save her ass from the blonde jerk, and tired of keeping himself from snapping and knocking out Joffrey's teeth. Despite being annoyed with the gossip at that moment, he was also glad that he didn't have to pretend to be in a relationship with Arya any longer. His reason for keeping up the pretense had also gotten tiring.

The opinions of other people had had never mattered to him before, but for the past couple of months, how Sansa viewed him had become ridiculously important to him. So ridiculous that he'd even begged Arya to continue pretending to be his fake girlfriend. It was so stupid. He'd wanted Sansa to see that he wasn't so scary, or so brutish that he couldn't get a girlfriend. He'd wanted her to see that even though a princess like her might not find him good enough, there was still someone who found him worthy and wanted to be with him.
He shouldn't have bothered. Hearing the bullshit going around school, it seemed he was at fault for Arya dumping him, and that he must have done something wrong. Did Sansa think that way, too? Whatever the case might be, he told himself it was useless to dwell on it. There was nothing he could do about how he was perceived.

He was Sandor Clegane, and there was no getting away from that.

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**Gendry**

After school had ended for the day, Gendry fired off one more text message to Arya, telling her he hoped the day hadn't been too much of a drag for her, before he made his way to The Hallow for band practice. Beric had been talking about someone wanting to pay them to do a show, and while Gendry was excited about the possibility, he had to admit he needed a break from rehearsing. The rehearsals leading up to the Battle of the Bands had been rigorous, but Beric was fanatic when it came to the *Brotherhood Without Banners*, and Gendry did not have the heart to go against their leader, who seemed to be suffering from a form of post-traumatic stress after losing the competition.

"Hey, Gendry. How you doin'?" Tom greeted him.

"Fine, thanks." Gendry mentally prepared himself when he noted the curious look in Tom's eyes.

He took his time setting up his equipment and idly started warming up as the other guys arrived.

"Hey, Gendry." Thoros thumped him on the back. "I heard about Arya's break up. Congratulations."

"What the hell are you congratulating me for? I didn't do anything," Gendry snapped, but inside he was pleased.

"You have a real chance with her now," "If he doesn't let someone else snap her up before he does," Tom pointed out.

"A certain, swarthy someone with an accent and hair streaked with –" Gendry glared at Thoros, who laughed, but didn't finish his sentence. Edric and Beric entered the room at that point, and Gendry endured more ribbing about Arya.

"She finally dumped the Hound."

"She has to choose you. In the looks department, you're a vast improvement, Gendry!"

"But only just," Beric teased, "have you seen this guy's scowl? He looks like a mad bull!"

Gendry scowled at him and indeed, if one squinted, he did resemble his nickname. This earned a laugh from everyone.

"Seriously, Gendry," Edric began, sitting down on his stool behind his drum kit, "you and Arya, when is it happening?"

Gendry cleared his throat, stalling as he tried to figure out what he could say to his friends. It wasn't a simple question to answer, and quite bluntly, everything rode on Arya's feelings for him. He kept in mind that his band mates had no knowledge of the real nature regarding Arya and Sandor's relationship, but they really didn't expect Arya to hook up with him straight after a break-up, did they?
"Guys, she's only been single all of two days. Give her some time."

"How is she, anyway?" Edric asked. "I saw her dashing across the quad this afternoon. I called out to her, but I don't think she heard me."

"I don't really know." Gendry shrugged. "I haven't seen her today."

There was a moment's silence at his words, and he looked at his friends' faces, all of them bearing thoughtful expressions.

"What do you mean?" Edric pressed.

Gendry shrugged again. "I mean, I texted her and she seemed okay. But, she said she was avoiding all the gossip and stuff, and I didn't get to see her."

"Strange," Beric mused, "of all people, I thought you were the one person she would want to talk to."

Gendry felt like he'd had cold water thrown at his face. Beric's words hit a nerve. Was Arya avoiding him? The idea didn't make sense, because he couldn't find a reason why she would do so.

"I don't know how girls think." He shrugged again. "And, Arya's unpredictable as it is…"

She seemed fine being around him just a few days before. She had sat with him at lunch time all of the previous week. Aside from Sandor Clegane no longer being in the picture, he couldn't see what else had changed. Stop trying to lie to yourself, said that voice in his head which always expressed his most negative and darkest thoughts. Ever since you kissed her, Arya's been finding ways not to be alone with you. Her totally avoiding you isn't that impossible to fathom, is it? Maybe she hates that you kissed her. Maybe it was better if you'd never touched her, at least now she wouldn't be keeping herself away from you. Being friend-zoned isn't so bad, compared to being avoided.

Gendry shoved a hand through his already mussed up hair. Fuck the friend-zone. He'd already made the first move, and he was going to see it through, whatever happened. Your confidence is admirable, taunted that voice in his head, but don't get above yourself.

"…Gendry, are you free on Saturday?"

He looked up at the sound of his name, realizing that the conversation had moved on while he'd been brooding. "What?"

"I want one of you to come accompany me when I meet the club owner to work out the terms of the gig, but these guys all seem to be busy. Can you come with me?"

"Yeah, sure," Gendry agreed readily enough. It wasn't as though he was particularly busy, and judging by the mean look in Beric's eyes he didn't really have a choice. "What's the name of the club?"

"It's a place called Heart of Fire, in Braavos."

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**Arya**

She had lied to him. She'd lied to Gendry about wanting to avoid the gossiping horde in the quad and the whispers that followed her around school. It was Gendry that she didn't want to see. He had made it clear that once she and Sandor were no longer 'together', he was going to do whatever he
could to convince her to give him a chance and go on a date with him. Gendry would want to talk, and she had no idea how to tell him that she had already agreed to go on a date with Jaqen that weekend.

And so, for the better part of the week, Arya had made sure to check every corner and scan every corridor as well as avoid open spaces as much as possible, in an effort not to run into Gendry. However, she couldn't avoid his text messages.

"How are you? I didn't see you around today," read one message.

"I'm thinking of going for takeout at lunch, let me know if I can get you anything," read another.

"The Brotherhood has been booked for a gig, I'm going with Beric this weekend to meet the club owner. Come and watch us, okay?"

She had appropriately replied to all of his messages…although she'd allowed for sufficiently long minutes to pass before she would hit 'send'. He had tried to call a few times, but she let those calls ring out, unable to answer them. There was a gnawing feeling in Arya's stomach, and by the end of the week, the cause for the gnawing sensation was clear. It was guilt.

With each text message she received from Gendry that showed his concern for her, and hopefulness, the guilt worsened. Part of her just wanted to come clear and tell him the truth about her plans with Jaqen. Yet, an even more dominant part of her did not want to see the disappointment on his face, or hear it in his voice. All she ever seemed to do was disappoint him, and somehow, it appeared she was incapable of stopping it from happening.

"Why are you avoiding him?" Hot Pie had demanded, straight to the point. Despite her efforts to evade his questioning, he had managed to catch her outside her English classroom one day.

"I'm not ready for him, yet," Arya had ended up saying.

"Who do you think he is, Arya?" Hot Pie had scoffed at her. "Gendry isn't going to rush you like that, you know. Why won't you just go and talk to him?"

There had been no way she could have told Hot Pie about Jaqen either, and so she'd just shrugged.

"Why are you so shy all of a sudden?"

"I am not shy," she'd snapped.

"Then, do you really not see Gendry that way? If that's the case, then you should just say so."

"That's not it, either,"

"So, what is it?"

"Look, Hot Pie." Arya had sighed and shifted from one foot to the other, both in agitation and because she didn't know what she could say. "I…I just need to work some shit out."

Hot Pie had just shaken his head before giving her a piece of advice that made her feel worse.

"Whatever you do, just don't lead him along."

She'd lost sleep thinking about it…about why she continued to hesitate about Gendry, and there was no black and white answer. She was fast learning that few things in life ever seemed to be. Gendry had been her first close friend, and for a long time that was how she had regarded him. The kiss
they’d shared in the empty dressing room at Baelor's Arena had awakened her to the possibility of sharing more than just friendship with Gendry. However, the emotions were too new, and being true to herself, it was the change of heart that she was finding hard to deal with. She didn't know how she was supposed to handle suddenly having to look at Gendry in a romantic light, and she was questioning the depth of her romantic feelings for him.

In comparison, her feelings for Jaqen had always been clear-cut and straightforward. Arya had known she'd had a crush on him almost from the start, and she realized that if things had gone smoothly for her and Jaqen, if the whole debacle with saving Sansa from Joffrey and being in a fake relationship with Sandor had not happened, then there was a very high probability that she would be in a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship with Jaqen right then. At the same time maybe Gendry would never have had the chance to develop those kinds of feelings for her, and she now would not be in this quandary.

Sitting at her dressing table that Friday night, Arya looked at her reflection in her dresser mirror and noted, critically, that despite the physical changes she'd recently experienced, and the clothes she was wearing, the wide-eyed girl staring back at her betrayed her naiveté. She was uncomfortable with how much of a little girl she still felt like, and she wondered if wisdom and maturity really did come with age. If she had been older, would she be better at handling matters of the heart? Would her feelings for Gendry and Jaqen be any clearer?

"Be honest with yourself," the girl in the mirror said to her, "you're nervous about seeing Jaqen tomorrow."

Yes, she was excited about seeing him, but her thoughts about Gendry and the uncertainty in her heart were dampening her excitement. However she looked at it, she was being unfair to both guys.

Sighing, Arya went to her closet and selected some clothes that she felt would be appropriate for a date. She determined that she would enjoy her time with Jaqen, and hoped that the weekend would bring more clarity to her heart and mind.

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**Jaqen**

The weekend had certainly taken its time coming around, he thought, but Saturday had finally dawned, and he woke to a crisp morning. The first thing he did was pick up his smart phone from his bedside table to check for messages, and see what was happening on Facebook. *The Faceless Men* had attracted an unprecedented amount of attention since the Battle of the Bands, and both his email and Facebook inboxes were full of messages from fans, promoters and other local artists interested in working with them. They might not have won the competition, but the opportunities that were coming their way as a result of the exposure were more than he could have hoped for.

Next, he checked the Gossip Spyder's page, and was both relieved and amused when that morning's post made no mention of Arya Stark, and he was glad about that. Instead, the news was about some Tyrell girl who was seen cheering for Joffrey Baratheon at the previous evening's football game, and speculation about how ex-girlfriend, Sansa Stark, would feel about that. Jaqen knew that it wouldn't be long before Arya's name would be headlining the gossip blog page again. The Stark sisters just attracted far too much attention.

The announcement about her break-up with her pretend ex-boyfriend earlier in the week had caught him by surprise, not that he'd expected Arya to give him a heads-up about it. Instead, the news was about some Tyrell girl who was seen cheering for Joffrey Baratheon at the previous evening's football game, and speculation about how ex-girlfriend, Sansa Stark, would feel about that. Jaqen knew that it wouldn't be long before Arya's name would be headlining the gossip blog page again. The Stark sisters just attracted far too much attention.

The announcement about her break-up with her pretend ex-boyfriend earlier in the week had caught him by surprise, not that he’d expected Arya to give him a heads-up about it. Nevertheless, the fact that she had cleared up that one obstacle before their date had pleased him more than he could say. Wanting to see Arya's face, he searched his Facebook feed for the last post that she had been tagged in. It showed Arya in a green dress and wearing a hairstyle that seemed too severe for the Arya he
was familiar with. The photo had been taken at the Baratheon party, and whoever posted it had caught Arya's profile. She was holding Rickon's hand, and genuinely smiling as she posed beside her little brother.

He studied the picture, taking in every line and curve of Arya's figure. The cut of the dress made her look more grown up, and Jaqen smiled, realizing that he liked what he saw, despite the awkwardness that Arya could not disguise. He couldn't wait to see her.

"You are up early, my boy," Uncle Otto greeted him, looking up from his iPad. "There's coffee, if you want some."

"Thanks, uncle."

Jaqen poured himself a cup, before sitting down at the table across from his uncle. From his angle, he could make out that his uncle was viewing a German news website.

"I hear you have special plans today," the older man said.

"Where did you hear that from?" Jaqen raised one eyebrow, though he was unable to keep the smile that split his face.

"Your Umma, for one…and that woman, the bartender who looks young, but isn't…what was her name again?"

"Gretchen," Jaqen supplied, "that will be the last time I tell her anything…and Umma, I cannot expect her to keep anything from you,"

Uncle Otto laughed. "Well, are you going to tell me the young lady's name?"

"It is Arya…Arya Stark,"

"Oh." Uncle Otto gave him a look from over the rims of his glasses. "Stark, hm?"

"I'm sure you know all about the Starks, uncle," Jaqen stated, "you are on that iPad every day, reading the news all the time."

"Well, I cannot claim to know everything about the Starks…terrible, that nasty business with that strike and the rioting a while back…all I know is that the Starks are a very influential family, and I will not hide my curiosity as to how you met the young lady."

"She fell." Jaqen took another sip of coffee, and mumbled into his cup. "She tripped and fell into my lap."

"Care to elaborate?" Uncle Otto put down his iPad long enough to listen to his nephew's story, and by the time Jaqen was finished speaking, he was chuckling at the way his nephew's ears had turned as red as the streak in his hair. "It was lucky you were there to break her fall."

"It was Fate, uncle, not luck," Jaqen corrected him, and then he sighed. "I'm hoping Fate sees fit to sway things in my favor today."

Knowingly, Uncle Otto studied the expression on Jaqen's features and seemed to understand that his teenage nephew was worried about more than just having a successful date.

"I'm sure everything will turn out just how they are supposed to, my boy."

"I hope you are right…I really do."
Jaqen excused himself shortly after that to prepare for his date, taking particular care over his appearance, picking out fitted black jeans, a white t-shirt worn under a grey V-neck sweater, and a port-wine colored scarf. He hadn't seen Arya in a couple of weeks, and he wanted her to see him at his best.

When the time came, he went downstairs to grab his jacket and car keys.

"You will go to pick her up now, yes?" Umma asked in her slightly accented speech, lingering in the doorway to the kitchen where Jaqen could smell the unmistakable scent of strudel baking in the oven.

"Yes, Umma." Jaqen went to give his aunt a peck on her cheek.

"I am making *spaetzle* today, just so that you know."

"And stroganoff, to go with it?"

"Of course." His aunt laughed.

"Why must you make my favorite dish when I will not be home?" Jaqen reached for the door leading to the garage.

"Do not worry." Umma smiled at him. "I will save some for you and make sure your uncle does not eat it all."

"Umma, you are the best."

"Go on, now. You don't want to keep her waiting."

He'd been excited and nervous the first time he'd gone to pick up Arya for a date, and it was no different this time around. However, there was a sense of urgency hovering over him. He couldn't explain why this was so, but he felt that if this date with Arya didn't go well...if he somehow failed to win her heart this time, then she would never be his. He didn't know why, but this date felt like it was his last chance. Looking back on it, maybe he should have had her agree to more than just three dates. Jaqen had to laugh at himself. *Perhaps, a man is not quite the smooth talker he thinks he is.*

Arya was already waiting for him outside Chateau Maegor's gates, and she was trotting over to meet his car even before he'd come to a complete stop. She was wearing a soft purple knit sweater, paired with a black skirt that flared around her thighs, black tights and ankle boots with silver stud detailing. She looked cute, as always, but with a tough edge. Arya would not want to be described as cute, he remembered.

"Why did you not wait for me inside?" he asked, smiling at her broadly as she climbed into the Jeep beside him. "Were you not cold standing out here?"

"I'm fine. I couldn't stand to wait inside." Arya's cheeks went pink when she seemed to realize what she'd just said. "Anyway, how are you, Jaqen?"

Jaqen's smile broadened even more at Arya's words, before they spent some minutes exchanging pleasantries with each other, commenting about the weather and asking after their families. Arya replied with enthusiasm in her voice, but it became quite apparent that she was nervous, and was struggling to keep it under control.

"So, it appears you have most definitely ended your charade with the Hound," Jaqen stated, glancing briefly at her as he navigated his way around King's Landing.
"Well, yeah." Arya giggled nervously. "I had to do it."

"Of course, you had to," Jaqen agreed, tongue in cheek. "And your timing of it seems well planned."

Arya giggled again. "You could say that. Although, Sandor wasn't very impressed."

"Did he give you a hard time about it?"

"Not really, I mean, I did give him warning and he knew it was stupid to keep pretending."

"Are his issues regarding your sister any closer to being resolved?"

Arya laughed out loud at that. "Nope. One's a bonehead, and the other's an airhead. They both like each other, but they're too stupid to see it."

"Your sister truly returns the Hound's feelings?" Jaqen raised his brows skeptically.

"Ahuh." She nodded. "She's broken up with her psychotic ex-boyfriend, so there's really nothing between her and Sandor anymore."

"You will not say anything to your sister about the Hound's feelings?"

"Oh, hell no!" Arya shook her head vehemently. "I've given it some thought, and I've decided I'm done with getting into other people's business. Seriously, it's brought me nothing but shit."

"You are so wonderfully eloquent, lovely girl."

Arya laughed again, and this time, her laughter seemed to be easier and more natural. "Where are we going today, Jaqen?"

Jaqen had a table booked at Green Eel Inn, Braavos' most well-known seafood restaurant, in fact, and then he hoped to take her on a short cruise on the Laughing Faces Ferry to see the sights around Braavos. But, just in case…

"My plan involves only in making sure that you are happy today, Arya," he replied, "if there is anything you dearly want to do, then all you need do is name it."

"I was hoping you'd say that," she said quietly, matter-of-factly.

Jaqen sat up in his seat, ears perked. "Oh?"

Arya's eyes lowered as she began to speak, and Jaqen wished he was not driving so that he could watch her expressions instead of the road.

"Jaqen, if it's okay, I really just want to get to know you better," she said, "today, I don't care about restaurants and sightseeing…I just want to get to know you."

"Is that so…?" He didn't know how to respond to the earnestness in her tone.

"Yeah, I want to get to know about the real you," Arya continued, "I know all about your music, and what you're like on the stage. But now I want to learn about who you are when you're not being a performer."

They sat in silence for a moment as Jaqen contemplated her request. It sounded simple enough, but he could also read her well enough to understand that there was a deeper meaning behind it. This was important to her, and therefore, it was important to him.
"Okay," he finally said, thinking fast, "your wish is my command, lovely girl." He gave her a reassuring smile, which she returned along with an audible sigh of relief.

"Thanks, Jaqen. I hope I haven't just made trouble for you?"

"Nothing of the kind, Arya," he replied, before pressing a button on his phone which was mounted on his dash. "I just need to make a quick call…Hello, Umma?"

Arya was studying his profile as he quickly told his aunt to expect them both for lunch, and she was grinning by the time he had ended the call.

"Umma is your aunt, right? So, I'm going to meet her today?"

"Yes, and my Uncle Otto, too."

"Are you sure it's okay? It's such short notice,"

"Trust me. You've just made their day."

As Jaqen suspected, Umma was already at the front door, hovering like a hummingbird and smiling warmly as she watched them walk up the path to the house.

"Welcome! Come in, come in!" She ushered them into the house. "We have been looking forward to this day! Come in!"

Jaqen was glad to see that Arya was smiling warmly back at his aunt, and that Umma's enthusiasm seemed to be amusing her. With Arya now in his home, he hoped she would get to see whatever it was she needed to see. Uncle Otto was in the dining room, setting up places at the old wooden table when they entered, and Arya was bombarded with further enthusiastic welcoming, before they were allowed to take a seat.

"You have only been South for a few months, yes? How are you finding living in King's Landing?"

Uncle Otto sat down at his place at the head of the table and engaged Arya in general conversation.

Arya replied politely to his uncle's questions, and Jaqen took the chance to just watch her. He could see that every now and then, her eyes would dart towards the pictures mounted on the wall behind Uncle Otto, and at the lace curtains framing the window. He himself had never really taken much notice of his aunt's taste in décor, but now he wondered how Arya perceived the dark wood furnishings, embroidered napkins and antique dinnerware.

"You have a beautiful home," Arya said, as Umma entered the room carrying a tray of food.

"Thank you very much." Umma beamed, setting the dishes on the table. "I am afraid my tastes are old fashioned, but I find these old things charming."

"It reminds me of my home in the North, Winterfell Manor, actually." Arya picked up the embroidered napkin in front of her and ran her fingers over the scalloped edge delicately. "Our house was full of old things, too. Generations of my father's family have lived in Winterfell, and I never really appreciated just what that means. Seeing all of this mahogany, and the crystal glassware…it made me miss home."

"Winterfell Manor sounds like a wonderful place," Umma said, "it is still your home, that will not change, and one day you will go back. Now, have you ever eaten spaetzle before?"

"I can't say that I have." Arya inspected the noodle-like dish on the plate before her curiously. "It
"looks great!"

"It is Jaqen's favorite."

"Really?" They watched as Arya tasted a tentative mouthful. "It's good!"

Throughout the meal, Arya listened as his aunt and uncle chatted about food, Umma's collection of antique teacups, and as he expected, about Jaqen's childhood.

"That photo." Arya indicated the frame displaying a younger Jaqen sitting at a piano, with much shorter and uncolored hair. "How old was he then?"

"That one? Oh, I believe he was about ten years old, do you recall, Otto?"

"I think so." Uncle Otto rubbed his chin. "That was taken after one of his elementary school recitals."

"Jaqen is pictured with a musical instrument in a lot of these photos,"

"Oh, yes. Jaqen has been playing instruments since he was in kindergarten. You could call him a prodigy," Uncle Otto stated proudly.

"Now, now, Uncle…" Jaqen tried to brush off his uncle's praise, sensing that he was about to start boasting. "I'm sure you're going to over-exaggerate."

"Please, tell me about it, Uncle Otto," Arya urged him.

The old man obliged. "Well, he had always displayed an interest in music. I remember, even before his parents passed away, as a toddler he would hover around the doorway when I taught piano lessons, just watching and listening. I never realized how much he was taking in, until one day I found him seated at the piano…so small he was, he could barely reach the keys…I was so surprised! This boy, he played a C Major scale perfectly!"

Despite himself, Jaqen found himself coloring slightly when Arya grinned at him after listening to his uncle's story.

"I always suspected you were a genius, Jaqen!" she said to him.

"I don't know." He shrugged. "It's just, what I do…"

He'd been described as a genius many times before, and he'd never really known how to take it in the past. Music was just part of him, and to be cliché about it, came to him as naturally as breathing. He had seen other musicians shed sweat, tears and in cases, blood, in pursuit of their art, and he always felt he was somehow lacking because he couldn't share that sentiment.

"Don't be so modest, Jaqen." Arya looked at him with eyes filled with awe. "Talent is one thing, but hard work is something else. Um…I don't know if I'm expressing it properly…my brother Jon plays the guitar and he's super talented at it, but when I got jealous about it, he said that his only talent was being born with perfect pitch and timing, but he had to work for everything else. Like, learning to read music and chords, he had to put in time and effort to get good at it. So, even you would have had to work hard at something. Right, Jaqen?"

He had to pause for a moment to think about what she had just told him. She was making him assess himself in ways he'd never had to.
"Composing, to an extent, and lyrics," Jaqen replied at length. "Lyrics have never come to me easily, and that has always frustrated me."

"Oh, yeah." She started giggling unexpectedly. "You once tried to rhyme my name… Arya, how are ya, I'd like to get to know ya, got caught up in your mania, I'd do anything for ya!"

"Of all things, you remember that?"

Mortified, Jaqen endured as his aunt, uncle and Arya laughed at his expense. When the laughter faded, Jaqen had a new perspective on the word 'genius', and how it applied to himself. Arya had surprised him once again.

After lunch, Umma served them slices of her strudel for dessert, and not long after that Jaqen made their excuses so that they could move onto the next portion of their date.

"I like them," Arya said as Jaqen drove them towards the Port. "Umma is adorable."

"I am sure they like you as well." Jaqen did not tell her about the approving smile his aunt had given him while Arya had not been looking.

"Thanks for letting me meet your family,"

"I was very happy for you to meet them," Jaqen returned.

He didn't let many people into his personal life, and even fewer made it past his front door. He thought he would feel more exposed, but he didn't feel that way with Arya. He hoped that she was finding answers to whatever questions she had in her mind.

"Where are we going now?" she asked him, peering out to look at the passing scenery.

Jaqen had purposely taken the scenic route along the seaside, and the early afternoon light was now bouncing off the water, glistening golden, and creating an aura that he had to describe as magical. Looking at Arya's smile, he would bet she was thinking the same.

"I usually like to hang around clubs and listen to music, when I am not composing my own, and there is a place at the Purple Port that I have been going to for a long time. I am taking you there now."

The Port was busy, given that it was a weekend, and Jaqen knew that it would only get more crowded after sunset. Parking his Jeep, he helped Arya out of the vehicle, and without asking for permission, he took her hand and began to lead her towards the club. Arya did not protest, so he pulled her closer to his side and gave her a quick smile. They shortly arrived at a club that was tucked into a side street, off of the main entertainment strip, where he was greeted by name at the entrance.

"Jaqen, nice to see you again," said one of the regular waiters he had come to know.

"Hello, Tim," Jaqen greeted him, "I will take my usual table, if that will be all right?"

"You got it,"

The club was already partially full, given that it was a Saturday, but Jaqen knew the owner, and he'd never had to wait for a table, no matter how full the club got.

"What is this place?" Arya asked, looking around the dimly lit room.
"It is a smaller and more casual version of *The House of Black & White,*" Jaqen replied as they sat at his usual table, which was located in a dimly lit section of the room. "It is a performance venue, but unlike *The House of Black & White,* this place prefers to invite lesser known bands and artists to perform. I like to come here because the artists are ever changing and I find inspiration in listening to different sounds."

"Cool." Arya picked up the flyers that had been left on the table by the artists that were lined up for that afternoon. "So, we're going to be listening to some indie-rock, and folk-pop."

Jaqen laughed at the dubious note in her voice. "It appears so. Keep an open mind and you never know, you might like it."

"This'll be interesting." She clicked her tongue, then gazed around the room again. "Blood red décor, huh?"

"It is Melisandre's favorite color," Jaqen supplied, "she's the owner, and if she is around I will introduce her to you later."

"Somehow, all the red actually works," Arya nodded.

"She will be glad to hear that. Now, would you like something to drink?"

Arya asked for a latte, while Jaqen ordered himself an espresso, and shortly after their drinks arrived the indie-rock act took to the stage. It was too loud for decent conversation, but Jaqen took the opportunity to just watch her, taking advantage of the dim lighting. She was less animated than she had been during the previous times he had been in her company, but seeing a more subdued version of her reminded him that, no matter how hard she tried to deny it, Arya had been raised to be a lady. He was having a good time, and in his opinion, their date was going well. Arya's fingers were tapping against the side of her latte glass, and as far as he could tell she was enjoying herself as well. She looked very pretty, sitting just a mere two feet away from him and smiling to herself as she listened to the female lead sing about falling in love.

Jaqen drew his chair closer to her, close enough that their knees touched, unseen beneath the table. At the sudden contact, Arya looked up at him questioningly, and he bent down so that his mouth was beside her ear.

"Thank you for being here with me today, Arya," he said to her.

She slowly turned towards him, carefully, so as not to bump her face against his. Her grey eyes met his, and her lashes fluttered briefly. Did she know what he wanted to do next?

"You too, Jaqen. Thank you for letting me get to know you better."

"Did you find the answers you were looking for?"

She didn't seem surprised at his question, though her eyes became a little guarded. "Maybe."

"Do not shut me out, lovely girl." With a finger beneath her chin, Jaqen gently raised her face. "Whatever it is, let's find the answers together, hmm?"

Arya's lips parted, and Jaqen felt her shiver. He had told himself he was going to wait until the end of the day, and the setting was not as he had planned, but Arya's eyes were wide and expectant, and Jaqen had been patiently waiting for too long to let this chance escape him.

"Lovely girl…" he murmured, before he lowered his head and claimed the kiss that should have
Gendry

Gendry stared at his phone for what might have been the thousandth time that day, and yet all he saw was his screensaver. He had no new messages, and no missed calls. He scratched his head in annoyance.

"Still nothing, huh?" Beric said, glancing at him briefly from the driver's side of the car.

"Maybe she's busy." Gendry shrugged. "Thanksgiving is next week, and I think she said something about her brothers coming down for the holidays. Maybe she's preparing stuff."

"Could be," Beric agreed.

It had been a frustrating week for him, and as the week had progressed with very little communication from Arya, Gendry's thoughts had progressively become darker. Hot Pie had tried to find out what was going on, but even he had not managed to learn much.

"She said she had some things to work out," Hot Pie had told him, "I'm just as confused as you are, dude."

In his frustration, he had even sought out Sandor Clegane one afternoon after school. The big brute had glared at him.

"I have training," Sandor had growled, "I don't have time to chat."

"This won't take long." Gendry had blocked Sandor's path.

"If it's about Arya, you can ask the little bitch yourself."

"I think she's ignoring me," Gendry had blurted, wanting to kick himself. "She hasn't taken my calls, and she's taking forever to reply to my texts."

Sandor's expression had flickered for a second, before it returned to his usual scowl. "I can't help you."

"You know something, don't you?" Gendry could tell that he had been hiding something.

"I'm not saying anything. It's none of my business."

"Just, tell me what you know!" his voice had risen, and Sandor had not taken kindly to it.

The guy had straightened himself to his full height and loomed over Gendry menacingly. "There's no use getting mad at me just because Arya won't talk to you. Now maybe I do know something, but even if I did, it's not my place to tell you."

Gendry had glared back at him for some moments, before his shoulders dropped in defeat. "I knew that asking you would be a waste of time."

Sandor had snorted. "Maybe you should consider giving up."

"What? Just like you've given up on Sansa?"

The unburned corner of Sandor's mouth had lifted cynically. "The Stark sisters are too out of reach.
for guys like us, even for someone with a face as pretty as yours. Maybe it's time you realized it."
"Arya will have to convince me of that," Gendry had said stubbornly, before turning on his heel.

However, Sandor's words had bugged him, and ate at his already bruised confidence. He was thankful that Beric had given him a reason to leave his bedroom. The drive to Braavos was a welcome distraction, and he was curious about the venue for their upcoming gig.

The *Heart of Fire* was located in the trendsetting district of Purple Port, although it was not on the main street, as Gendry would have thought, a little surprised when Beric led him down a side street. The next thing to surprise him was the inordinate use of the color red. From the deep red carpeting underfoot, to the upholstery, even the frosted glass of the bar was of a red hue. No one was currently on the stage, which was at the rear of the club, but there was a decent crowd gathered about even though it was only three p.m.

"There are acts all throughout the day, but the ones that draw the real crowds always get the nine p.m. slot," Beric informed him.

A waitress approached them at that moment. "Melisandre will see you now. Please follow me."

Gendry and Beric were led to an upstairs room, where a beautiful woman who appeared to be in her late thirties, with a long mane of dark red hair was waiting for them. She stood up as they entered, revealing her attire of tight, red leather pants and a dark red blouse with an obscenely low cut neckline.

"Hello, boys." She smiled at them, while her eyes wandered over them appreciatively. "What a delicious looking pair you are."

Gendry glanced at Beric for guidance, unsure how to respond. His leader ignored him.

"Hello, Miss Melisandre." Beric reached out to accept the manicured hand that Melisandre held out to him. "I'm Beric Dondarion. Thank you very much for seeing us today, we know that you are a very busy woman."

"Please, just Melisandre will do." She turned her attention to Gendry. "And you must be The Bull. I've heard a bit about you."

"Oh, really?" he was a bit overwhelmed by the scent of her perfume.

"Of course." She grinned at him, once again letting her eyes roam over his figure. "The waitresses who work here got very excited when they found out I was booking the *Brotherhood Without Banners*."

"That's good to hear," Gendry said, smiling nervously.

"Of course, it is," Melisandre added, "you're very popular with the ladies, and I intend to capitalize on that."

"Sure, he's handsome," Beric said flippantly, "but, how do you propose to capitalize on that?"

"Listen up, boys." Melisandre smiled sweetly. "You will get a nine p.m. slot, on a Saturday night. I will impose a cover-charge that evening, a portion of which will be paid to you. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good so far," Beric replied.
For the next thirty minutes, Gendry observed as Beric talked about percentages and negotiated the finer details of their contract. Once the necessary paperwork had been signed, Melisandre shook both of their hands, before inviting them to stay and watch the performance that afternoon.

"Thank you, that will be great," Beric accepted her invitation.

A waiter was called, and Melisandre instructed him to lead them to a table near the stage, and that their refreshments were to be on the house that afternoon. Gendry followed after Beric as they were led back down the stairs towards the performance area, where an indie-rock group were currently performing. The tables nearer to the stage were dimly lit, and Gendry was careful not to trip over anything as they traversed the path between tables.

He was so focused on watching his own feet that he almost collided into Beric, who suddenly stopped in his tracks in front of him. Beric turned around and grabbed Gendry's arm.

"On second thought, I just remembered there's something I need to do...we should leave now,"

"What? But, we're already here." Gendry made to move past him. "Let's just stay for a few minutes."

Beric's grip on his arm tightened, preventing him from moving. "I really think we should go, now."

Gendry frowned at Beric's tone, and he craned his neck to see what had made Beric look so panicked.

"Gendry, you don't need to see this..."

It was too late. Gendry had seen it. He had seen her kissing him.

Forcefully, Gendry shoved Beric aside, and in three short strides he was standing in front of Arya, just as Jaqen H'ghar raised his head from hers.

"What the hell is this?" he bellowed, not recognizing his own voice for the anger it contained.

Arya's head snapped up at the sound of his voice, and the gasp that escaped her lips sounded too loud, it was almost comical. Jaqen stood up, and then Beric was suddenly standing between them.

The only thing he remembered after that, was the guilt in Arya's grey eyes.
Hi everyone! Once again, thank you for your patience and your continued support as I continue to write this epic fic. Since my last update, my kid has turned one year old, and is now getting into everything. Consequently, I haven't had time to do the meticulous editing I used to do in the past, however, what I have written, I think has turned out pretty well. So, tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Arya Stark, you little minx! I would not have thought it possible, if not for these images that we are seeing! There you have it, folks. The reason for her abrupt split with Sandor Clegane seems obvious...she was spotted walking hand-in-hand with Jaqen H'ghar in Braavos on the weekend. The two were rumored to have been dating some months ago, and it looks as though things were not over between them! Let's hope things are sweeter for these two the second time around.

In football news...the Grand Final is on this Saturday night at Baelor's Arena, and our White Knights will be playing the Dragonstone Academy Dragons for the Championship. Don't forget the traditional pre-game bonfire at Blackwater Beach! Let's go, White Knights!

With Thanksgiving just days away, I would like to wish everyone a Happy Holiday!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Arya

What a total disaster.

Arya stared at the photos of herself and Jaqen, her hand clearly clutched in his, and sighed. There were far too many people out there with nothing better to do than take photos of other people out on their date. She understood why many celebrities got so touchy about having their picture taken by paparazzi. If her last name had not been Stark, then nobody would give a shit about whose hand she was holding.

As it was, predictably, people at school were staring and talking about her behind cupped hands. Sadly, she was used to it, and having refined her skills in the art of glaring under the tutelage of Sandor Clegane, she glared darkly at anyone who dared to look at her in any way that pissed her off.

"For someone going out with a total hottie like Jaqen H'ghar, you think she could smile a little?" she'd overheard some girl in her math class say.

She might have been smiling, she thought, had her date on Saturday not ended with Gendry punching Jaqen's jaw, and Beric having to escort Gendry from the premises of Heart of Fire. She closed her eyes at the memory, and shook her head.
"What the hell is this?"

The sound of Gendry's voice still rang in her ears. More than the disappointment and anger she'd expected to hear, it was the underlying pain in his voice that was really getting to her. Gendry had looked as though she'd betrayed him.

"What are you doing here with him, Arya?" he'd demanded, his eyes darting from her to Jaqen and back. "What's going on between the two of you?"

"I should think that was quite obvious." Jaqen had stood up, immediately on the defensive.

Beric had stepped between them, arms outstretched in order to keep them apart, anticipating the possibility of aggression.

"I wasn't talking to you," Gendry had snapped at Jaqen, rudely.

"I won't allow you to speak to Arya while you are like this--" Jaqen moved in front of her, attempting to keep her behind him, and shielding her from Gendry.

"Arya?" Gendry had pressed forward, but Beric held him back. "Is it true? Are you with him?"

She hadn't been able to answer him. For sure, he had seen Jaqen kissing her, and she hadn't been resisting. However you looked at it, there was only one conclusion one could make.

"Don't do this now, Gendry," Beric had urged him, "let's go. You can talk to her another day."

"No." Gendry had shaken his head. "I need to hear it from her,"

"You'd best leave now, you are making a scene," Jaqen pointed out.

People had begun to watch them, even though the band on the stage continued performing. Arya's heart had been pounding in her chest, and she'd never felt so acutely helpless. Denying what she had with Jaqen would make her a liar, and she didn't want to deny what had just happened between them. There was nothing she could say that wouldn't result in pain for either Gendry or Jaqen…so she'd kept her mouth shut.

"Answer me, Arya,"

"Let it go, Gendry," Beric started to pull him away.

"Listen to your friend," Jaqen added, "though, you must see that her answer is clear."

Arya had seen Gendry swing his arm back, but she could do nothing but gape in shock as his fist connected with the side of Jaqen's face.

"Jaqen!" she'd cried.

"Back off, Gendry!" Beric had shouted at the same time.

Jaqen had stumbled into the table, causing it to scrape noisily against the floor, knocking down the chairs they'd recently been occupying. The music faltered, and people scattered to get out of the way. With his hand to his face, Jaqen righted himself and glared at Gendry.

Arya moved in front of Jaqen, and looked pleadingly at Gendry. "Please, just go."

Security had been called, and Arya had seen their approach through the crowd. She had wanted to
avoid further trouble for both of them. Gendry stopped struggling in Beric's hold, and he gave her a 
final look.

"Fine," he said, "if that's what you want."

Two security guards appeared beside Beric and Gendry, and Beric appeased them by assuring them 
there would be no further violence.

"Move along fellas," one of them said.

With a prod from Beric, Gendry finally turned around, and Arya watched as the crowd parted to let 
them through. When she could no longer see them, Arya turned to face Jaqen.

"I'm so sorry." She reached out and touched his arm. "Are you okay?"

There was a cut on his lip, but otherwise he seemed all right. People around them began to mind their 
own business again, and the band on the stage resumed playing.

"It takes much more than that to hurt me," he said, and offered her a smile. "I am concerned about 
you. Are you all right?"

"I'm okay," she'd replied, though she clearly wasn't.

A woman dressed entirely in red had appeared beside them, and Arya's first impression of the older 
woman was that she wasn't one to be messed with.

"Jaqen, is everything all right?" she had asked, observing him as he dabbed at his mouth with a 
napkin.

"Ah, Melisandre." Jaqen had smiled at her apologetically. "I apologize for the trouble. I assure you it 
will not happen again."

"Glad to hear it." The woman had given him a smile before turning her attention to Arya.

Jaqen had introduced her to the club's proprietor, and the knowing expression on the woman's face 
had let Arya know that Melisandre was perfectly aware of the reason behind Jaqen and Gendry's 
altercation.

"I gathered you would be acquainted with Gendry and the Brotherhood," Melisandre had 
commented, "however, I was not expecting this…animosity."

Jaqen had given her a rueful smile. "Perhaps, animosity is the wrong word…I would say it was more 
of a difference of opinion."

"Is that so?" Melisandre had glanced towards Arya. "They both must have strong…opinions, 
regarding this matter. Don't you agree, Arya?"

"It seems so," Jaqen had replied for her, when Arya had found herself tongue-tied.

"Let's hope you sort out your differences before long. We wouldn't want your handsome face 
damaged any further, do we? It's not as though you can just slip on a new one."

Melisandre had wished them a pleasant afternoon, before leaving to speak to other guests around the 
room, to assure them that everything was fine, presumably. Not long after that, Jaqen had tactfully 
suggested he take her home, and Arya had agreed to end their date earlier than what he had planned 
for. She'd apologized to him several more times on the drive home, feeling awful that he'd been hurt.
because of her, and feeling doubly terrible that it had been one of her friends responsible for the injury to his face.

"Stop worrying, Arya." Jaqen had reached over the gears for her hand, which he squeezed reassuringly. "It is understandable, what Gendry has done…I might have done the same thing, had the tables been turned."

The idea of Jaqen punching Gendry was no less distressing, but Arya had kept the thought to herself, thankful that Jaqen had held back and not punched Gendry in return.

At the gate of Chateau Maegor, Jaqen had turned to her with a gentle look in his eyes. "I will see you again soon, hmm? We have something we need to talk about."

"Soon," she'd agreed, knowing exactly what he was referring to.

The rest of her weekend had been spent isolated in her bedroom, stalking both Jaqen and Gendry on Facebook, where she'd learned that the Brotherhood Without Banners had been booked to play at the Heart of Fire. The reason for Beric and Gendry's presence at the club became evident, and Arya hoped that Gendry's actions had not jeopardized this opportunity for the band. When Gossip Spyder had posted the photos of her and Jaqen, Arya had felt a moment of panic fearing that Gendry and Jaqen's altercation might have been caught on camera too, but she'd been relieved when there'd been no mention of it. Gendry didn't need that on top of everything else.

At school, Gendry had made it clear that he was avoiding her. There had been one moment where their eyes had met across the hall for a second, and Gendry's blue eyes had been cold as he'd looked at her. Arya had felt the chill even after he'd walked away. She didn't know if there was going to be any recovery from this. She didn't know if their friendship could withstand the emotional damage she was inflicting on Gendry, and the knowledge caused Arya's chest to ache painfully, as though there was something sharp lodged between her ribs, right where her heart should be.

Twisting that sharp object deeper was the fact that Gendry had not only seen Jaqen kissing her, but that she had been kissing him back. Right before things had turned to shit, and while she'd been deep in his kiss, Arya had come to a realization. She had no idea if the choices they made would ultimately be the right one for them? All she could do was go with heart, and hope that her heart would lead her to the right path.

Right then…her heart was choosing Jaqen.

Gendry

There was no excusing her behavior now. It appeared that Arya had made her choice quite some time ago, and she'd been avoiding him because she'd been too cowardly to tell him.

Fact; Arya had chosen Jaqen.

Gendry had waited so long, and stupidly, thinking that Arya would give him a chance and at she would at least listen to him. He thought that she had reciprocated some of his feelings, and that she would let him show her how he felt. He had forced himself to be patient, thinking that Arya wanted to avoid further gossip, so he'd been willing to wait for the talk to die down. But, now he just felt like an absolute chump. Jaqen H'ghar had once again managed to sneak his way in, and now he was with Arya.

Fact; he was too slow.
He had always been a step behind. He should have acted on his feelings for Arya much sooner. Had he been too soft? He wondered. Should he have been more aggressive in his pursuit? *God, I don't understand girls at all!* He felt anger surge through him. Arya could have been honest with him from the moment she'd decided to choose Jaqen over him, instead of making him think he had a chance. Had she been leading him on the entire time? The thought of it made it hard to breathe, as though his lungs were being constricted, while his heart was being wrung dry.

The Arya he knew…the Arya he *thought* he knew was incapable of playing games like that. She didn't have it in her to hurt people for no good reason. He never ever would have thought she was capable of causing him this much pain. Another thought adding to his misery was the realization that perhaps, he had never really known her to begin with.

From day one, they had always belonged in different worlds. He couldn't compare to Jaqen H'ghar, Gendry thought. He wasn't as worldly, as confident, or even half the musician that Jaqen was. He had never been a suitable match for Arya. Sandor Clegane had been right when he'd said the Stark sisters were too out of reach for ordinary guys like him. He was just a rat from Flea Bottom, and he couldn't change that. All the money he'd inherited couldn't change that, either. Now, he was just a rat wearing overpriced clothes and driving an overpriced car.

*A rat will always be a rat.*

Beric, Edric and Hot Pie had been waiting for him in the parking lot when he'd reached school that morning. It had surprised, and irritated him at the same time. Of course, Beric had promptly informed Edric and Hot Pie about the incident with Jaqen at *Heart of Fire*, and Gendry had been receiving text messages from the guys all weekend.

Gendry hadn't replied to any of them, hence the entourage escorting him to class that morning.

"I'm fine," he'd said to them as they'd circled him upon exiting his car.

"Are you sure?" Edric had asked.

"How's your hand?" Beric had glanced at Gendry's right hand.

"Fine."

"Fine," Gendry had raised his hand and flexed his fingers. "It's fine. Except it's still itching to land a few more punches on that bastard's smug face."

Beric had frowned at his words. "You need that hand to play guitar, so I'm kind of glad you don't have that option."

Gendry had given him an uncertain look, suspecting that their lead singer was more concerned for his guitar-playing hand than for his general wellbeing. There was no surprise about Arya being the topic of many conversations around him during classes that day. All the talk regarding how perfect she and Jaqen looked together, and how much more suited she was with the senior from Braavos Academy compared to Sandor Clegane, only compounded his foul mood. He had chanced upon Arya in a hallway once during the day, and he hadn't been able to rearrange his facial expression into one of nonchalance fast enough. He didn't necessarily want her to see how much her rejection was affecting him, but by the sudden widening of her eyes, Gendry was sure she could read it on his face, and in his eyes.

He'd walked away before the urge to walk over to her and shake her by the shoulders and demand *why* became too much, and he'd spent the rest of the day trying his best to shut off from the talk of his classmates. Hot Pie had tailed him whenever he could, muttering the whole time and expressing his disbelief.
"I can't believe she could do this. She must have an explanation for not saying anything."

But, Gendry hadn't wanted to hear anything excusing Arya's behavior.

"Just drop it," he'd told Hot Pie, "I don't want to talk about this…or her."

"But…"

"How do those songs go? Shake it off? Let it go?" Gendry had shaken his head. "From today, she doesn't exist."

"Really? That's how you're going to deal with this?"

"It's a good a plan as any." Gendry shrugged.

"Ignoring the problem is a plan, huh?"

"I'm not ignoring it," Gendry corrected him, "I'm getting over it."

"Really?" Hot Pie said for the second time, skeptically.

"Really," Gendry stated firmly, "from today, I'm going to focus on the band. I'm going to concentrate on preparing for the gigs that Beric's lining up, and…who knows? Maybe, I'll think about accepting an offer from one of these girls that keep sending me messages."

"You get messages from girls?" Hot Pie raised his brows, distracted.

"Yeah." Gendry forced a smile. "Didn't you know? I'm popular, or so it seems. Being in a band makes me hot property."

"For real?"

Gendry took out his smart phone and quickly navigated to his Facebook inbox, before flashing it before Hot Pie's eyes. "There, fifty-four unread messages, and that's just today."

Hot Pie whistled. "Well, once you've taken your pick, do you think you could introduce some of them to me?"

Gendry managed a chuckle, and he made a few more comments that he hoped would make Hot Pie believe he was okay, though his throat felt thick with bile, and the bitterness that came with disappointment.

Sadly, it was a taste he was familiar with.

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**Sansa**

Her eyes had been seeking out the tall and dark-haired figure of Sandor Clegane all day. In fact, all she had been doing for the past week since the news about his breakup with her sister went public was stare at him when he was within sight, or trying to catch a glimpse of him during breaks and in between classes.

Seeing the photos of Arya and Jaqen holding hands had not surprised her. Arya suddenly breaking up with Sandor had to have been for a reason, and the events of the weekend had revealed it to all. She recalled that her sister had been linked with Jaqen in the past, and it appeared Arya's feelings for him were stronger than what she had with Sandor. She'd wondered how Sandor was taking the
news, and consequently, she'd taken to covertly watching him to see if she could glean anything from his fierce expression.

Talking to him was easier said than done. Their paths had rarely crossed since the day he'd found her loitering at his locker, and it wasn't as though she could just go up to him and say hello, especially now that she and Jeyne were no longer sitting with Joffrey's group. Sandor's face for the most part, when she did see him, remained impassive. Perhaps the news of his ex-girlfriend holding hands with another guy so soon after breaking up with him did not faze him. Or, perhaps he just didn't have any time to think about it.

It was Thanksgiving week, and the championship match was mere days away. The most talked about topic, other than Arya Stark and Jaqen H'ghar, was the upcoming game against Dragonstone Academy. There had been murmurs amongst the sporting aficionados that Coach Selmy had been less than thrilled with Sandor's game of late, and that Sandor had been called on by the coach for pep-talks. If that was the case, then Sansa was glad that Sandor had something else to focus his attention and energy towards.

The same could be said for herself. Sansa was rediscovering her love for music, and she now threw herself into her choir commitments with enthusiasm. The Musical Director had recently began calling for extra rehearsals in preparation for the string of performances they would be having, including the Christmas Recital in a month's time, and then a prestigious competition in the new year.

Conveniently, this gave Sansa a reason to avoid having lunch in the quad, but she did miss her cheerleader friends, Randa and Mya, who had chosen to remove themselves from Joffrey's circle, and were now sitting with other girls from the cheer squad. It was awkward for her to be sitting in the quad, Sansa thought, especially with Margaery Tyrell now holding court.

Margaery's entry into King's Landing Prep's social circles had been seamless, and from what Sansa had observed, Margaery had been warmly welcomed. Margaery was one of those girls that seemed to fit in regardless of which group of people she was with. She was smart and witty, so she could converse with the brainy and intellectual types. Her mother and grandmother were noted for their charitable works, so Margaery was favored by the altruistic types, and word was she had already pledged to support a 'Feed the Homeless' effort. Having been a cheerleader at her old school, Margaery's athleticism was proven, and of course she had already been asked to join the KL Prep Cheer Squad.

Margaery Tyrell could do no wrong, and it was apparent that her association with Joffrey Baratheon was only having a positive effect on how he was perceived. People still quietly whispered about Sansa's breakup with him, and nobody had forgotten that very public scene in the quad. Witnesses to the incident at Blount's party where Sansa's blouse had been ripped, correctly speculated that Joffrey had frequently been violent with Sansa, which ultimately led to their breakup. However, with Margaery's presence at his side, opinions were being swayed. After all, Margaery had to be a good judge of character, so how bad could Joffrey be? Whatever Sansa's reason for breaking up with Joffrey, it couldn't be because he was physically hurting her.

It annoyed her. It maddened her, how easily people could be fooled. But, she did not let this detract from how happy she was to be away from him.

"She's not dating Joffrey," Jeyne said, seeing that Sansa's gaze had been focused on the table at the quad that was surrounded by Joffrey and his hangers-on. "She's sticking to the story that they're just friends."

"I don't care if she's dating Joffrey," Sansa stated truthfully, "Margaery knows what she's getting into."
Sansa did not elaborate, as she had not told Jeyne about the fact that Margaery and her grandmother had grilled her about Joffrey.

"Come on. Let's get to the music room." Jeyne linked her elbow with Sansa's, and the two made their way to the performing arts block for another rehearsal session.

As they rounded the corner, both girls stopped in their tracks as the imposing figure of Sandor Clegane approached from the opposite direction. He noticed them, but it wasn't until Jeyne greeted him that he slowed his steps.

"Hi, Sandor," Jeyne smiled at him, with a daringness that Sansa envied at that moment.

Sandor looked at her awkwardly, before responding. "Hi."

"Are you excited for the final match this Saturday night?" Jeyne asked him easily.

"I guess." He shrugged. "It's the first time we'll be facing Dragonstone Academy in the finals."

"We'll be coming to watch and cheer you on," Jeyne stated.

Sansa gave her friend a quick look from the side of her eye, as no mention had been made to watch the game previously, but now she had to thank her friend for her quick thinking.

"Yeah," Sansa added, unnecessarily, "we'll be there."

"Great," Sandor grunted without expression.

"Are you going to the bonfire before the game? It's tradition, I heard," Sansa found herself asking, eager to hear his response.

"The bonfire, huh?" Sandor sighed, his lack of enthusiasm for the subject was impossible to miss. "I guess I'll have to be there, because it's tradition, and it's supposed to be good luck if the entire team is present."

"Then, maybe we'll see you there," Sansa said, with a hopeful cheerfulness.

"Maybe." Sandor nodded. "I gotta go. I need to see Coach Selmy."

Sandor did not wait for their response, before sidestepping them and continuing on his way. Both girls watched him as he walked away.

"Why are we suddenly going to the game?" Sansa asked her friend. "I thought we weren't going."

"We're going so you can cheer him on, like you just told him." Jeyne smiled, innocently.

"Jeyne…"

"Look, the guy is single now…and so are you."

"I thought we agreed I shouldn't do anything that would upset my sister?" Sansa frowned.

"Ahuh," Jeyne agreed. "But that was before she broke up with him. In any case, it looks like your sister has already moved on from Sandor."

"Is it really okay for me to go after him? He's my sister's ex."
"There's no law against it," Jeyne pointed out, "and, it's not like they were going to get married or anything."

"But, it doesn't feel like it would be right for me to go after him so soon." Sansa sighed. "And, as you saw, he didn't look happy to see me."

"Sandor's not a guy of many expressions," Jeyne said, rather flippantly, "so, unless he tells you to leave him alone, there is no reason why you shouldn't be friends with him in the meantime."

Sansa sighed once again, and hoped that her friend was right.

"Do you think he knew about Arya and Jaqen before Gossip Spyder posted about them?" Jeyne wondered.

Sansa shrugged. "It's hard to say. I mean, he doesn't look like he gives a damn about any of it. How can anyone be that unaffected? I just don't get it. Am I not seeing something?"

Jeyne didn't have an answer for her either, and Sansa found herself thinking over the situation far too often over the coming days. She was hung up over Sandor, and it was because of this that she was trying to get into his head and why she was coming up with all sorts of reasons that would explain Sandor's total unaffectedness. At first, she figured he was just good at hiding his feelings, but she knew from prior experience that if Sandor was displeased about something, he wasn't one to hide it.

She even imagined that he went home at night and sulked in private while staring at photos of Arya, which depressed her, so she quickly put a stop to that chain of thought. Eventually, she came to the possibility that maybe the split was amicable, and that the relationship had died a natural death. Perhaps Sandor's affections for her sister really were no longer romantic, which was why seeing her with another guy did not bother him.

Sansa hoped this was the likely explanation, because she really didn't like the thought of Sandor suffering from heartache. Time is what he needed, she thought. Given time, Sandor would eventually go back to his normal self, and with enough time, Sansa hoped she would figure out how she was going to deal with her own emotions.

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**Arya**

It was a short week, due to the Thanksgiving holiday, and school ended early for them that Wednesday. Arya had rushed home, eager for Robb and Jon to arrive with Theon. They were staying for the four day weekend, and Arya had missed them. She hadn't been able to keep in touch with Jon as often as she would have liked in recent weeks as he'd been busy with exams and assignments for college, so she had been greatly looking forward to seeing him again.

Bran and Rickon were in the entertainment room watching cartoons when she reached Chateau Maegor, and their mother was in the kitchen speaking with the chef regarding the menu for the coming days. In addition to her brothers coming to visit, Uncle Benjen would be joining them for the holiday, too.

Her father, though his stern expression changed little, was excited to see his younger brother as well. Arya knew this because she'd heard him ordering cases of Uncle Benjen's favorite beer, and making certain that his favorite sticky baked chicken wings were included in the menu. Her dad could be cute sometimes, Arya thought.

Her phone buzzed just as she reached her bedroom, and without even checking, she knew that the
text message would be from Jaqen.

"Have a happy Thanksgiving, lovely girl. I can't wait to see you on Saturday. The next two days will be torture. Saturday seems so far away…"

Arya bit her lip as she read the message. She and Jaqen had been swapping text messages every day since their date, and with each of Jaqen's messages, Arya was waiting for the one that would confirm things between them. She was waiting for the words that would make them…official.

She had done some serious thinking over the past few days, and asking herself some hard questions. The answers she had reached were not easy to come to terms with, and she'd been forced to reconcile with the fact that she had done very little to prevent the trouble and pain she had caused the two guys she had claimed to care about.

She'd made a decision. She was happy about that decision. She was also very regretful that Gendry had to be hurt for her to be happy. Perhaps it was unavoidable. Perhaps, Gendry was always going to be hurt. Perhaps she had always known she was going to end up with Jaqen. Arya had come to see that her hesitation regarding Gendry was because she hadn't really ever seen him in a romantic way. *No, that's not right. She told herself. If things had worked out differently...I could have been with Gendry.*

As it was, she was too caught up in Jaqen that she couldn't give Gendry the chance he deserved. She only wished that Gendry didn't have to see her kissing Jaqen. Telling him about Jaqen would have been hard enough, but at least he deserved to have her tell him to his face.

"You're a coward," Hot Pie had said to her. He had bumped into her as she'd come out of a classroom. "You're a coward, and a liar."

"I am not," Arya had tried to defend herself. She had known that Hot Pie would be angry with her.

"You said you weren't leading him on, Arya," Hot Pie had pointed out.

"I wasn't trying to...I didn't mean to."

"I thought you liked Gendry. I thought he meant a lot to you."

"I do, and he does." Arya had given her friend a pleading look. "It's just, that I liked Jaqen first..."

"It's not about who was first, Arya. It's about who you like more." Hot Pie had sighed then. "But I guess we know the answer to that, don't we?"

Arya had felt guilty for disappointing her friend. Many times, he had been the first to offer support and kind words whenever she had been in trouble, but the look he had given her told her more than any words he could have said, just how much faith he had lost in her.

"I'm sorry," had been all she could say, "I never meant for things to turn out this way."

"No, I'm sure you didn't," Hot Pie said, seeming to believe it, "at least tell me, did Gendry ever have a chance?"

Arya had looked at the floor, unsure how to respond.

"Yes or no, Arya?" he had pressed.

"Yes, but..."
"But, what?"

"If he'd…I don't know. Maybe, if he'd said something sooner?"

Hot Pie had blinked at her, and his mouth had thinned in the way she knew meant he didn't like what he was hearing.

"I get it. So, he made his move too late, huh?"

Arya had looked away, remembering the kiss Gendry had given her backstage at the Battle of the Bands.

"You know what?" Hot Pie had continued, "Gendry has never tried to hide how he felt about you. He's liked you for a long time. It was obvious to everyone. I don't know how you didn't see it."

In retrospect, Arya knew that if she looked hard enough, she would recall the tell-tale signs she'd overlooked, misunderstood, or perhaps even chosen not to see. As Hot Pie had turned to walk away, he had said something to her that let her know that at least, her friend did not hate her.

"Arya, listen. I guess, I am glad for you. If this is what you want, then I can be happy for you. Just be careful, okay?"

"Thanks, Hot Pie. I will." Arya had given him a small smile.

"Oh, and um…Gendry's not his usual self, and I know it's none of my business, but maybe for a while…you could try not to flaunt your relationship with Jaqen in a way that attracts Gossip Spyder's attention?"

Arya had understood that Hot Pie was gently warning her about not rubbing salt in Gendry's wounds, and she would do her best to ensure it.

Her brothers arrived at Chateau Maegor shortly before dinner, with Robb having driven all day to get them there. Arya had rushed out of her room when she heard Robb's Porsche in the driveway, narrowly avoiding a collision with Sansa who had come out of her own bedroom at the same time.

"After you," she said to her sister, and followed her down the stairs.

She and Sansa were back to talking normally, ever since Sansa's breakup with Joffrey, but Arya knew it would still be some time before they would be completely back to normal. Given what she knew about Sansa's feelings for Sandor, she suspected that Sansa's awkwardness around her all stemmed from Sansa's perceptions about her and Sandor's supposed relationship.

Arya shuddered. Did people really believe she could have dated Sandor Clegane for real? She now just wished to distance herself as far from that episode as fast as possible.

"Where's Arya?" she heard Jon's voice echoing in the entryway.

"Jon!" Arya ran towards him and jumped into his outstretched arms. "It's so good to see you."

"You, too, little sis'," he returned, "how are you?"

"I've been okay," Arya replied, smiling at him when she pulled away.

"That's good to hear. Have you been keeping yourself out of mischief?" Jon raised one brow, and it was enough to let Arya know that her big brother had something on his mind. "You and I, we need to talk, little sister." He was smiling as he had said it, but Arya had a feeling she wasn't going to
enjoy this talk.

Jon released her so that he could greet the other members of the family who were hovering around them, and Arya greeted Robb and Theon, who both looked at her in the same way that Jon had moments before. Arya then saw that Sansa was looking just as ashen as she felt. Arya sidled up next to her sister.

"Did Robb have something he wanted to discuss with you?" Arya asked in a whisper.

"So he said," Sansa replied, in the same whisper.

"Do you think they've been reading Gossip Spyder's posts?" Arya squeaked.

"There's a good chance they have."

"Oh…fuck."

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**Jon**

He had been controlling himself all evening. Out of respect for his father and the occasion, Jon had been keeping a lid on the urge to question his youngest sister about the things he had been reading on that gossip blog. He hadn't been able to speak to Arya in recent weeks. Arya had told him about the gossip blog months before, and the only reason he had even bothered checking it out was in the hope of finding some news about Arya's school or events in King's Landing that he could ask her about, to show that he was interested in what was going on around her.

What he didn't expect to see, however, was that both of his little sisters seemed to feature much too frequently on this blog, and the most recent stories had made him swear loud enough to attract Robb's attention. When Robb had seen the photo of Arya holding hands with a boy that didn't look much younger than himself, Robb had insisted on digging through the blog archives to see what else they could uncover.

The stuff they found made for a riveting read, and when Theon had come back to their shared apartment and found the brothers glued to Jon's laptop, he had looked over their shoulders just in time to read about Sansa's newly single status.

"What the fuck?" had been their shared sentiment.

"How much of this shit is factual?" Robb had demanded. "What the hell is up with that public breakup? Why was Sansa bringing father into it?"

"I don't know," Jon had replied, "and what the hell is Arya doing? Just how many boys is she playing around with? First was this Sandor Clegane, and now some guy called Jaqen…I'm gonna call her now and demand she tell me what's going on!"

"Don't, Jon." Robb had taken the phone from his hand. "We'll see our precious little sisters soon enough. We can ask our questions in person."

From across the dining table that evening, while the family ate and talked amongst themselves, it hadn't escaped Jon's attention that Arya and Sansa were on edge, jumping to attention every time he or Robb directed conversation their way.

"Sansa," said Robb.

"Yes, Robb?" Sansa answered, almost too quickly.
"I want you tell me about something I've been hearing about," Robb continued.

"What's that?" Sansa queried, her eyes darting about nervously.

"I want you to tell me about this Blue Rose Song Festival. I heard you're in a choir, and that you'll be performing in the next few weeks."

Sansa visibly relaxed, and began to tell them all about the song festival. Jon hid his smile. Robb was teasing her.

"Arya," Jon said, after Sansa had finished speaking.

"Yes, Jon?" Arya looked at him, and he could see her brain ticking behind her eyes.

"I want to ask your opinion about something that's happening this weekend,"

Arya visibly paled, and Jon narrowed his eyes.

"What is it, Jon?"

"The high school football finals, who do you think will win?"

At the question, Arya relaxed too, but Jon realized she had reacted to the word 'weekend'. Something was up, and he would bet it involved this Jaqen H'ghar. Jon and Robb refrained from teasing their sisters further that evening, as they weren't out to make them feel bad. They were teenage girls, and teenagers were prone to exaggeration. They merely wanted to clarify certain things they had read about, and get the truth behind the stories.

Later that evening, a buzzing at the front gate had signaled the arrival of Uncle Benjen, who was greeted with much noise and hugs. After he had been served a late dinner, the adults and older children had gathered in the living room to talk, and listen to Uncle Benjen's tales from his travels.

He worked for Black, Crow & Associates, a geological consulting firm based in Alaska, where he was involved in mineral exploration, geological mapping, sampling and drilling activities.

"The scenery is beautiful, that far North," he told them, "for the most part, I enjoy my work. Except when I'm assigned to places that are always cold and snowing, so I'm glad to be down South where I have the chance to thaw out a bit!"

When the hour grew late, they called it a night, and Jon followed Robb and Theon upstairs where bedrooms had been made up for each of them. He had just finished showering when he heard his phone buzz with an incoming message. It was from a girl in one of his classes that he'd recently started talking to; a sassy red-head by the name of Ygritte.

"Hey, Jon. Did you all make it down okay? How are things with your little sister?"

Jon smiled. He liked Ygritte. She was loud and opinionated, and wasn't afraid to speak her mind. She had thrown her head back and laughed when he'd told her about the situation with Arya.

"You know nothing, Jon." She'd smiled at him. "What makes you think your little sister will tell you the truth?"

"I know her," Jon had said, "Arya has always confided in me."

"Ah, but the troubles of a little girl are quite different from that of a fourteen year old high-schooler. Just be prepared, in case she tells you to get lost."
In fact, Jon had been worried about that very thing, but he hoped that there was still enough of the little girl he knew inside this more grown-up version of Arya, and that they could talk the way they used to. Jon texted back with an appropriate response, and slipped into bed. He took out his iPad and began surfing his favorite sites… and waited. Sure enough, and as he’d hoped, there was a knock on his door before it opened a fraction, and Arya poked her head inside.

"Jon? Are you awake?" she stage-whispered across the room.

"Come in," Jon replied, "you're too loud. Don't go waking everyone up."

In the past, it had not been uncommon for a younger Arya to knock on his bedroom door in the middle of the night for a chat. Arya silently let herself inside the room, and turned to close the door quietly behind her. When she turned back to face him, Jon had a momentary glimpse of a seven-year-old Arya, dressed in baggy pajamas and her hair in a lopsided ponytail. He blinked, and the image was gone, replaced by a taller, purple-haired teen, dressed in little shorts and a t-shirt that had slipped off one shoulder to reveal the strap of a brightly colored bralette.

Jon rubbed his eyes, suddenly tired.

"Are you okay, Jon? I can talk to you tomorrow instead, if you're too tired, I mean."

"I'm fine." He smiled at her, and indicated the foot of his bed. "Sit down."

Arya climbed onto the space he’d indicated and tucked her legs under her. After a moment of fidgeting, Arya fixed him with grey eyes that held a challenge in them.

"Okay. I can't stand not knowing. I hate the suspense. So, what is it you wanted to talk to me about?"

Jon had to give her credit for coming to confront him first.

"Two words," he said, "Gossip Spyder."

"I knew it." Arya's shoulders drooped. "How much have you read?"

"Everything. Right from the very first post when you and the family first moved down here."

Arya swore, before she met his eyes again. "I don't know where to start, Jon."

"Well, you can start by telling me about this Sandor Clegane. Correct me if I'm wrong, but he's that big scary guy that was with Joffrey that time? The linebacker?" Jon hoped he had been mistaken.

"Yep, that's him."

"And you went out with him?" Jon all but shouted.

"Shhh!" Arya jumped and clamped a hand over his mouth. "No! No, I didn't."

Jon pulled her hands away from his face. "Then what was that photo of you kissing him in the car all about?"

"A misunderstanding! That's what it was!"

"So, you mistook him for someone else?" he demanded, incredulous.

"That's not it!" Arya was now scrambling. "It was all fake. We were only pretending!"
"Pretending?" Jon sat up. "Oh, I gotta hear this. Your explanation ought to be good."

Arya looked towards the door, as though fearing someone might walk through it at any moment.

"I'll tell you, but you have to promise you won't tell anyone."

"Not even Robb? Because, you should know, he's just as curious as I am."

"Jon, please." Arya's eyes were now clouding over, and Jon feared that her willingness to talk might vanish with the darkening of her eyes.

"Alright." Jon was prepared to compromise. "I'll promise to tell Robb only enough to stop his worrying, and nothing more."

"And you can't tell Sansa any of this, either."

"Okay, I promise."

Relieved, Arya rearranged herself so that she sat cross-legged on the bed. When she finally began to speak, her voice was low, quiet, and she spoke quickly. With each sentence that she uttered, Jon's brows rose incrementally, first in amusement, then in disbelief, and then finally, in total bewilderment. He felt that his eyebrows would disappear into his hairline if he could raise them any higher. The story pouring from his sister's mouth seemed so fanciful that it had to be true. Arya couldn't make this shit up.

He stopped her only once, when Arya had got to the part about Sansa and Joffrey's breakup.

"Wait, hold up." Jon put up his hand to indicate she pause. "Father and Uncle Robert seriously got involved?"

"Seriously," Arya said, "if you'd seen the bruise on Sansa's arm, you'd understand why."

Jon sighed. This was something Robb had to know about, if he wasn't already hearing about it from Sansa first-hand. After Arya had finished talking, Jon had found himself agreeing with Ygritte. He knew nothing. He had no idea that the lives of his teenage sisters could be this…involved.

"That's messed up, Arya," he said, "you fake-dated a guy, who actually liked Sansa, so that you could protect her from her now ex-boyfriend who turned out to be a real psycho."

"Yep," Arya sighed. "And get this, I think Sansa likes Sandor, but she's never actually said it, and anyway I'm not meddling again because I only end up messing up."

"But, it's just like you to meddle though," Jon pointed out, "you've always been like that."

"How do I make it stop?" she asked, a horrified look on her face.

Jon laughed. "Well, I guess now that you're older, you seem to understand that there are consequences to your actions. I wouldn't worry too much. You'll know when to control yourself."

"I wonder about that." Arya bit her lip. "I could have avoided so much trouble, if only…"

"What's done is done. Learn from it, and move on," Jon told her, it really was the only thing he could think of to say to her.

In any event, he was glad to have heard the truth from Arya, although his worries were far from assuaged. There was still this Jaqen character to deal with, and it seemed there was nothing fake
about his involvement with Arya.

"Speaking of moving on…where have I seen this Jaqen H'ghar before?"

Arya had been expecting this, it seemed. "You saw him perform at the House of Black and White that one time we all went out."

"Ah, yes. So, he was that guy, eh?" Jon remembered that evening. "I remember noticing that he kept looking over at you the whole time. It's interesting. I actually thought there was something going on between you and Gendry."

Arya dropped her head into her palms. The action was accompanied by a mournful wail, taking Jon by surprise.

"Arya?" he prompted.

"It's all ruined…" she said cryptically.

"What's all ruined?"

"Our friendship." She flailed her hands in the air. "He saw me kissing Jaqen, and I've hurt him so much…now he doesn't want to be friends anymore."

"Oh."

"I was going to hurt one of them, regardless," she said, helplessly, "it didn't matter who I chose, one of them was going to get hurt. Why is all this romance business so complicated?"

"Because…us humans have something called emotions, and also something called hormones, and when you put them together it often makes for some volatile results."

Arya narrowed an eye at him. "Smartass."

He smiled at her gently. "Tell me what happened."

"Well, um…" Under the lights of the dim bedside lamp, Arya was blushing bright pink. "This is embarrassing."

"Then, just give me the abridged version,"

Arya sighed. "They both like me. I like them both, but…I think my feelings are pulling me towards Jaqen."

"Ah." Jon winced. "Poor Gendry. He was a nice guy. I liked him."

"Jon, don't make me feel worse than I already do."

Jon chuckled. "Look, Arya. I wish I could tell you that there was another way to deal with this, but unfortunately there isn't. I'm not an expert in relationships, by any means, but you said it yourself. Sometimes someone has to get hurt. The fact that you can empathize with Gendry's pain tells me that you do care for him, and the fact you don't like causing him pain means you've got a good heart. However, only you can decide what's best for you. Also, no guy wants to know that you chose him out of pity. That'd be a massive strike to his ego. In the long run, I think Gendry will be fine."

"Really?"
"He's a strong guy," Jon said, "don't underestimate him."

Arya looked somewhat appeased by what she had just heard, and Jon could only hope that his little sister would make the choice that was best for her.

"I hope you're right," she said.

"Have some faith, Arya." Jon then changed the subject. "So, when do I meet this Jaqen?"

Arya's only response was to turn an even brighter shade of pink.

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**Sandor**

He woke up on Saturday morning with one thought on his mind; Thanksgiving was over. Thank fuck for that, he thought. He had nothing to be particularly thankful for, so the holiday held little meaning for him. Now that the day had passed, he could focus on the championship game that night. There was the bonfire to get through before that, however, and that was another festivity he didn't particularly care for.

His father had not come home, not that he ever did for something like Thanksgiving. Instead, there had been an email saying he'd given the housekeeper a few days off, and that there would be extra money in his account so that Sandor could take care of himself. His brother had not come home either. Ironically, he was thankful for that. In fact, Sandor could not even remember the last time that all three Clegane men had been home together for any of the holidays.

His father had thrown himself into his work pretty much after his mother and sister had died. Sandor thought he understood his father's reasoning. It was easy to forget about everything he had lost, when you kept your mind occupied with work. He wondered if it was possible for his father to have really loved his wife that much, that her death had such a negative impact on his life thereafter.

Sandor hated his father for being weak. He wondered how his life would have been different if his father had been able to show him any kind of affection. Although, he knew there was nothing lovable about him, or his freakish brother.

He eventually dragged himself out of bed, changed his clothes, and went to the training session that Coach Selmy had called for that morning. On arrival, he saw that there were no signs of the hangovers that he had been expecting. Particularly from Joffrey, who had been bragging about the fancy spirits his father had flown in for Thanksgiving. It appeared that Coach Selmy's threat about benching anyone who even remotely looked intoxicated from the championship game had worked.

They went through their drills, and the plays they'd been perfecting all season, as well as a reminder of what they could expect from the Dragonstone Academy team that night, before they were dismissed.

"All of you, don't do anything reckless at the bonfire this afternoon, and don't any of you be late to the arena. I want you all there well before kick-off."

Sandor ignored Joffrey as he left the locker room, and headed to the closest takeout place to replenish his energy before heading back home to waste a few hours before the bonfire. Once at home, he headed to the basement where he kept some exercise equipment, and began to lift some weights in order to keep his muscles warm. Inevitably, as it always did, his mind wandered to the little bird. Sansa Stark never strayed far from his thoughts.

He'd spent most of Thanksgiving thinking about her. While he'd sat on the couch watching
television, he'd tried to imagine how Sansa was celebrating the holiday. No doubt, it had to include some, if not all of the typical family movie scene depictions of a Thanksgiving feast, with turkey, pumpkin pie and people who cared for one another laughing around the table. He didn't begrudge her that. In fact, imagining her happiness for those few moments had allowed him to escape his own loneliness, brief as it was.

When the time came, he grabbed his football gear, got into his car and made his way to Blackwater Beach. It was tradition for the two schools that would be facing off in the final match to host the bonfire, and when Sandor reached the beach, he could see that there were decorations in both King's Landing Prep and Dragonstone Academy colors dotted along the shore.

There were a lot of people already there representing both schools, and Sandor gave a nod to those people brave enough to speak to him and wish him luck for the game. Game days were usually the only time people voluntarily greeted him, he thought darkly. Looking around, he wondered if Sansa would really turn up, as she had said. The only real reason she had watched the games before was because of Joffrey. Now that they'd broken up, there was no reason for her to keep watching, especially as he knew she didn't enjoy watching the game all that much.

There was a peal of laughter in the distance, and when Sandor turned his head in the direction it had come, he had to admit his surprise when he found Sansa seated there on the sand with her friend Jeyne and the two cheerleaders, Randa and Mya.

"Hound!" he heard his name being called, and he momentarily shifted his focus to find his caller, who turned out to be Boros Blount. "We're over here!"

Sandor raised his hand to signal his acknowledgement, and turned back towards the group of girls in the sand. He found Sansa looking in his direction, and for a second he wondered if she'd turned around because she'd heard someone shouting his name. He was already turning away, dismissing the thought and walking towards the sand dunes to join the rest of his team when he thought he heard his name being called out again.

"Sandor!"

It sounded like Sansa, he thought, but it was probably wishful thinking so he ignored it.

"Sandor," the voice was closer now, and still sounding very much like Sansa.

There was a tug on the back of his sleeve, and he looked down to see blue eyes gazing up at him.

"Hi," Sansa said, "I wasn't sure when you would show up. I was waiting, and luckily I heard someone calling your name."

The cool afternoon breeze blew her hair in her face, and amidst the salt and ocean scent, Sandor picked out the citrus notes of Sansa's fragrance.

"You were waiting?" he asked. For me, were the words he didn't dare say out aloud.

"Yeah." She smiled shyly. "I really wanted to wish you good luck."

Sandor felt something warm and fluttery in his chest, and he knew very well that it was the presence of Sansa, in all her ethereal glory, standing there at his elbow wearing jeans, a white sweater in some chunky-knit fabric, and barefoot in the sand that was the cause of it. It also caused a frown to form between his eyebrows. Her wishing him luck was easily explained. He had a game to play, and that was what people did. But, her deliberately coming to him…waiting for him…that was not normal.
"Thanks," he grunted roughly.

Her smile stayed bright on her face. "I'm sure you'll play brilliantly. You always do."

Sandor barked a laugh. "Coach Selmy would disagree with you."

Sansa made a thoughtful face. "It doesn't matter if you win or lose, it just matters that you do your best."

Sandor's mouth thinned, before the unburned corner lifted in a mocking smile. Only he would know just how truly he did his best in that game against Lhazar High, the match that saw Joffrey continuously sacked by their linemen, and his face kissing the dirt more often than it was not.

"Then that's what I'll do," he said, "I'll try my best."

Sandor saw that Sansa looked as though she was about to say something else, but at that moment, a young man with a pretty face approached them.

"Sansa," said the young man, whose pretty face looked familiar.

"Willas." Sansa's eyes widened, just as Sandor's gaze narrowed. "How are you?"

"I'm great." The guy held up his hands. "Look."

Sansa appeared to inspect him for a moment, before she brightened. "Your cane, you're not using it anymore."

Willas Tyrell, Sandor now recalled. Fucking, great.

"That's right," said Willas, "the doctor gave me the all clear. I have to take it easy, but my legs are as good as new."

"That's fantastic!" exclaimed Sansa.

Sandor cleared his throat, which of course drew their attention. The oldest Tyrell son turned to him.

"Sandor Clegane, if I'm not wrong." Willas smiled at him politely.

"We've met before," Sandor grunted, not returning the smile.

"Oh, yes." Willas looked as though he was thinking about it. "At the Battle of The Bands, briefly. You were with Sansa's sister, Arya, at the time, right?"

"You have a good memory." Sandor's eyes narrowed further still.

"I heard that you and Arya recently broke up."

Sandor's eyes were now glinting dangerously. "You heard correctly."

"Break-ups suck, don't they?" Willas continued to smile genially, seeming not to notice the change in Sandor or Sansa's mood at the mention of Arya's name. "Anyway, let's not keep Sandor from his friends, Sansa. The guys on the football team are in high demand tonight, and Sandor probably has a lot of people who want to greet him."

Sansa looked up at him apologetically. "Er…yeah. Sorry to keep you, Sandor."
Sandor didn't say anything, wishing he could throw Willas Tyrell into the ocean, resenting his presence and for butting into the moment he was having with Sansa. It was evident in the college guy's demeanor that he'd purposely come to take Sansa away.

"All the best for the game, Sandor." Willas gave him another smile.

A thought suddenly crossed Sandor's mind, and it was all he could do not to swear.

"Enjoy the game," he said, before he stalked off.

"Bye, Sandor," Sansa called after him, but he ignored her.

He was aware of the silence that followed his exit, and he knew that they were watching him walk away.

"He's as rough as people say."

Sandor heard the words that Willas muttered, and he suspected he meant for him to hear it. He walked faster, his mood darkening. Was Willas Tyrell going to be Sansa's next boyfriend? It was the thought that had made him want to swear in their faces, because it had been so obvious and he couldn't believe he hadn't seen it before. Gossip Spyder had hinted at it, and Sandor had seen evidence of it the night of the party for the Tyrell's. Willas Tyrell had made a beeline for Sansa every time she had been in his vicinity, and Sansa had not been holding back her smiles around the college boy.

Sandor joined the rest of his teammates, and Joffrey was the first person to speak to him. Unfortunately, the topic was Sansa.

"Look at that." Joffrey nodded his head in the direction Sandor had just come from. "Does she really think she can hook up with a college guy like Willas Tyrell?"

Sandor turned to look, because the part of him that enjoyed self-torment had not been able to stop itself. Sansa and Willas were now back with Jeyne and the cheerleaders, and joining them were Loras Tyrell and Renly Baratheon. The girls were all laughing and self-consciously preening themselves in the presence of the older guys, and Sandor wondered if girls ever noticed how silly they looked when doing this.

From the crowd gathering at the beach, he could see that quite a number of the King's Landing College Stags had turned up, and presumably, would be proceeding to watch the game later. He half-expected to see Gregor in the crowd, but as he hadn't spotted the hard-to-miss, freakish walking mountain that was his older brother, it was safe to assume he wasn't present.

Sansa was now giggling at something that Willas had just said to her, with her face upturned, and her posture relaxed. It should have pleased him to see that she no longer had that wariness about her that she used wear when she was with Joffrey, but Sandor only frowned.

"What would a guy as experienced as Willas want with Sansa?" Joffrey continued, "she's fooling herself if she thinks he's seriously interested in her."

"What does it matter to you?" Sandor asked, "you're chasing Margaery."

"I don't care if she's with another guy," Joffrey replied, "I just don't want her thinking that she can get someone better than me."

Sandor couldn't believe the guy's ego. Joffrey really thought he was God's gift to women.
"If Willas is chasing after Sansa thinking she's going to put out, then he's going to be majorly let down. She's as cold and frigid as a nun." Joffrey laughed.

Sandor knew better than that. Sansa was not frigid. The memory of Sansa's lips on his neck, and her hot little tongue on his skin was proof that she was warm, and had desires like any normal girl. If Sansa had not let Joffrey touch her, it was because he was a douchebag and she didn't want him to. Willas Tyrell was not Joffrey, and Sansa was not going to say no to everyone. If Sansa had been able to warm up to Sandor, who she wasn't even attracted to, then she could definitely warm up to the infinitely more handsome and debonair college boy. Also, Willas Tyrell did not strike him as the type to chase after girls simply to get into her panties, which made him a much better match for Sansa.

The fact that someone as thick as Joffrey had noticed the attention Willas had been paying to Sansa in recent weeks, meant that everyone else would have noticed it sooner. Sansa was younger than Willas, and inexperienced, so he would not be rushing her into anything. But, it would only be a matter of time before Willas would make his move. Sandor was sure of it.

His thoughts were broken when he saw three more young men approaching Sansa's group, and he watched as the two older Stark brothers, and their foster-brother Theon Greyjoy greeted Sansa and her friends. Sansa's brothers then took it in turns to shake hands with the Tyrell brothers, as well as Renly Baratheon. Sandor was not surprised that the college boys all seemed to be acquainted with one another. After all, money and influence moved in the same circles.

He continued to observe them as the auburn haired brother, Robb, made conversation with Renly, and then Willas. He must have been asking about the football team, because Renly indicated in their direction.

"You've got company, Joffrey." Sandor nudged the blond jerk. "Don't you think you should greet them? Your father's are still business partners, right?"

"What are you talking about?" Joffrey asked, annoyed at being interrupted from his conversation with some junior girls.

Sandor indicated the Stark brothers with the group on the beach, and Joffrey turned to find daggers being glared his way.

"What the hell are they doing here?" Joffrey swore.

"To wish you luck, that should be obvious," Sandor said before walking away, chuckling darkly as he did so.

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**Sansa**

She hadn't known that Willas was going to turn up. Not that she minded his company, but his timing could have been better. She didn't know if she was going to get another chance to speak to Sandor. She hadn't been aware of her feet carrying her towards him, but suddenly she'd found herself tugging on his shirt. At the sound of his name being called, her body had moved on its own, and then she'd been standing in front of him, babbling about how she'd been waiting for him.

Robb had told her about wanting to watch the championship game, so she had been expecting her brothers to turn up, but she hadn't planned on keeping company with anyone else. The arrival of Renly, Loras and Willas had momentarily surprised her, before she remembered that Renly and Loras were keen football fans, were on the college team, and that Joffrey was Renly's nephew.
"Will Margaery be coming, too?" Sansa had asked politely.

"She'll be at the game tonight," Willas had replied, "she was accompanying Grandma somewhere earlier today."

Sansa had seen the curious looks that Jeyne, Randa and Mya had given her when she'd returned with Willas at her side. She knew what they were thinking, and she wanted to tell them that they were wrong. There was nothing going on between her and Willas. He was in college, and surely not interested in a high school sophomore. In any case, she liked Sandor Clegane.

Nevertheless, mere minutes after introducing Willas to her friends, they were completely charmed by the oldest Tyrell brother. Sansa noticed that the presence of the three college guys was attracting quite a lot of attention from the students of both KL Prep, and Dragonstone Academy. It's amusing, she thought. Everyone had this warped idea that she was Miss Popular, when in reality, if it wasn't for who her father was, and his network of connections, she would never have met guys like Renly, Loras or Willas. If she had been some other man's daughter, she would be just another anonymous red-head, whose life would be of no interest to anyone.

Having found out that Sansa had plans to watch the game with her friends, her football fanatic brothers had declared they would come and watch the game with her. Arya, she learned, had plans elsewhere and wouldn't be watching the game. Sansa had not asked, but she knew from the expression on Jon's face that Arya's plans involved Jaqen H'ghar.

When her brothers arrived and joined them on the beach, Robb, Jon and Theon spent some minutes re-acquainting with the Tyrell brothers and Renly. Jon explained to a curious Sansa that they had all met before, at inter-school sporting events when they had all been in high-school.

"Renly." Robb shook the offered hand of the dark-haired Baratheon. "I wanted to thank you for watching out for Sansa during the riot. It's a long time coming, but I wanted to thank you in person. Extend my thanks to Tyrion Lannister, too, when you see him."

Renly shrugged it off. "Don't mention it. I can't accept all the credit. Her knight in shining armor that day wasn't me."

"Really?" Perplexed, Robb frowned. "There was someone else?"

"Yeah, there was." Renly nodded. "It kind of surprised me actually, that he went to find her in that madness."

Sansa's heart began to pound in her chest. Renly was about to reveal something she hadn't told her family. The only person she'd told was Jeyne, who now gave her a quick sideways glance. Sandor's role in her rescue had not been forgotten. It had merely been overshadowed by the more pressing issues at the time, and Sansa had kept quiet about it because she'd had a feeling that Sandor did not want or need to be lauded for his actions.

"Who was it?" Robb asked.

Renly nodded in the direction of the sand dunes where the football team had set up their beach blankets and chairs. "Sandor Clegane."

Randa and Mya exclaimed their surprise, while Jeyne said nothing.

"Sansa, you didn't tell us," said Mya.

"Oh, my gosh..." gasped Randa.
"Clegane, huh?" Robb's expression cleared. "I've heard that name before."

"Yeah," said Jon, "I've heard that name, too."

Sansa was aware that her brothers knew exactly who Sandor Clegane was, and when they turned to look towards the football team, it wasn't difficult to spot his tall figure in the group.

"We were just talking to him earlier," Willas said, "Sansa seems to be good friends with him."

"Is that right?" Theon raised an eyebrow. "I assumed he was Joffrey's friend."

Sansa didn't deny it.

"We talk sometimes," she replied, "and, I don't think he's particularly close to Joffrey…"

"Maybe, I'll have to thank him in person as well," Robb said, looking at Sansa with an expression that told her he knew more than he was letting on.

Robb had been trying to corner her ever since lunch on Thanksgiving. He wanted to talk, and Sansa just wasn't ready. Luckily, their father had wanted Robb's company, and so far she'd managed to avoid having to talk to him.

"Speaking of your ex-boyfriend, Sansa…is that him, over there?" Jon indicated towards the sand dunes again.

"Ah, my young nephew…he's a handful, all right." Renly gave them an apologetic look.

All of her brothers were looking towards Joffrey now, much to Sansa's discomfort, particularly as Loras and Willas wore amused expressions on their faces. Joffrey must have noticed them staring, because he looked back, and his face froze for a fraction of a second.

"Handful is not the word I would use," Robb said darkly.

"If you like, I can call him over. I'm sure he'd love to chat with all of Sansa's brothers," Renly offered.

Theon started to laugh, and shortly Robb and Jon started laughing with him, lightening the mood once again. The cheerleaders of both schools were putting on impromptu routines, and Randa and Mya went to join the rest of the KL Prep squad in rallying their school spirit, leaving Sansa and Jeyne with the group of college boys. It didn't turn out to be a bad deal, in Sansa's opinion, because they saw to it that she and Jeyne constantly had snacks and drinks in their hands and that they were comfortable.

The local food truck owners had all come down to the beach to take advantage of the horde of hungry students, and between Robb, Renly and Willas, Sansa had just about all the nachos, corn dogs and soda she could handle. When the sky began to darken, the massive bonfires were lit. There were six in total; the two largest bonfires represented the two competing schools, and four smaller ones that dotted the length of Blackwater Beach, illuminating the students who were in party mode.

Firecrackers and fireworks were being constantly let off, which filled the air with the sound of explosions and loud pops, and filling the sky with brightly colored lights. On occasion when the firecrackers were let off too close to spectators, there were a number of supervising teachers present to reprimand the offending student.

"This bonfire is a bigger gathering than I anticipated," Theon muttered, "I was expecting a campfire
and marshmallows on sticks."

"Everything in King's Landing is done on a grand scale, Greyjoy," Renly told him, "wait until the half-time show at the game later tonight. I expect there will be more lights and explosions."

Beside her, Willas, who was also studying business economics in college was engaging her brother in some talk about the joint venture their families had entered into, while Jeyne laughed at the jokes Loras and Renly were telling. Sansa pretended to listen, but her attention was directed towards the sand dunes. Sandor was never too far from her sights. Her eyes were trained to spot him, as though he'd been wired with a homing beacon. It was because of this sixth sense of hers that she saw what happened next, though she was powerless to do anything but gasp in shock.

There was a loud bang, followed by another, and then a bright flash of sparks as an object flew in Sandor's direction.

"Watch out!"

The shout of warning had not come from her, but it came not a second too late. Sandor's quick reflexes saved him from injury, and Sansa watched as Sandor fell back onto the sand, the rogue firecracker narrowly missing his head, landing several feet away where it continued to burn, pop and hiss amid the squeals of people trying to jump out of its way.

"That was close," Willas commented, observing the scene.

"Lucky for your friend, Sansa," Robb added.

Sansa didn't say anything, but continued to watch as someone from the team offered Sandor a hand, which he waived away. He got back onto his feet a moment later, and as he brushed sand from his clothing, Sansa felt relieved to see that he was unhurt, although the expression on his face was furious, and his mouth was moving with the curses Sansa imagined he was likely spouting.

A teacher arrived on the scene after the firecracker stopped popping, and the student responsible for setting it alight was quickly rebuked, and Sansa thought him lucky, as Sandor would not have let him off so lightly had he managed to get to him first.

Not long after that, the members of the football teams from both schools began to depart, presumably to make their way to Baelor's Arena, where the finals were traditionally held. Sansa learned that it was custom to play the championship match on neutral ground. She didn't see Sandor leave the beach, and she regretted not being able to speak to him again before the match. With the game set to start at 8 p.m. Sansa and Jeyne were driven to Baelor's Arena by Robb, where they again met up with Renly, Loras and Willas. Margaery arrived not long after, and by 7:30 p.m. they were all seated, and eagerly awaiting kick-off.

Looking around the stadium, Sansa recalled that the last time she had been at Baelor's Arena was for the Battle of The Bands. There was no stage or mosh pit now, instead there were freshly painted lines on the field, balloon arches in each of the school colors, smoke machines, and giant flaming torches on either end of the football field. As Renly had said, everything was done on a grand scale in King's Landing, and high school football games were no exception.

While they waited, Willas and Margaery began to talk about horses and equestrian shows, and Sansa joined them as the topic was something that interested her, but her interest was half-hearted as all Sansa could really think about was the memory of her kissing Sandor's neck that night, in that very same stadium. For a crazy second, she wondered if he would remember it, too. He won't be thinking about stupid things like that, she thought. *He has an important game to play, and he won't be*
thinking about the stupid sister of his ex-girlfriend who threw herself at him that one time.

She distracted herself by wondering whether Arya was having fun, wherever she was that evening, and whether she even spared a thought for her ex-boyfriend and the match he was about to play.

The game kicked off at a few minutes past eight, with the school teams being welcomed to the field amid deafening cheers from the crowd that had turned out to watch them. From the start, it was apparent that it was going to be a close game. With the White Knights on the offense, they were able to score points in the opening minutes, and the King's Landing Prep supporters went wild in the stands.

The Dragons hit back with some impressive counter-attacks that quickly saw them close the gap in the scores. Sansa was on the edge of her seat, seeing that Sandor was being made to play hard in his defensive post. By half-time, the White Knights were leading by only two points.

"The Dragons are stronger than I anticipated this year," Renly said, "I thought for sure that the Knights had this in the bag, but now…I don't know."

Sansa was then made to listen as the guys discussed the strengths and weaknesses of each school team. Margaery excused herself to go and speak to some of her friends in the stands nearby, and Jeyne attempted to converse with her over the noise.

"The half-time show is about to start. You don't want to miss that."

"It's that spectacular, huh?" Sansa raised her brow.

"Well, it'll keep you entertained, you know?" Jeyne leaned in, before whispering. "Just until he comes back onto the field."

Sansa felt her cheeks flush, but she smiled in agreement. Jeyne was right. The much hyped half-time show were big, flashy song and dance numbers by performers from each school, accompanied by an abundance of blinking lights and a veritable arsenal of pyrotechnics that, by the time the show was over, left the stadium filled with a haze of special effects smoke. Indeed, Sansa was impressed, but she couldn't wait to see Sandor get back on the field. At the start of the third quarter, the teams were welcomed back with more cheering, and Sansa's eyes focused on the sideline to make sure she didn't miss Sandor's entrance. She saw him start jogging onto the field, passing through the wobbling balloon arch as fans cheered for him.

"Hound! Go get them, Hound!" they yelled.

Sandor raised an arm acknowledging his fans as he neared the giant flaming torch…just as it gave a sputter, and then a loud hiss which was followed by a fireball that burst from the top of the torch, shooting high into the sky. The crowd shouted in surprise, and a voice over the speaker called for calm as technicians immediately dealt with the malfunctioning torch. Sansa could only watch as Sandor stood in the same spot as though frozen, looking up at the column of fire still spewing from the burning torch.

"Is he okay?" someone in the stands nearby asked.

"He looks like he's in shock, don't you think?" Margaery asked.

"He'll be fine, he's a tough sonofabitch," Renly replied.

"Oh, look. He's snapped out of it," Loras observed. "Did I tell you about that time Sandor saved me from his big scary brother?"
"You sound like a helpless little girl when you say it like that," Margaery teased her brother.

Sansa was too focused on Sandor to pay attention to their banter. She watched as Sandor finally moved from his position, urged on by another teammate. Nothing had happened. He was unhurt, and Sansa was glad. However, when the second half of the game was finally under way, it was clear to Sansa that Sandor was not playing with the same ferocity as he'd played in the first half. She didn't know if anyone else could see it, but to her, his movements that were usually razor sharp, had suddenly become sluggish and hesitant. His defense game was suffering, and soon the Dragons scored enough points to take the lead.

"Clegane!" Coach Selmy's voice carried over the din of crowd, and it was clear the coach was not pleased by the sudden slump in his star linebacker's performance.

The coach called for a stop in the game, and Sansa watched as Sandor was called to the sideline, where Coach Selmy engaged him in a heated exchange. Sansa had seen this before, and usually, Sandor responded well to one of Coach Selmy's pep-talks. However, this would not be one of those times. Sandor was taking off his helmet, and removing his mouth guard. Sansa could see Coach Selmy's puzzlement on his face.

"What are you doing, Clegane?"

Everyone around them was asking the same question.

"What's he doing?" Robb asked.

"Beats me," Renly replied.

The set of Sandor's shoulders had changed, as had the expression on his face. He looked around the smoke-hazy stadium at that moment, but he didn't appear to be noticing the crowd. His expression was dark, but void of emotion like she had never seen before. She was used to seeing anger, or displeasure…but seeing him emotionless frightened her. Sandor then started to walk away from Coach Selmy, who was still speaking, and away from the field.

"Get back here, Clegane!" Coach Selmy yelled after him.

Sandor stopped, and slowly turned back to face his coach. Sansa saw his lips moving, but what he said was lost in the noise. Then he faced the direction of the exit, and continued to walk off the field, abandoning the game.

"Did you see that?" Renly asked.

"He's gone…he just left," Loras said, puzzled.

"Can he do that?" asked Jon.

"Is he okay?" asked Jeyne, looking at Sansa.

Around them, the stadium had erupted into loud chatter and booing, while on the field the players milled about in confusion, as Coach Selmy was being forced to make the decision to substitute another linebacker in place of Sandor. Amidst the chaos, Sansa realized what had happened, and suddenly she was on her feet. It's the fire, she thought. A memory of a dark evening walking through a dark garden played through her mind, and she remembered Sandor telling her the story of his scar…and the fire that had maimed him. She bit back a cry, because she knew without a doubt what had happened to Sandor.
Please, she thought. Please, let him be okay.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed this chapter. I'll try to bring you the new one asap!
Episode 22 "His True Self"

Chapter Notes

Surprise! Here's the next chapter, updated much faster than you were all probably expecting. I've been suffering from the flu this week, and I apologise in advance if I have spelling mistakes, or if I've slipped into Aussie grammar. Check the end notes for more info about this chapter. Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gossip Spyder

Whoa! What a week we've been having!

First of all, I hope you are all recovered from the Thanksgiving feasting and partying…so, it's back to school and the daily grind for all of us.

Now, if you don't already know what happened at the championship game, then where the hell have you been and what have you been doing? The talk about Sandor 'The Hound' Clegane walking off the field and deserting the rest of his team in the middle of the third quarter of Saturday night's game almost overshadows the fact that our White Knights went on to win the match, despite the desertion of our star linebacker…a big congratulations again White Knights! You guys were awesome!

Sandor Clegane has not been seen at school or around town since he left Baelor's Arena on Saturday night, and many are wondering what is going on. Other members of the football team have refused to speculate, but all we know for sure is that there were a number of college football scouts at the game on Saturday, and surely they will now be questioning The Hound's mental state. Let's hope this one blip on his otherwise stellar high-school football career does not impact on Sandor's eligibility for future college football scholarships.

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Sandor

It was 1:30 p.m. on a Thursday afternoon, and he hadn't moved from where he'd parked his ass on the couch that morning. He hadn't been to school all week. In fact, he hadn't been outside his house at all. His housekeeper had been keeping him fed, and after the one occasion he'd yelled at her after she had tried to check on him, she hadn't tried to speak to him again in his current mood.

His head was a mess. All because he had not been able to control his fear…his weakness.

Damn it all to hell, he thought. If it wasn't for that fucking torch…Sandor let his train of thought go unfinished. There was no sense repeating what he'd been beating himself up for over the last few days. Fire frightened the shit out of him, and with good reason. He knew how it felt to be burned alive.

He'd been spooked by that firecracker narrowly missing his head at the bonfire, but the giant torch
filled with god knows what kind of fuel, and burning with enough intensity that he could feel its heat ten feet away, well…that had been his undoing.

Twice in the same day he'd had a close call with fire. Superstitious edict proclaimed that bad things happened in threes. Sandor didn't believe in superstition, but he had not wanted to stick around to find out if it was true. The smoke haze that had hung about the stadium after the over-the-top pyrotechnics from the half-time show had not helped. Standing next to the torch, feeling its heat, and inhaling that sickly-sweet smoke, had proved too much for him.

"What are you doing, Clegane?" Coach Selmy had barked at him as he'd walked away from the football field. "You have a game to finish. Get back out there with the rest of your teammates and win this championship."

Sandor had turned back to see his coach's furious face. "Fuck football. Fuck the game. Fuck the championship."

He'd fled the stadium then, not giving a shit about consequences. He'd been in the locker room taking off his football jersey when Coach Selmy had come looking for him.

"What is the matter with you, boy?" the older man had asked gruffly, concern mixing with the agitation on his weathered face.

"I thought we were here to play football," Sandor had replied, "not have a fucking barbeque."

"Barbeque?"

"The hell we need all this smoke for?" Sandor had asked as he roughly pulled on his sweatshirt.

"Are you all right, Clegane?" Coach Selmy's brows had knitted together, puzzled at the linebacker's mutterings.

"That damned torch is a hazard…a fucking accident waiting to happen." Sandor zipped up his sports bag and threw it over his shoulder, before he'd pierced the older man with a look that had made him back down. "That thing is gonna blow up and kill somebody, and I'm telling you it won't be me."

Sandor had brushed past Coach Selmy as he had stalked out of the locker room. No one had attempted to stop him as he walked down the hall and out of Baelor's Arena. He'd gone home, and he'd been there in self-imposed isolation since. His phone had rung several times, and he'd ignored the unrecognized numbers. He also did not bother reading the few text messages he'd received from Joffrey, Trant and Blount. He had deleted them as soon as he'd seen the notifications. The one text he did read was from Arya Stark.

"Are you alive? Y or N," s he had written.

"Fuck off," he'd replied.

"Good. You're alive. Take care of yourself."

He knew that Arya had not gone to watch the game. She had sent him a text message before the game had started, wishing him luck. She hadn't spoken to him at school since their supposed break-up, so he had been surprised to receive her message. Her texting to see if he was okay left him confounded. It amused him to think that Arya could have grown attached to him in some way during the duration of their fake relationship.

Coach Selmy had paid him a visit at home on the Tuesday afternoon, seeing as he hadn't come to
school for a couple of days. His teachers knew he lived alone, and with an absent father, it had not surprised Sandor that Coach Selmy had taken it upon himself to check on his welfare. The older man had looked him over, taken in his disheveled appearance, but seemed pleased enough with what he'd seen.

"Do you need to speak with anyone, my boy?" the man had asked him.

"About what, Coach?"

"Your pyrophobia." Coach Selmy had given him a look, seeing if he would deny it.

"Pyro…?" Ah, Sandor had thought. It has a name. "No, Coach. I'll be fine."

The older man had pursed his lips, looking as though he wanted to argue about it, but he'd refrained.

"Given your particular circumstances, I understand why you've been absent from school. I'll speak to the principal on your behalf, but you must be back in attendance next week, understand?"

"Yes, Coach."

After the older man had left, Sandor had gone right back to sitting on the couch and staring aimlessly at the television. Learning that there was a proper name for his weakness had not helped his mood.

"Pyrophobia," he'd said to himself, "a fucking fear, of fucking fire."

A quick search on the internet had revealed that in many cases, a bad childhood experience with fire was the trigger for the condition.

"A bad childhood experience, huh?" Sandor had run a hand over his face, feeling the hardened and wrinkled surface of his mangled left side contrasting against the supple right side. "I'm the fucking poster boy, right here."

He knew he had a problem, and he knew exactly why he'd fled from Baelor's Arena. What he couldn't say for certain, was why he was choosing to hide himself away. What the hell was he hiding from? He didn't give two cents about the fact Gossip Spyder was talking about him again, and he didn't have a problem with people staring and whispering about him. He knew he was going to face a lot of negativity for abandoning the championship match, but he didn't care so much about that either.

"What the hell is the matter with me?" Sandor got up and headed to the kitchen, only to find that he was out of beer. "Motherfucker."

He contemplated going out to buy some, but that required physically going out and leaving the house. After profusely swearing, he wrote a note for his housekeeper to buy alcohol, and made do with soda.

He wasn't suicidal, he knew that much. He just had a lot of things on his mind, and thinking about it all just made it feel like there was a weight tied to his legs, pulling him underwater, and that there was nothing he could do about it. Sansa had been in the stands that night. She had seen him freaking out, and watched as he'd abandoned the game and his team.

"It doesn't matter if you win or lose, it just matters that you do your best," she had said.

"Then that's what I'll do. I'll try my best," he had told her.
Her blue eyes had been shining that day at Blackwater Beach, as she'd looked up at him and wished him luck for the game. Her voice had been filled with sincerity when she'd told him with absolute certainty that he would play brilliantly. She believed in his talent on the field, and his ego had puffed with pride at the time. However, that was before Sandor had run away. Sansa had witnessed him become a coward. How do you think she's going to look at you now? He asked himself. Sandor didn't know how she could look at him with anything but disappointment, if she even cared at all.

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Sansa

She had been scanning the school car park every morning that week, looking out for Sandor's black Mustang, but every morning, her concern for Sandor grew and grew when she failed to spot his car. Where is he? What is he doing? She didn't know who she could ask to find out, and she had exhausted her links with the other guys on the football team. Sandor didn't have friends, and it seemed the only person who was missing him, was her.

I should have gone, she thought. I should have chased after him as soon as he left the stadium.

She had already been on her feet. Sandor had just disappeared through the stadium exit, and in fact she had already taken a step to follow him.

"Sansa?" Robb had asked, "where are you going?"

Sansa had stopped, realizing that all her companions were watching her. "I…I have to see if he's okay."

Robb had given her a look, and Sansa could have sworn that he knew more than he was letting on. The rest of the group had given her curious looks too, only Jeyne's eyes also showed understanding.

"I can see that you're concerned about your friend," Robb had said, "but, I doubt you'd be allowed into the locker room to see him now. It's probably best if you just sit back down, and you can try calling him later."

Sansa had wanted to argue. She had wanted to insist on going after Sandor, but a glance back down at the field and at the look on Coach Selmy's face, she had agreed that Robb was probably right.

She had sat back down, and watched as the game resumed without Sandor. She lasted all of two minutes, before she had stood up again.

"I have to go," she hadn't waited for anyone's reply, she'd simply just ran.

It had seemed to take forever to climb down the stands, and even longer to find the right corridor once she had found her way to the holding rooms.

"Locker rooms." She'd pulled on the arm of someone wearing an organizer's tag around his neck. "Which way?"

The guy had pointed her in the direction, and Sansa ran on. She had reached the hall leading to the locker room that the White Knights were using, just as Coach Selmy emerged from the doorway.

"Coach Selmy," she'd called out to the man, "is Sandor okay? Please, may I speak with him?"

"Miss Stark." Coach Selmy had been surprised to see her, but then his brows had knit together when he'd realized what she had just said. "I'm afraid you can't. You've just missed him."
"What? He's gone?"

The man had nodded. "He left just a while ago…Miss Stark! Hold on!"

Sansa had not waited for the man to finish speaking before she was off and running again. However, she had been too late. She had reached the car park just in time to see Sandor's unmistakable Mustang driving out of the lot. Out of breath, she had collapsed against a bollard, and had to hold back the urge to scream. It had taken her some time to get back to the stands to rejoin the group. At their questioning gazes, she'd managed to shrug and say that she'd missed him.

After the game, and some hours after Sansa and her brothers had gotten home, Robb had knocked on her bedroom door. There had been nowhere for Sansa to escape, so she'd allowed him to come in. Robb had given her a reassuring smile, before pulling a chair next to her bed and sitting across from her.

"I'll make this quick," he'd said, "I already spoke with father, so I know what went down between you and Joffrey."

"Oh." Sansa had grimaced. "So, what did you want to talk with me about?"

Robb had sighed and scratched his head. "Actually, there was a lot I wanted to discuss with you, but at the moment I can only think of one."

"What's that?"

"Sandor Clegane." Robb's blue eyes and met hers, and Sansa knew that he knew. "How long have you had a crush on this guy?"

Sansa had just stared at her brother, blushing.

"You don't have to be embarrassed. It's a natural thing to happen." Robb had laughed softly. "I saw it when you ran off after him tonight."

"I couldn't help it," Sansa had finally said, "I've liked him for a long time. But he ended up dating Arya."

"I heard they've broken up and she's with someone else now."

"I know that, but it doesn't mean anything will happen between Sandor and I," Sansa had pointed out. "I just can't help caring about him."

Robb's expression had become thoughtful. "This guy rescued you during the riot. From what I read on that blog, he also helped you out when you and Joffrey had a fight at that party."

"That's right." Sansa had nodded. "I don't know why, but he always seems to be looking out for me."

"He sounds like a decent kind of guy,"

"He's a hundred times better than Joffrey."

"I think I can see that." Robb had noticed the smile on his sister's face. "So, what are you going to do now?"

Sansa had sighed and shrugged. "I don't know. Right now, I just want to make sure that he's okay."
"So, call him. You have his number, don't you?"

She had nodded. "I have it. Joffrey gave me Sandor's number ages ago, but I've never had use for it."

"Now you have a reason to."

"I can't. I can't just call him like this."

"Hey, you were the one running around Baelor's Arena chasing after him earlier."

"I was acting on instinct."

"Why are you ignoring your instinct now? It's what you want to do."

"I can't," Sansa had said again, "we were never close...we were never really friends. We just talked sometimes, that's all."

"You know, you kind of impressed me back there going after him like that," Robb had revealed, taking her by surprise. "Don't chicken out now."

"I don't even know what I could say to him now," Sansa had admitted, "it'd be so awkward."

"It could be," Robb had agreed, "it doesn't have to be. Just ask if he's okay, and let him know you're here to help if he needs anything."

Sansa had looked at the clock on her phone and noted the late hour. "It's too late. He's probably sleeping."

"Then call him in the morning," Robb had suggested.

In the morning, Sansa had tried. Numerous times, she'd dialed Sandor's number, only for it to go to his voicemail.

"Leave a message," his recorded voicemail instruction barked, without greetings.

In the end, she hadn't been able to leave him a message, and Sandor had never picked up her calls. The next thing she knew, the weekend and the holidays were coming to an end, and her brothers were preparing to leave once again. Before he had left, Robb had taken her aside in one of the rarely used reading rooms in Chateau Maegor.

"Look, I've been talking with Jon, and it appears he's spoken with Arya."

"Oh,"

"Don't look so panicked." Robb had laughed. "I now know that I have nothing to worry about. Arya cleared up a lot of things, and the rest, I already know from you."

Sansa had relaxed marginally. "Did you tell Arya about how I ran after him at the game?"

"No, and neither has Jon or Theon."

"I suppose she'd hear about it somehow." Sansa had sighed. "I ran off, in front of the Tyrell's. Margaery was right there."

"Are you worried about what people will say?"
"No." Sansa had shaken her head. "I'm not embarrassed about being concerned for a friend, or showing that I cared."

"Good." Robb had tilted his head then, and gazed at her in a way he'd never done before. "I'm seeing a part of you I've never seen, Sansa. You're not a kid anymore."

"Have I really changed?"

"Ahuh." Her brother had nodded. "You're still you, but at the same time, I see a young lady standing in front of me, instead of my kid sister."

"You sounded like father for a moment there," Sansa had said, breaking the slightly awkward mood between them.

Nevertheless, Robb knew that she appreciated his sentiment. They had never needed to display their affections in the way Jon and Arya tended to do.

"About Sandor," Robb had said in a quieter tone, "in my opinion as a guy, I think you should keep trying."

"Really?" Sansa had frowned, skeptical.

"Yeah." Robb had nodded. "From what I know about this guy, and how he's helped you out in the past, I think it's a safe bet to say he does care about you in some way. A guy like him would not go out of his way to help a girl if he didn't care about her at all."

"But he was probably only helping me because I was Joffrey's girlfriend, and Arya's sister…"

Robb was already shaking his head. "Trust me on this. I know his type, and guys like him are not moved by sentiment alone."

"But, he's Arya's ex-boyfriend…"

"There's no law that says you can't date your sister's ex-boyfriend, and I really don't think Arya will be upset if you did."

That had been the second time Sansa had heard that. Jeyne had said the same thing, but her misgivings would not be quashed so easily.

At school, it had been hard to ignore the talk surrounding Sandor's disappearance. Many people were speculating he'd blown his chances at a football scholarship and that Sandor's apparent poor performance during later games was perhaps due to some unknown injury, or that he'd simply lost his enthusiasm for the game. Only Sansa had an inkling of the true reason, and the longer he stayed away from school, the deeper her worry became.

During a break between classes later in the week, she was surprised to find Margaery waiting for her at her locker.

"Hi, Sansa." Margaery flashed a beaming smile. "How are you today?"

"Fine, thank you," Sansa replied automatically, robotically. "And, yourself?"

"I'm doing great. I just had a pop quiz in Chemistry, but I think I did all right."

"Really? That's great." Sansa could not hide her curiosity. "So, um…what can I do for you?"
"Actually, I was wondering what I could do for you," Margaery replied, still smiling.

"What do you mean?"

Margaery looked around, making sure no one was within earshot of their conversation. "I know you must be worried sick about Sandor."

Sansa blushed red, unable to prevent her reaction. "Oh…um."

"It's okay," Margaery assured her, "I figured it out when you chased after him that night. You know, you broke my brother's heart."

"What? How?"

"Willas had been all set to ask you out, but when you went after Sandor like that, it was kind of obvious that he didn't stand a chance."

"Oh, my God…" Sansa's cheeks became redder. "I had no idea."

"Hey, don't sweat it." Margaery laughed lightly. "It'll be good for his ego to be reminded that he's not irresistible to women. Now, what are you going to do about Sandor?"

Putting aside what Margaery had just disclosed about Willas, Sansa sighed. "I don't know. I've tried calling him, but he's not taking my calls. I've asked almost everyone I know if they'd heard anything about him, but no one knows anything."

Margaery pursed her lipgloss coated lips. "I have an idea. Come on, follow me."

Margaery did not wait for Sansa to follow her, instead, she took hold of Sansa's hand and pulled her along with her.

"Wait. Where are we going?"

"You'll see," said the brunette in a sing-song voice, "there are probably other people we could ask, but this way, no one has to know that we've been snooping."

Sansa had little choice but to follow her down the hall, though she was still clueless even when they came to a stop outside the Physical Education Department staff room. Margaery knocked on the door, and at a response from inside the room, Margaery opened the door.

"Good afternoon. Would it be possible to speak with Coach Selmy, please?"

Sansa heard rustling and movement inside the staff room, and a short moment later Coach Selmy stood in the doorway.

"Miss Tyrell." Coach Selmy looked from one girl to the other with an inquisitive look on his face. "And, Miss Stark. How can I be of service, ladies?"

"Good afternoon, Coach," Margaery greeted him with another of her beaming smiles. "We won't take up much of your time. We were just wondering if you'd heard anything about Sandor Clegane?"

Coach Selmy's eyes flicked over to Sansa before he responded. "Ladies, I can assure you that Sandor is fine. You don't have to worry about him."

"Sir, he hasn't been to school all week," Margaery insisted, and her expression became full of concern. "As his friends, we're very worried about him. Is there anything more you can tell us? We
just want to help our friend."

Coach Selmy looked troubled. It was clear he was debating whether to compromise student-teacher confidentiality, or give in to Margaery's convincing plea.

"Sir," Sansa heard herself say, "I know Sandor. He doesn't run away from anything. What happened at the game on Saturday, well, clearly he's been affected very deeply. I just need...I mean, we just need to see that physically, he is okay. Please, sir?"

Coach Selmy's eyes narrowed a fraction at Sansa's slip, and she could see in the way that he was studying her that he was piecing together the incident outside the locker room at Baelor's Arena, and her presence now outside his office.

"I see," he finally said, "perhaps a visit from his friends might do him some good. Do you have his address?"

Sansa could hardly believe her ears, and she shook her head in response. "No, sir. We don't."

"I'll just be a moment then." Coach Selmy went back inside the staff room, and while he was gone, Margaery shot Sansa an ear to ear grin. Coach Selmy returned shortly with a piece of paper in his hand, which he handed to Sansa. "Here it is. Though, if anyone asks, I know nothing about this."

"Yes, sir." Sansa graced him with a smile of her own. "Thank you, sir!"

Triumphant, they walked away from the staff room, and when they were far enough away Sansa turned to Margaery excitedly.

"Thank you, Margaery," she said, "if there's anything I can do for you, you just have to name it."

Margaery shrugged. "I barely did anything. It was you that convinced Coach Selmy."

"But, still. I never would have thought of going to see Coach Selmy, if it wasn't for you." Sansa gave her an appraising look. "I don't know why you're helping me, but thank you."

Margaery tilted her head and returned her look. "I know that people talk, but we're not rivals, Sansa. I see us as friends."

"Is that true?" Sansa could not hide the note of wariness in her voice. "What about Joffrey? You and your grandmother asked me some very tough questions about him that night at your welcoming party."

Margaery laughed. "I'm not dating Joffrey, and I have no intention of doing so. I just make him think he has a chance."

Sansa frowned. "Why? Why would you do that?"

Margaery's smile vanished then, to be replaced with an expression that reminded Sansa of a lioness, ready to pounce on her prey. "Listen, Sansa. I am sorry that my Gran had to ask you all those questions. I know it upset you, but we had to know the truth about Joffrey."

"Again, why?"

"Business," Margaery replied, "my family have invested a lot into the joint venture with your father and Robert Baratheon. It was unfortunate that your break-up with Joffrey, and the incident surrounding it was all made public around the time our fathers were signing the documents. Gran had
to know that our family's reputation wouldn't be hurt by our association with the Baratheons, and the only way she could think of to get to the truth, was through you."

"I see." Sansa nodded. "And, what's your role in all this?"

"My role was to take the spotlight away from Joffrey. If all eyes are on me, then that fool's misbehaving is more likely to be overlooked. My older brothers are not interested in father's company, you see. I know Willas likes to think he does, but he's more interested in his racehorses, his real passion. Someday, I intend to run my father's company as CEO, and I'm not about to let Joffrey's unsavory character hurt my company's reputation. I see it as my form of long-term investment."

"You're serious, aren't you?" Sansa asked, part in awe and part in disbelief.

"Deadly serious," Margaery replied, before flashing her that beaming smile once again. "So, we're friends?"

Sansa had not been able to suppress her laughter. "Sure. I guess so."

"Wonderful!" Margaery linked her arm through Sansa's as they made their way down the hall towards their respective classes. "Although, someday you're going to say it without the skeptical tone in your voice."

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**Arya**

It was a Thursday night, and Jaqen had just delivered her home at 7 p.m. on the dot after having spent the afternoon with him. She'd met him at Harrenhal Mall after school as it was a more central location for them to meet, rather than having him come all the way to King's Landing Prep to pick her up. It still seemed surreal to her. She had a boyfriend. A real boyfriend. Thinking about it made her giddy-happy, even after almost a week since they became an official couple.

When she had met him on the Saturday previous, she had barely been able to meet his eyes, overcome by a sudden shyness that seemed so unnatural for her. Jaqen had seemed to understand, and he had followed her cues. They had not planned for anything big. In fact, with most of the city caught up in the excitement of the championship match between KL Prep and Dragonstone Academy, they had opted to steer clear of the major districts that would attract pre and post match revelers.

They had gone to a café first, and all they had done was talk. They had swapped stories of how they had spent Thanksgiving with their respective families, and Jaqen had told her about some of the bands that had been lined up to play at *The House of Black & White* in coming weeks, extending an open invitation for her to come and watch whenever she liked. Afterwards, seeking some privacy, they had gone for a walk in King's Landing's popular Godswood Park, which was known for its long avenue of towering trees with bone white trunks, and five-pointed leaves of vibrant red.

"I've never seen so many weirwood trees in one place," Arya had exclaimed in awe.

"They are magnificent, aren't they?" Jaqen had said. "They have a haunting kind of beauty."

With the early afternoon light shimmering through the leaves, and the cool late autumn air carrying the scent of the trees and the coming winter around them, Arya had wanted to pinch herself to make sure that she had really been standing there next to Jaqen, and that she wasn't in one of her daydreams. Jaqen had taken her hand, and the warmth of his palm against hers had finally convinced
her that she wasn't dreaming.

"What is going through your head, lovely girl?" Jaqen had asked softly.

"That I've never had a boyfriend before, and I don't know what I'm supposed to do," she had blurted out, in true Arya fashion.

Jaqen had chuckled and squeezed her fingers. "You do not have to do anything. Being here, is all you need to do."

"Seems too simple," she'd said.

"When it is meant to be, then there is no need for it to be complicated."

Arya had pondered the meaning of Jaqen's words for a minute, before she had grinned up at him. "Are you saying that I was fated to be with you?"

He looked down at her, studying the smile on her face. "Fate…that is an interesting word you use."

"Why? Do you believe in fate?"

"I do," Jaqen had quickly replied, "if you can recall…I once asked you that same question."

She did remember. It was that time they had met at the juice bar in Harrenhal Mall. It was also the same day that Jaqen had asked her for three dates.

"Yes. I remember."

"At the time, you told me that you didn't know," Jaqen had continued, "what about now? Do you believe that Fate exists?"

They had walked some distance down the avenue before Arya had given him an answer. She'd had to really consider her response, because Jaqen seemed to really take the idea of fate seriously, and she understood that fate was not a simple phenomenon.

"I do," she had finally said, "I guess, I do believe in fate."

What she had held back in her response, was that while she did believe in the idea of destiny and predetermination, fate was not confined to bearing only good and happy tidings. Fate also saw to it that if something bad or unhappy was meant to happen, then it would. Fate had two faces; black and white. However, it seemed that voicing her thoughts on the subject would dampen the mood they had going, so she had chosen not to say it. Jaqen had seemed pleased with her answer, because he'd stopped walking and had pulled her to stand in front of him. Arya had tilted her head to meet his hazel eyes, and soon the spicy scent of his cologne surrounded her. There, beneath the rustling scarlet leaves, they had shared their first kiss as a couple…officially.

Arya had known that the distances between their schools, the fact Jaqen lived in Braavos, as well as Jaqen's busy schedule of band rehearsals and performances would mean their time together would be limited, and would have to be tailored to fit Jaqen. Meeting him that Thursday afternoon and being able to see him for a few brief hours had been great, but not nearly enough for either of them. Jaqen had told her that he would call her to let her know when he would be able to see her again.

"I know my schedule is rough," he'd said apologetically, "but, if you miss me, you only have to tell me, and I will be here."
Arya knew he meant it, but she was not that selfish or inconsiderate. Hearing it had still made her feel all fuzzy, however. She had just entered the house when her mother walked into the foyer, having heard the front door shutting.

"Arya, you're home. Fantastic," her mother said, "when you get upstairs, could you please call your sister down for dinner? Dinner will be served in ten minutes, when your father arrives home."

"Yes, mother," Arya had replied obediently, before climbing the stairs to her room.

After she had deposited her belongings on the floor and on her desk, she went to do as her mother had asked, and knocked on Sansa's bedroom door. When there was no response, she knocked for a second time and waited a good thirty seconds before she pushed the door open.

"I'm coming in, Sansa," Arya called as she entered her sister's room.

Sansa had been sprawled across her bed with headphones on her head, and she looked up at Arya's entrance.

"Oh…I didn't hear you," Sansa pulled the headphones from her head.

"I did knock," Arya said, "twice."

She watched as her sister hastily put away what looked like a scrap bit of paper that she had been staring at.

"Is it time for dinner?" Sansa asked, her hands still fiddling with the notebooks on her bed.

"Almost, mom said ten minutes." Arya made to leave. "I'll see you down there."

"Wait, Arya," Sansa called out to her as Arya's hand reached the doorknob.

Arya turned back around and looked questioningly at her sister. "Yeah?"

Sansa's expression became hesitant, but it swiftly turned to one of determination as she seemed to make up her mind about something. "Um…I'm just wondering if you'd heard anything about Sandor?"

Without thinking, Arya responded with a quick nod. "He's alive, if that's what you mean. I texted him a couple of days ago."

"You did?" Sansa's eyes went round. "Is he okay?"

"I don't know, I didn't get a chance to ask."

"Hmm." Sansa's look changed to thoughtful. "So, you two are on amicable terms? I mean, you still text him, even after breaking up."

Something clicked in Arya's head, and she suddenly straightened her back, on guard. Ah, shit!

"Um, yeah…I suppose." Arya now had to answer carefully, as her sister was still none the wiser. "We…um…we both realized we were better off as friends." Oh, Gods this is painful!

"I see." Sansa nodded, and Arya started wondering just what it was that her sister was fishing for. "So, you're really over him?"

"I'm with Jaqen now." Arya took a stab at what might be on Sansa's mind. "I really hope Sandor
finds someone else, too."

"Really?"

"Really." Arya smiled, knowing from Sansa's keen expression that she'd hit the target. "Sandor's probably going through some tough shit right now, and it's a shame he doesn't have anyone with him. It would do him good to have someone to talk to."

"You wouldn't be upset to see him with someone else?"

Arya shook her head vehemently. "No. In fact, it would be the opposite. I'd be really pleased to see him happy with another girl." Arya fixed her sister with a stare, making sure to meet her eyes. "I'd even be happy to see him with you."

Sansa gasped loudly, and Arya, pretending not to have heard, took that as her cue to leave the room.

"See you at dinner," she said, as casually as she could as she exited the room

And that, my dear sister, she thought, is all you'll get from me.

Gendry

He hadn't been sleeping, and the effects of several nights spent staring up at the ceiling were showing on his face. Gendry stared at his reflection in the mirror hanging over the bathroom sink, and a guy he barely recognized stared back at him.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked the reflection, but the guy in the mirror just continued to watch him with reddened eyes, and a sneer around his mouth. Never in his life had he ever felt this low, and he'd had a pretty depressing life before coming to live with the Motts. All because of a girl, he thought.

"I don't know who you are," Gendry said to his reflection.

He looked down at his right hand, gripping the edge of the bathroom vanity. He had hit a guy in the face with that hand, over a girl. He'd had a few days to cool down, and as his temper had waned, his ability to reason had returned. He hadn't known that he'd been capable of lashing out at another person like that. He never thought it was in him to be that aggressive. It unnerved him, and appalled him.

He hated the person he had become.

All for a girl.

No, he thought. This is entirely my doing. I'm the one responsible for my actions. I lifted my hand against him. It's not her fault. She can't control how she feels.

Gendry hung his head. He was being a total ass. He knew that falling for a person and liking someone, most of the time, was not something one chose to do. It just happens. His feelings for Arya had just happened. He hadn't planned for it. In all probability, Arya liking Jaqen had also just happened. He had no right to be mad about something that people had no control over. The only thing he should have been able to control were his actions, and he'd failed at that big time.

"How did I get like this?" he asked himself.
Being honest with himself, the last few months of his life, ever since he came into money and everything that went with it, felt as though he'd been living someone else's life. He'd been wearing branded clothing, driving a car he'd only ever dreamed of, was being fawned over by girls he didn't know, and going to school with kids from some of the most influential families in the city. He was as far from his old life as he could be. Had hanging around rich, entitled kids turned him into an entitled brat, too?

Gendry gave up trying to fix his hair, and went back to his room to finish getting dressed. After dragging on a pair of jeans and shoving his head and arms into the nearest clean shirt, he grabbed his guitar and headed to the garage. He got into his car and started the engine, but he didn't drive out. He had no desire to go to school. He wasn't going to pay attention in class anyway. What he wanted was to do something that would make him feel like himself again. His old self.

"Screw it. Fuck school." He'd made up his mind.

It was Friday, and he was going to get a head start on the weekend. He took out his phone and quickly fired off text messages to Hot Pie and Beric, so they wouldn't go looking for him, and then he drove to Flea Bottom. For a while, he just drove around his old neighborhood, past the apartment block where he used to live, and he even drove by his old high school, River's Edge High. Lommy and his old friends would all be in class at that moment, and he remembered afternoons after school where they would pool all their loose change together, so that they could buy a giant plate of cheese fries from their favorite hangout in Serpentine Alley. He hadn't seen the guys in a while, and with his memories stuck in the past, he suddenly found himself standing outside the 'Lucky 8' pool hall.

The place had not changed. It still smelled of musty wood and the cleaner that Bruce used to mop the floor. It was comforting. Bruce was behind the counter restocking the shelves with softdrinks, and he looked up briefly at the sound of Gendry's entrance.

"Sorry, we're not open yet. Come back in an hour."

"Hi, Bruce. Long time, no see," Gendry greeted him.

The man looked up for a second time, and squinted at him. "Gendry?"

Gendry walked up to the counter in front of him and squinted at him. "Gendry?"

"I barely recognized you in those clothes. We haven't seen you here in a long time," Bruce declared, "how have you been?"

Gendry shrugged. "Um…okay, I guess."

Bruce raised his eyebrows. "How are you adjusting to your new life?"

Gendry winced for a fraction of a second, before he shrugged again. "Okay. It's been an… adjustment."

"You're still a cheeky bastard." Bruce chuckled. "What brings you here this early in the morning? Wait, shouldn't you be at school?"

"Well, I kinda just felt like chilling out…like old times," Gendry replied, "I haven't played pool in a while, and I could do with the practice."

Bruce's shrewd eyes picked up on the things that Gendry was not saying. The many years of their acquaintance, not to mention the fact that Gendry's face was a veritable open book, made it easy for the man. Bruce nodded, and Gendry was glad he didn't have to explain why he was skipping school.
"Can I get you something to eat? Drink? Though I can only offer you a muffin, and iced coffee in a bottle."

"That sounds great, thanks."

Bruce fetched him a chocolate chip muffin and the iced coffee and set them on the counter in front of Gendry.

"So, how's that little friend of yours?" Bruce asked as Gendry bit into the muffin.

"Which friend?" Gendry asked, his mouth full.

"A young lady," Bruce replied, "pretty, and petite. Purple streaks in her hair. She was here some weeks back, and she came to speak to Lommy."

"Arya?"

"Is that her name?" Bruce mused, "anyway, she came and played a game with the guys, and after hustling Lommy, she bought them a bunch of food and drinks. She seemed like a nice girl."

A memory of something Lommy had said to him that time he came to see him at the Battle of The Bands rang in his mind, and Gendry recalled what his old friend had told him.

"Facebook, she said," Lommy had revealed. "She found me through Facebook, then she came to see me at the pool hall the other day."

He had forgotten about that. In the excitement surrounding the competition, he'd forgotten to ask Arya about what she'd been doing looking for his friends on Facebook, and coming to Flea Bottom to meet them.

"Why was she here?" Gendry asked Bruce.

"You don't know?" Bruce gave him a look. "She came here asking questions about you, and I'll tell you now, she wasn't the first one."

"What?"

"There was a man who came here asking questions about you, before your friend Arya. I presumed it was something to do with your inheritance, but she seemed to know the man's name when I told her about it."

Gendry didn't know what to make of what Bruce had just told him. "What was his name?"

"Johnny... no, Jory. Jory Cassel. Ring any bells?"

Gendry shrugged. "Nope. But, if Arya knew him, then he was probably one of her father's security people. Which means Arya's father knows all about me by now. No doubt, Lommy would have told Arya everything he knew."

"Who is this Arya? Who's her father?" Bruce scratched his chin. "Why are you being investigated?"

"She's Arya Stark... Yes, that Stark," Gendry confirmed, before Bruce could ask the question. "I suspect that doing background checks on your daughter's friends is probably standard procedure, for a man as wealthy and powerful as Eddard Stark."

"Makes sense," Bruce said, "their world seems like a totally alien planet to me."
"Yeah, I know what you mean," Gendry agreed, and kept eating his muffin.

For certain, Arya now knew that he was from River's Edge, and that the only reason he was at King's Landing Prep was due to his inheritance. She would know that he was an outsider. If anything, he was the alien.

I never belonged in her world.

"What's with that look on your face, kid?" Bruce stopped his cleaning to fix him with a stern glance. "You're not ashamed of where you came from, I hope?"

Gendry did not answer him.

Bruce swore. "What the hell's the matter with you? You'd better not be thinking what I think you're thinking. What's wrong with being poor? What's wrong with coming from Flea Bottom? There's plenty of us hardworking folk here, and those people in those fancy mansions are not better than us."

"I'm not ashamed," Gendry said.

"Then what's with that look?" Bruce demanded. "You look like you've been sucking on lemons."

"It's nothing,"

"Bullshit," Bruce called him out, "I wasn't going to ask, but it looks like your head's turned to shit, and you need to purge whatever rot is eating you up. Spit it out, kid. Why the hell are you here at ten in the morning, instead of school, where you should be?"

Gendry placed his elbows on the counter and dropped his forehead into his palms, before dragging his fingers through his already messed up hair.

"I don't fit into that world," he said, "the whole time I've been there…every day I go to school, and I keep wondering what the hell I'm doing in that prep school. The kids spend money like they have a never-ending supply, every week there's a different party at someone's parent's estate, and the biggest problem they have is whether to spend the summer in the Bahamas, or the Hamptons."

"That sounds like a lot of superficial nonsense. You're above that, Gendry. What's really going on?"

Gendry huffed in frustration before blurting out his answer. "Arya rejected me, and I punched the guy she chose instead of me."

Bruce let out a low whistle, then tsked-tsked. "Now we get to the bottom of it."

"It's not just about Arya," Gendry was finding it hard to express what he was feeling. "It's all of it."

Bruce leaned over the counter and patted his shoulder. "I can't say I understand everything you're going through – I've never had anyone leave me a pile of money, see?" He laughed at his own joke. "But I was a teenager once, a long time ago, and I have vague recollections of how confusing a time it was for me. It's not unusual for someone in your position to feel lost, Gendry, especially with how your life has been affected by your inheritance."

"I don't know who I'm supposed to be. I can't go back to being who I was…too much has changed."

"Don't think of that as a bad thing. Think of it as an opportunity to reinvent yourself. You're young. You have time. Find out and become the person you want to be, and if there are parts of yourself that you would prefer remain lost, then leave them behind. The same goes for the situation you're in.
Now, more than ever, you have the power to change things. Ignore the kids in your class, and go on doing your own thing. The Gendry I know is called The Bull for a reason. Where's that stubbornness gone to, huh?"

"That's what I've been wondering, too," Gendry said.

"Well, now that you've admitted you have a problem, you can now start trying to fix it. Right?"

"Yeah." Gendry gave him a cheeky smile, but his eyes expressed his gratitude. "You've gotten wiser in your old age, Bruce."

Bruce gave him a slap across his head and laughed. "Respect your elder, cheeky bastard."

Gendry was laughing too, before Bruce wiped the smile off his face with his next question.

"So, do you want to talk about Arya?"

Gendry grimaced. "I think I might have burned my bridges when I punched her new boyfriend in the face."

"You really liked her?"

"Yeah." Gendry sighed. "I did…I do. Rejection sucks."

"And, you can't stay friends?"

Gendry shook his head. "I don't see how."

"Hmm." Bruce began tidying packets of potato chips on the shelves. "Maybe you shouldn't have punched her boyfriend."

"I can't undo it now, can I?" Gendry mused.

"Why did you punch him?"

"I don't know…I just snapped, I guess. I saw them kissing, and that was that."

"I can't recall you ever being jealous over a girl before," Bruce said, "did you know they were together?"

"I didn't know they were together until that moment," Gendry replied.

"Hmm." Bruce said again, "I still can't understand why you punched him. If you and Arya were not together, then she didn't exactly do anything wrong."

Gendry groaned. "I'm the biggest ass on the planet!"

"Hmm?"

"I just thought she'd give me a chance, you know? We'd gotten really close, and I thought she cared about me the same way I did for her. I'd been waiting so long for my chance to make a move…I thought I finally had it, but it looks like she never liked me that way."

"Perhaps not in a romantic way, but I think she must have cared for you a lot," Bruce pointed out, "she did come all the way here because she was concerned about you."
"I still don't know why she did that."

"She said that you never spoke about yourself," Bruce told him.

"I didn't want anyone judging me," Gendry stated.

"I don't think she was judging you."

Gendry paused, thinking, trying to recall any incident where Arya may have treated him differently, as anything less than her equal, but he came up blank. Arya had found out about his very humble past weeks ago, but she had never once brought it up, or acted as though it mattered. As a friend, Arya had only ever cared about him for who he was, not his social status, his money or his background. And now he'd ruined it all.

"I don't think she'll ever speak to me again," he murmured.

"Have you tried apologizing?"

Gendry blinked, as though the idea was a ludicrous suggestion. "No, I haven't."

"Then, perhaps you should," Bruce said, "I don't know all the details, but from what you've told me, you already know that what you did was wrong, and you're feeling remorseful about how you've behaved. If salvaging your friendship with her is what you want, then you'd better swallow your pride and say you're sorry. After all, what have you got to lose?"

Nothing, Gendry thought. He had already lost in the romance stakes, and most likely in the friendship stakes, too. It was hurting him, knowing that Arya was with Jaqen, but it would hurt more not to have her around at all. He knew he probably couldn't stand to be near her in his present state, but someday when his heart no longer ached, maybe they could return to being friends.

"It's worth a try," he finally said.

"Good." Bruce smiled at him in encouragement. "Feeling better?"

Gendry shrugged. "Maybe."

"That's a start."

Gendry appreciated Bruce taking his time to talk to him. Other than his foster-dad, Gendry didn't have any other father-figures in his life. He'd known Bruce since he was in middle school, and had often helped him with odd jobs around the pool hall for extra pocket money. He could never say what Bruce's advice meant to him, but he still wanted to thank him.

Gendry stood up and looked around the pool hall. "So, you got anything you need help with? Mopping? Cleaning?"

"You're offering to clean?"

"I have to kill time somehow," Gendry replied, "Lommy and the guys are at school and won't be here for hours."

Bruce shrugged. "All right, suit yourself. There are boxes in the storage room that need unpacking, and when you finish that, you can flatten and take them to the industrial recycling bin in the alley."

"It's as good as done." Gendry rolled up his sleeves.
For the rest of the day until Lommy and his other friends arrived at the 'Lucky 8' after school, Gendry helped Bruce around the pool hall. He cleaned the restrooms, and even manned the counter for a couple of hours while Bruce took advantage of his help, and left to run some errands. It felt good to be doing something useful, and Gendry was glad for the opportunity to feel grounded once again. While he didn't enjoy cleaning, the physical labor reminded him of the life he'd left behind. He didn't want to experience the hardships of his childhood again, and he had to remind himself that Bruce was right, and he did have an opportunity to reinvent himself. He had money, he was getting a good education at a top private school, and he had a good shot at getting into a good college in a couple of years. Get a grip on yourself, he thought. You didn't go to KL Prep to chase after girls, and you certainly didn't go there to turn into the jerk you are now. He was going to have another go at finding the new...no – the real Gendry Waters.

Sansa

She stood before a large grey house, wondering if she was at the right place. She checked the address on the piece of paper Coach Selmy had given her against the address showing on the map app on her phone. The little blue blinking dot on the screen that represented her showed she was where she wanted to be. The suburb of Little Keep was not far from Chateau Maegor, just fifteen minutes by taxi, but it had felt much longer to her on the ride over.

All day at school she had kept thinking of what she was about to do, and questioning her sanity. Going to Sandor's house uninvited and unexpectedly was definitely at the top of the list of the craziest things she had ever done. Yet, here she was, standing outside his house and working up the courage to ring the doorbell. At least walk to the front door, she told herself. She was halfway along the path leading to the front step when it opened suddenly, and a woman in her late forties stepped out of the house. Sansa stopped in her tracks, just as the woman stared at her in surprise.

"Oh." The woman looked at her curiously. "Can I help you?"

Sansa smiled and walked the remaining length of the path to stand in front of her "Hello. I'm looking for the Clegane residence, and I was wondering if I'm at the right place?"

"Clegane," echoed the woman, "yes, this is their house. I'm their housekeeper."

"That's great," Sansa said in relief, "is Sandor home? I was hoping I could see him today."

The woman's eyes narrowed, and Sansa could see that more than suspicion, the woman was genuinely curious.

"May I ask who you are?" the housekeeper asked, "they don't ever get visitors here."

"My name is Sansa Stark, and I go to school with Sandor."

"Stark?" The woman's eyes widened. "You are Sandor's friend?"

"Yes. I'm...I'm his friend," Sansa replied. It's not a lie, exactly.

The housekeeper sighed. "It is good you have come to visit him, but unfortunately he is sleeping and has not come out of his bedroom the whole day. I just delivered his groceries, and now I'm on my way home."

Sansa felt her excitement deflating at the woman's words, but she wasn't ready to give up yet.

"Please," she began, "I haven't seen him at school all week, and I'm very worried about him. I don't
mind waiting for him to wake up."

"But I am leaving," the woman repeated, "I don't know when he will wake up."

"I know." Sansa put on her most gracious smile. "Perhaps you could let me wait inside? I really do
want to make sure he's okay. If he doesn't wake up in an hour or so, then I'll leave."

The housekeeper glanced at the watch on her wrist and sighed resignedly, before giving Sansa a
measuring look. "You are certain you wish to wait inside?"

"Absolutely." Sansa nodded.

"All right, if that's what you wish." The woman turned towards the door and unlocked it, before
holding the door open for Sansa. "I warn you that his mood has been unpredictable the last few days.
I don't know what happened at the football game, but I'm sure that is why you are here. Do not wait
too long, and please be sure to lock the door if you decide to leave before he wakes."

Sansa thanked the housekeeper profusely, and bade her goodbye, shutting the front door behind her.
Once she was alone in the entryway, Sansa let out the breath she'd been holding, and observed her
surroundings. The curtains and blinds on the window by the door were all drawn tightly, and it took
a few moments before her eyes adjusted to the lack of light. From the outside, the house was built in
a similar style to the other houses on the street. It was a made of a grey stone, with a dark grey tiled
roof. The lawn was neat and maintained, but unadorned with the garden beds or trimmed hedges that
were popular with the neighbors. The house was the largest in the street, and also the most imposing,
and least welcoming.

The entryway was tiled, and apart from a hallway table on one side, there were no pictures or
paintings hanging on the walls. Sansa walked further into the house and noted that the housekeeper
had left the lights on in some of the downstairs rooms, though the curtains, as per those in the
entrance, were all drawn shut. She felt like an intruder as she tiptoed through the house. From where
she was standing, she could see that there were two sitting rooms towards the front of the house, and
a quick inspection showed that the kitchen and dining room were further down the hall.

She figured that if Sandor were to come downstairs, the kitchen would be the most likely room he'd
visit first. But, it would be weird for me to sit in someone else's kitchen, she thought, so she went to
the living room where the light had been left switched on.

Sansa shrugged off her coat and took a seat on the black leather sofa in the middle of the room.
Peering around, she wondered in whose taste the house had been decorated, as what she had seen of
the house was all chosen from the one color palette. Grey, and various shades of it dominated the
color scheme, and the style of the furnishings looked like something she had seen on old 80's and
90's TV shows. Once, the Clegane household might have been at the height of interior decorating
fashion, but no one appeared to have bothered with it in a long time, she thought.

After she had been waiting for some twenty minutes, boredom saw her getting up for a closer look at
the items and bric-a-brac around the room. There were a lot of sporting trophies on the shelves, and
when she read the names on the plaques she saw that they were all for Gregor Clegane. A quick
glance around the other shelves did not uncover any trophies for Sandor, which she deemed had to
be a mistake. Sandor had to have trophies awarded to him in the past. He was one of the most
talented athletes she knew, although she now knew never to call him that to his face.

Curious, she found herself wandering down the hall into the second living room she had noticed
earlier. A fumbled search along the wall located the light switch, and she flicked the first one her
fingers came across. A downlight flickered on at the far end of the room, and all thought of searching
for trophies were forgotten when her eyes landed on what the downlight had illuminated.

There was a baby grand piano in the room, and it was positively the last thing she had expected to find. In a few strides, Sansa reached the baby grand and she was pleased to find that there wasn't a speck of dust on the glossy black lacquered surface. She gently pressed a key, and she was doubly pleased when the note she had played rang clear and true. The piano had been well maintained and kept in tune.

Sansa sat down on the narrow, padded piano bench, and when she raised her head to look around, she found that this particular room had a decidedly feminine appeal. The sofa was cream instead of black, and lined with embroidered cushions. The curtains on the windows were lace, and on the wall above the piano was an oil painting, a still life of a crystal vase filled with jonquils.

She couldn't believe that this cozy haven existed in the same, entirely grey house, and she wondered who could have used this room in the past. She glanced at the ceiling, imagining the occupant of the house in the rooms above her. She could not believe she was in Sandor's house, and that Sandor himself was only a short flight of stairs away.

She resisted the urge to climb the stairs and knock on his door, and instead she stood up and lifted the seat of the piano bench to see if there was any sheetmusic around, and to see if she could discover the identity of who the room and the piano had belonged to.

There were various scores hidden in the seat, and Sansa browsed through the titles noting classical, contemporary and jazz pieces. There were also a lot of children's pieces, themes from animated films and Christmas carols, which made her smile. Sansa spotted a folder bearing the initials H.C on the cover, and when she picked it up to inspect its contents, a sheaf of loose papers fluttered out of folder and onto the floor. Bending to pick them up, Sansa saw that the papers were in fact lined staff paper, and that they were covered in handwritten music.

Flipping them over to try and reorganize them, a scribble written on the corner of one page caught her eye. *For Sandor,* it read. It was written in pencil, like the handwritten music, and in a feminine hand. With a burning curiosity, Sansa closed the bench lid and sat back down at the piano, where she arranged the handwritten sheetmusic on the stand according to the neatly numbered pages. She saw that words had been written in the gaps between the lines of music.

"These are lyrics," she whispered.

*I t's a song,* she quickly realized with excitement. *It's a song written for Sandor.*

Her fingers were at the keys of the piano even before she registered what she was doing. Sight-reading the music on the pages, her hands slowly played what her eyes saw. The song was composed in the higher registers, in D major, with notations instructing the musician to play it *legato,* *andante* and *piano.* Play it smoothly, at moderate tempo, and softly.

In her head, she began to put the lyrics to the music, and soon she was grinning, for it became very clear just what kind of song the composer had written.

"That's my…mother's lullaby," rasped a voice behind her.

Immediately, Sansa ceased playing and she whirled in her seat to look towards the doorway. Sandor stood in the shadowed hallway watching her. His hair had been roughly pushed back from his face, and his t-shirt and sweatpants were rumpled from sleeping. Sansa thought he looked intimidating… and magnificent.
"You," Sandor said, "what are you doing here?"

Sansa's mouth opened and closed several times before she was able to speak.

"I…I came to see you," she replied.

Sandor's eyes narrowed, and he slowly walked across the room towards her. "How did you get in?"

"Your housekeeper…I convinced her to let me in."

His grey eyes were stony as he stared at her, and Sansa couldn't tell what mood he was in, but from experience, the set of his jaw warned her that he was probably irritable.

"You're really here to see me?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, "I wanted to see that you were okay."

"Why?"

"Because, you hadn't been at school all week,"

"So?"

"I was worried."

Sandor made an odd grunt, before he stepped even closer to her, right until he was standing in front of her. Much to her shock, he then eased himself down to sit next to her on the narrow piano bench, facing the opposite way towards the doorway. His large bulk made it a tight fit on the bench and he loomed over her. Sansa felt his heat all down the right side of her body, and her right arm brushed against him. She dared not move a muscle.

"That song you were playing," he said quietly, "where did you find it?"

"It was in a folder and the sheets fell out when I picked it up. I'm sorry I was touching things without asking permission first, but –"

"Sing it," Sandor interrupted her.

"Pardon?"

"You were playing it fine before," he said, "now I want you to sing, little bird."

Sandor turned his head towards her, and Sansa could see an emotion playing across his face that she hadn't seen before.

"Sing," he growled.

Taking a deep breath, Sansa began to sing the lullaby, while her fingers played the notes that his mother had written for him. The song was simple, as befitting a child's lullaby, lilting and sweet. The lyrics described a fantasy often imagined by little children. Sansa tried to picture a young Sandor, and wondered how old he might have been when he dreamed of knights and fair maidens.

*Little boy, oh little boy*

*Close your eyes, my precious child*
Mother is here, right by your side
You're safe and sound,
Here in your bed
Little boy, oh little boy
Dream of dragons, and maidens fair
You can be a prince, or a knight so brave
When you close your eyes,
It can be all that you dream
Little boy, oh little boy
Close your eyes, my precious child
Mother is here, right by your side
You're safe and sound,
Here in my heart

Neither of them moved or said a word after Sansa had finished singing. She could tell that Sandor was experiencing something deeply personal, and she didn't want to interrupt him from his thoughts. His eyes were staring at a point on the wall, but Sansa knew that it wasn't the wall he was seeing, and that he was probably reliving a memory.

"It's been nearly thirteen years since I've heard that song," he muttered quietly, "it was the last song my mother ever sang to me, before she died."

"Oh…I'm so sorry," Sansa said, unsure what else she could say or do. It was the first she had ever heard anything of his mother.

"She was a composer," Sandor continued, "she wrote songs for children, and she liked to paint. She painted that picture on the wall – the flowers."

Sandor pointed to the painting of the jonquils that Sansa had noticed earlier.

"It's beautiful," Sansa acknowledged.

"She painted my sister, too." Sandor then pointed to a small picture frame on the display table next to the piano.

Sansa had missed it before, distracted as she had been at seeing the piano, and also as the painting was not much bigger than a greeting card. The painting was of a little girl with the same dark hair and grey eyes as Sandor, but her facial structure was finer and more delicate. Each brush stroke had been applied with care and attention to detail, and the use of light and shadow gave the little girl an angelic glow.

"I didn't know you had a sister," Sansa said softly, "she's very pretty, and your mother was a very talented artist."
"None of that matters, now. They're both dead...they've been gone a long time," Sandor murmured. Sansa said nothing, as saying sorry for all that he had lost felt somewhat inadequate. She raised her hand to his face and lay her palm against his cheek. Much to her surprise, her fingers found wetness there, and she had to contain her gasp at the realization that he was crying. Sandor turned his face into her hand, and for a moment he stayed that way, as though taking comfort in her touch.

"You saw me run away, didn't you?" Sandor asked, at length.

Sansa lowered her hand back down, and responded carefully. "I understand why...anyone would."

" Anyone would see me as a coward," he bit out.

"That's not true," Sansa rushed to say, "you're not a coward."

"I ran, little bird, and running is what cowards do."

"Are you going to let your fear of fire get the better of you? Are you going to let it win?"

"Let it win?" Sandor gave a short, harsh laugh. "I've already lost."

"I refuse to believe that," Sansa shook her head, "I refuse to let you think that way about yourself."

"Say what you like, but it's the truth."

Sandor hastily wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, swearing when he found the tears on his face. He turned to glare at her.

"Why are you here?" he asked her again.

"I was worried about you."

"You said that before," he grunted, "why are you here?"

"You weren't picking up your phone, and no one had heard from you or seemed to know anything about what had happened since you left Baelor's Arena. So, I got your address from Coach Selmy and came here."

"Why?" he demanded.

Sansa couldn't understand why he was refusing to hear her. How many times would she have to tell him that she genuinely had been worried for him?

"Because, I care about you," Sansa said, looking at a point on his chest, unable to meet his eyes. "I remember what you told me...about how you got your scars. When I saw what was happening that night at the game, I tried to run after you, but you'd driven away before I could reach you."

"You came after me?" he asked, puzzlement evident in his tone.

"I did," she replied.

Mustering up the courage to look up at him, Sansa raised her head to find Sandor's brows drawn together, deep in thought. His grey eyes were on her face, searching for answers to questions he hadn't given voice to. There was confusion in his eyes, too, but something in the way he was watching her gave her hope. Without warning, Sandor had taken hold of her, his large hands wrapping around her shoulders, forcing her to tilt her head back even further. His expression had
turned fierce.

"I'll ask you again, one last time," he rasped quietly, "why are you here, little bird?"

It was now or never, she thought, and took a chance on hope.

"I like you," she said in a small voice, "I'm here because I want to be with you."

Sandor made a hissing noise that might have been a gasp. "Is that the truth?"

She nodded rapidly. "It's the truth."

He stared down at her. For many long moments, he did nothing but to hold her shoulders and study her face. Sansa could not read his expression. Just when the silence seemed overlong, Sandor began to lower his head. For a wild moment, Sansa thought he was going to kiss her, and she held her breath in anticipation. Then he paused, his lips a mere and agonizing inch away from hers.

_No!_ She screamed in her head. _You can't change your mind now!_

Taking matters into her own hands, Sansa arched her back and closed the gap between them. She kissed his stunned lips, and when he loosened his hold on her shoulders, she slid her hands up his chest and curled her fingers around the nape of his neck, pulling him down to her.

"Sansa…" Sandor gasped her name, but she didn't let him speak.

She wanted to kiss him, and she was going to show him, through her kiss, that she was telling the truth. Sandor finally opened his mouth to her insistent urging, and Sansa slipped her tongue inside, where she got her first taste of him, and the hint of brandy he must've been drinking. For so long she had been imagining this moment, and wondering what his kiss would feel like. Now that she was finally where she wanted to be, she knew her imaginations had been severely lacking.

Sandor's arms were now wrapped around her back, holding her closer to him, and he was returning her kisses with equal fervor, having gotten over his initial shock. His hands had tangled in her hair, and his breathing had become shallow, just as hers had done. Sansa could never have imagined the heat of his palms on her back, or the broadness of his shoulders beneath her fingertips, or that being in his personal space would make her feel so heady.

His tongue was in her mouth now, and she marveled at the contrasting sensations of his lips on hers. The burned part of his lips felt firmer and less supple that the unburned side, but she felt his warmth and eagerness all the same. He was giving his all in this kiss, and she responded to him, moaning into his mouth and pressing herself against him.

As much as she didn't want it to end, Sandor was the first one to break the kiss, pulling his head back just far enough so that he could look down into her eyes. He didn't attempt to untangle himself from her, for which she was grateful, as she probably would have slipped off the piano bench, given how affected she was by what they had just shared. She looked back at him, noting that his features were again clouded with uncertainty.

"What is it, Sandor?" she asked him quietly, "what's the matter?"

He shifted in her arms slightly, and cleared his throat before speaking. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"It is." She nodded. "Absolutely. This…_you_ are what I want."
Giving him no chance for a rebuttal, Sansa pulled his head down and kissed him again.

**Eddard**

He felt a sense of déjà vu when he saw the envelope sitting on his desk. It was marked confidential, which explained why it was still sealed. He buzzed his secretary.

"Yes, Mr. Stark?"

"Do you know who left this envelope for me, Judy?"

"No, sir," she replied, "it was left at the front desk."

"I see. Thank you, Judy."

With a sense of trepidation, Ned carefully ripped the seal and tipped out the contents of the envelope. The feeling of déjà vu doubled when he saw photos of a dark-haired and blue-eyed boy, copies of a birth certificate, and photos of his old boyhood friend as a teenage boy. On top of it all was a card with a message typed in a bold font.

**THE TRUTH WILL BE TOLD.**

Ned pressed a button on his phone.

"Boss?"

"Jory, get back here as soon as you can."

Jory returned from his errand within the hour. Ned had been staring at the card, and the documents regarding the paternity of Gendry Waters the entire time, thinking about who could have sent the envelope and the card.

"What's the matter, boss?" Jory asked.

Ned handed him the envelope and the card, and gave him a few moments to inspect them. Jory frowned as he read the message.

"What does this mean? Who sent it?"

"I don't know," Ned replied, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Someone, other than Robert, is aware that you know the truth."

"It certainly appears that way."

"Is this a threat of some kind? Extortion, perhaps?"

"If it was extortion, it makes no sense to come after me."

"You're right," Jory agreed, "what are you going to do?"

Ned sighed and leaned back in his seat. "I'll have to let Robert know about this, if he hasn't received an envelope already. I have to assume that Mace will have received one, too."

"And, the boy?" Jory looked at the photo of Gendry Waters again. "What will happen to him when this gets out?"
Ned swiveled his chair to look out at the window behind him. He had wanted to avoid this. Having met the boy and seeing that he was well settled and taken care of, it seemed that the boy's fortunes had finally turned for the better and that he had good prospects at a bright future. Someone was threatening the stable life Gendry was now leading, and Ned didn't know what he could do to stop it.

"I don't know, Jory," Ned finally replied, "that boy's life is about to get turned upside down, all over again."

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**Gendry**

He was woken up by the incessant buzzing of his phone on his night stand. He rolled over and tried to ignore it, hoping that his caller would give up. He'd had a late night out with Lommy and the guys, and he'd also had a few too many beers. He had rehearsals with the band that day, and he needed to rest and get the alcohol out of his system before he was fit for human company. The phone stopped buzzing, and he was just about to fall back to sleep when it started buzzing anew. Grunting, he rolled back towards the night stand and grabbed his phone.

"Yeah?" he muttered into it, sleepily.

"Check Gossip Spyder's post, right now," Hot Pie ordered.

"Dude, it's too fucking early…"

"Get onto it, now," Hot Pie insisted, "I mean it. You're going to want to see this."

"Later, I'll –"

"Now!" Hot Pie shouted.

"All right!" Gendry sat up and wedged the phone between his shoulder and his ear as he got out of bed and padded across his room to his laptop. "Geez, this better be fucking important."

"It is." Hot Pie was breathing oddly. "Oh, man…this is, big."

Gendry yawned into the phone as he opened the internet browser, and the first thing he saw was a photo of his own face, next to the faces of two other men that looked eerily like him.

"What the hell? Who the fuck…?" he wondered, blinking as he cleared the sleep from his eyes.

"That's you," Hot Pie said, "the photo next to yours is Robert Baratheon, and the last one is Renly Baratheon. Gendry? Say something."

Gendry couldn't say anything at that moment. He had just read the headline.

**Gendry Waters…Is really Gendry Baratheon!**

"Holy fuck…" Gendry finally said.

"Gendry? Is it true? Gendry? Dude?" Hot Pie was shouting into his ear, but Gendry wasn't listening. He hung up the phone, and continued to read the post. When he finished, he read it again.

And, again.

And…again.
About Sandor's Mother's lullaby, this is an actual lullaby that I wrote, and you can listen to the tune over on my tumblr page. I will post the link in my bio. When I first imagined Sansa singing this lullaby to Sandor, I hadn't actually planned on composing actual music to go with the words, but the music evolved when I became a mother and my daughter was born prematurely, and I was visiting her in hospital day after day. For the few moments she was allowed out of her incubator, and I could hold her, I would hum to her...and thus, we have the tune for Sandor's lullaby.
Gossip Spyder

Gendry Waters…Is really Gendry Baratheon!

Breaking news everyone! The front page of today's King's Landing Herald newspaper has printed an article alleging that Gendry Waters, KL Prep junior and guitarist for popular band Brotherhood Without Banners, is in fact the illegitimate son of Robert Baratheon, CEO of Baratheon Inc., and father of KL Prep's Prince of the Playground, Joffrey Baratheon.

The King's Landing Herald, a highly regarded newspaper, claims to have received documents proving Gendry's paternity, and has included excerpts from his birth certificate, which sites Robert Baratheon as the biological father. The newspaper has so far not revealed the source of this information, saying only that the information comes from a 'credible' source.

It appears someone from within the Baratheon's inner circle wants to discredit Robert Baratheon by painting him as a serial womanizer. You can find the full article yourself on the Herald website, and OMG does it make for an interesting read!

Meanwhile, here's the photoset comparing the uncanny likeness of Gendry Waters to his alleged father Robert, and his would-be uncle Renly…spitting images, right? With those blue eyes, black hair and tall physiques, I'm convinced!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Gendry

He sobered up incredibly quickly after the third time he had read Gossip Spyder's post. The next thing he'd done was to find the King's Landing Herald article to see exactly what had been written about him and his alleged father. Sure enough, the article was there, with images of his completed birth certificate which bore the name of his father, instead of the blank space he was familiar with. As he'd stared at the photos of his face next to Robert and Renly Baratheon, Gendry's mind filled with question upon question. Of course, someone had to know the truth about him, and he would bet that his fancy-pants lawyer would have the answer he was looking for.

The article went on to state that Robert had acknowledged paternity of another son, currently studying at Lys Preparatory School, one of the most exclusive private schools in France. The boy, a few years younger than Gendry, was born following a brief relationship Robert had had with French socialite, Delena Florent. Gendry skimmed the rest of the article, which seemed to detail the wild bachelor life Robert continued to live even after marrying Cersei Lannister. Serial womanizer was an inadequate description, in his opinion. At that moment, Gendry didn't care about why his paternity was suddenly being revealed. He just cared to find out if it was true.

Closing his laptop, he dragged on some clothes and went downstairs to find his foster parents in the dining room. Ellen had the Herald spread out on the table in front of her, while Tobho had the phone glued to his ear, looking impatient.

"That damned lawyer isn't answering his phone," Tobho muttered.
"Gendry." Ellen suddenly noticed his presence in the room.

"You're awake." Tobho hung up the phone and immediately went to turn over the newspaper, trying to hide the front page from view.

"Don't bother," Gendry told them, "I already know I'm front page news."

Ellen stood up from the table and quickly came to his side, pulling him into a motherly embrace. "Oh, Gendry," she said, gently running a hand through his ruffled hair. "We'll get to the bottom of this."

"That's right," Tobho added, "we don't know why someone would do this, but we'll make sure that at the very least, you get the truth. You deserve to know the truth."

Gendry took the newspaper from the table and flipped to the page showing his own picture next to those of the Baratheon men.

"I think that's pretty convincing proof, right there." Gendry tapped the color photo that took up almost half of the page. "I ran into these men once at the Stark's house, when I went to see Arya. This Renly…he could be my twin, if it weren't for the fact he's older than I am."

"So, you believe this is true?" Ellen asked. "You don't think someone fabricated your birth certificate?"

"I don't know. But…it all seems to fit, doesn't it?" Gendry took a seat opposite his foster-dad and rubbed the stubble on his jaw.

Ellen sat down too, and the three of them grew silent as they pondered Gendry's observation. The amount of evidence pointing to Robert Baratheon being Gendry's biological father was mounting up. The physical resemblance and the birth certificate aside, there was also the significantly large amount of money that had been bequeathed to Gendry, as well as the separate amount of money that had been left to the Mott's as Gendry's guardians. If anyone had had that kind of money, then it was Robert Baratheon. Gendry recalled that the thought of being a long-lost Baratheon progeny had crossed his mind before. The day he'd encountered Robert and Renly in the foyer of Chateau Maegor, he'd been as shocked to see them as they were to see him, and Gendry had not been able to help but wonder at the possibility. But now, someone was claiming it was true, and all he felt at that moment was numb.

The article had revealed that Robert had already fathered one illegitimate son, which meant that if the paternity claim was true, then Gendry had a half-brother somewhere.

"Half-brother…" A thought hit him then, and he began to swear. "Fucking hell…Oh, hell no."

"Gendry?" Ellen gave him a look.

"Sorry," Gendry apologized for cussing.

"Okay, but what are you swearing about?"

"If Robert is my father, then that makes Joffrey my half-brother." Gendry started laughing then. "Fucking wonderful."

His foster parents could not have understood the awful significance of this, but Gendry could only laugh at the hand that fate had dealt him. How he was going to play his cards was another matter. He could check. He could just sit back and do nothing while he waited for the other players to make their move. He could raise. He could put himself out there first, showing that he wasn't afraid to play
the game, because he was ready to face whatever came his way.

No, that's not enough, he thought. Whoever had released the identity of his biological father had done so confidently. The King's Landing Herald was not known for printing tabloid gossip, and Gendry suspected that the repercussions would resonate in ways he did not yet know. I'm all in, he thought. I'll give them everything I have.

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Arya

She was normally good at remembering names, but at that moment, she couldn't remember the names of any of the people Jaqen had introduced her to. Aside from the other members of the Faceless Men, Arya had been mentally referring to people by their appearance and traits.

There were at a recording studio owned by a friend of Jaqen's, and Arya had been invited to join them for the afternoon. As she had never witnessed the serious, working side of Jaqen, the chance to see him in his element was too exciting to miss.

For the last hour or so, Arya had been watching from behind the glass paneled room, as Jaqen and his band took take after take of one song, trying to get the best possible recordings. They were in the process of tracking, she'd been told, which involved the recording and overdubbing of all the individual instrumental parts, beginning with the rhythm and bass section. Once the rhythm section was as perfect as could be, they could then begin recording the other instruments and vocals.

"Then, after all the tracking has been laid down," Jaqen had explained to her, "we get to the editing and mixing. We take the best tracks of the instruments and vocals and put them together to make the best outcome for the song. After that comes the mastering process where we look at the song as a whole and check for balance and tone, to make sure the listener gets the best possible experience."

"I had no idea it was so complex," Arya had said, "I thought you all just go into the studio and play like you do on stage."

"Once upon a time, that was how it was done." Jaqen chuckled. "These days there are a lot more options available for bands and musicians like us."

Arya learned that often, the way a song is played to a live audience can differ greatly to how the musician originally intended for the listener to hear it.

"Playing live is fantastic," Jaqen told her, "but, sometimes music is best listened to on an iPod, while one is alone."

She could appreciate that, and understood exactly what he meant. While she watched him speak with his producer friend, she saw that Jaqen was meticulous, and understood music and composition at a level she never would. It was tiring watching him work, and after a while, Arya had tuned out mentally. Though, she had been distracted to begin with.

Gossip Spyder's post about Gendry and his alleged biological father had caused quite an uproar at Chateau Maegor that morning. Arya had just woken up and was scrolling through her phone and Facebook feed when she'd noted the links to the King's Landing Herald website people had been sharing. Sansa had nearly battered down her door at her shock at the news.

"Arya!" Sansa had burst through her bedroom door waving her phone in the air. "Gendry…Robert Baratheon…Gossip Spyder…is it true?"

Two seconds later, Arya too had been gasping in shock after reading the headline.
"Oh, gods…" Arya had paled.

"Did you know?" Sansa had asked.

"No." Arya had shaken her head, because it was the truth. "I didn't know that Robert Baratheon was his father."

"I don't believe this," Sansa had exclaimed, "I'm going to ask father."

Arya had jumped out of bed and had followed her sister downstairs, where they found their father on the phone, and pacing the floor in front of his desk in his office. Their mother had held up her hands at their approach, signaling for quiet.

"...I understand that, Robert," their father had spoken into the phone, "it's too late for denials and you cannot ignore this. You must decide on a course of action, and you best consider all the possibilities...Yes, I know your family are upset, but think of the boy, Robert. His life as he knew it no longer exists. You owe him the truth...as does your family."

Their father had noticed their presence at that moment, and for a second Arya had met his eyes. In that instance, she had known it was the truth.

"I have to go, Robert. I'll call you later."

Their father had ended the call without waiting for Robert to acknowledge him.

"Is it true, father?" Arya had asked, still needing to hear his vocal confirmation.

Their parents shared a look, and their mother made a gesture with her shoulders, indicating that the decision and its consequences were up to their father, who shrugged and motioned for Arya and Sansa to sit down.

"Listen girls," their father had begun once they were seated. "I take it you've both seen the news about your Uncle Robert and Gendry Waters. I know he's your friend, Arya, and that you both go to school with him. You're bound to hear many rumors about him, so the least I can do is tell you the truth as I know it."

Arya held her breath, while Sansa twisted her hands in front of her. Their father gave each of them a sober look, before declaring what Arya already knew.

"Gendry is Robert's son. His mother was a waitress that Robert had a brief relationship with, and as far as I know, Gendry's mother had chosen not to tell him the identity of his father while she was alive. Whether she eventually meant to tell him at some point, we'll never know...there you have it."

"Oh, my God!" Sansa had gasped, before covering her mouth.

"Does he know, father?" Arya asked. "Has he been told?"

Arya did not want to believe that Gendry was finding out the identity of his biological father from the front page of a newspaper. That was cruel, and just plain wrong.

Her father had shaken his head. "I don't know, Arya. Robert will attempt to contact his foster family today, and after today, Gendry will know the truth."

It had been Arya's turn to shake her head then. "This isn't right. It won't make a difference to Gendry. Even if Robert tells it to his face, Gendry will not consider him as family."
"This won't be easy for Gendry, and I suspect the next few days, weeks or even months, could be difficult for him. He'll need his friends, and all you can do is be there for him."

The phone had rung then, and their father excused himself to take the call. "Ah…Good morning, Mace…Yes, I've spoken with Robert, and yes, it does seem that way…the person behind those envelopes we received seems to be the source of the leak…"

"Come on girls," their mother had motioned for them to give their father some privacy. "I'll call you down for breakfast momentarily, so just let your father handle his calls for now."

Arya and Sansa had headed back upstairs, and all the while Sansa had continued to verbalize her surprise at what they'd just heard.

"This is huge," her sister had said, "everyone at school will be talking about this. I feel bad for Gendry having to find out like this…did he really not know who his father was, Arya?"

Arya had shaken her head. "No. He never knew. This will be a shock, all right."

"He looks nothing like Joffrey. I can't believe they're brothers."

"Gendry took after Uncle Robert, and Joffrey looks like his mom."

"I actually thought he looked a lot like his Uncle Jaime."

"Hmm." Arya had thought about it. "Yeah, I guess so."

"What do you think will happen to Gendry?" Sansa had mused. "Actually, what will Gendry do now?"

"I don't know," Arya had replied, "I really don't know."

She had answered honestly. Gendry had suddenly become an enigma to her, and she had absolutely no idea how this unknown-Gendry was going to behave or react to the sudden developments.

"Joffrey is going to be furious," Sansa had said, "they're both in the same grade at school, too. I think they even have a class together…that's gonna be awkward for everyone."

Sansa's phone had beeped, saving her from having to comment, and Arya had watched as her sister's lips formed a smile after she'd peered at the screen.

"Who have you been texting all morning?" Arya had asked. "Your phone's been beeping non-stop."

"Oh…someone," Sansa had replied, cheeks turning pink. "Anyway, look what people are posting on Gendry's Facebook."

Arya had been sufficiently distracted by the scandalized tone in her sister's voice, and she'd read the comments people had began to post in relation to both the King's Landing Herald article and Gossip Spyder's post. Most were incredulous, and Arya had had a sickening feeling about what awaited Gendry come Monday at school.

"…Arya? Are you with me, Arya?" the sound of Jaqen's voice breaking into her thoughts brought her back to the present.

Jaqen was peering at her curiously, with a slight frown creasing his brows.

"Jaqen, I'm so sorry," she hastened to apologize, "I was thinking about something…"
The crease between his eyebrows disappeared and he gave her a gentle smile. "Are you worried for Gendry?"

She gave him an apologetic look. "I am."

Jaqen motioned for his band for a break, and while his band members put down their instruments, he led Arya out into a small courtyard behind the recording studio building.

"There's no need to be apologetic about your concern for him," Jaqen said once they were both seated on a bench. "Regardless of what has happened, first and foremost, Gendry was your friend."

Jaqen looked to be making some kind of decision, and Arya wondered at the guarded expression on her boyfriend's face.

"What is it, Jaqen?" she finally asked him.

He sighed. "I will understand if you feel you need to go to him," he stated, "it's not every day that one finds out he is the son of one of the most powerful men in the country."

"Gendry won't want to talk to me." Arya shook her head. "I know you will understand, but I don't think I'll even get the chance to speak to him."

It was a sad thought, Arya mused. Part of her wanted so badly to be at Gendry's side supporting him through his personal crisis, and it saddened her to realize that she was probably one of the last people Gendry wanted near him.

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Gendry

Neutral ground, Gendry thought, surveying the sleek and polished furnishings of the lawyer's office that he and his foster-parents now sat in. Toby and Tabitha had been left with a babysitter, and now Ellen and Tobho sat on either side of him as they waited for Robert Baratheon to turn up. They were seated in what looked like a conference or negotiation room, at a glass-topped table with matching leather chairs. The fancy-pants lawyer had stepped out a moment before to take a phone call. Tobho was sipping water nervously, while Ellen was fiddling with the strap on her handbag. They had been on the phone all morning to concerned friends and the Mott's extended family who had read the newspaper, all wanting to know what was going on. Tobho had also placed a call to Child Services to inform them of what was transpiring as technically, Gendry was still a ward of the state.

The lawyer had eventually contacted Tobho and requested their presence at the lawyer's office at their earliest convenience. Some two hours later, Gendry was once again in the office where his entire life had been turned upside-down not so long ago. At the time he'd been told about the money he'd been bequeathed, he hadn't cared so much about who had left it to him. He'd been too focused on the dollar signs flashing before his eyes and the thought of being able to buy almost anything he wanted. If he had known then just how much trouble would come with the money, he wondered if he would have welcomed wealth with as much enthusiasm. Nothing is for free, he'd once heard somewhere, and certainly in his case, the price he was having to pay for his newfound wealth seemed unfairly high.

The lawyer came back into the room and cleared his throat. "Mr. Baratheon has arrived, so if you are all ready, I'd like to invite him to join us. He's quite anxious to meet you."

Tobho glanced at Gendry, who shrugged in response to his foster-father's silent question, before turning back to the lawyer. "Please, invite him in."
Gendry recalled from his one and only meeting with Robert Baratheon that he was a big man. Indeed, when he entered the conference room a moment later, Gendry saw that his memory had been correct. Robert Baratheon was tall and broad, though the muscular build he might once have had in his youth had now turned to fat, particularly around his middle. Still, his hair was as black as night, and his eyes were still sharp as he glanced at the occupants of the room. His entrance commanded attention, and Gendry found himself sitting straighter in his chair, despite himself.

Following Robert into the room was another man, tall and blonde with green eyes who appeared, in Gendry's opinion, like an older and far more dapper version of Joffrey Baratheon. Introductions were made, and he learned that the identity of the Joffrey look-alike was Jaime Lannister, Robert's brother-in-law.

He watched as the adults shook hands politely, but he kept his arms firmly crossed at his chest, leaving Robert to awkwardly withdraw his hand some moments later, after Gendry had left him hanging. The lawyer cleared his throat again.

"Thank you all once again for coming in today at such short notice." He appeared to be choosing his words carefully. "We are all here because of the allegations in –"

"Could you please cut the crap," Gendry heard himself say.

"Gendry…" Ellen gave him a look.

"I'm sorry, Ellen." Gendry quickly flashed his foster-mom an apologetic look before he turned his attention to the man seated across the glass-topped table. "We've all seen the article, we know why we're here. I don't care how or why the story got printed, all I want is for someone to tell me if it's true."

Gendry's eyes met the unwavering icy-blue stare of Robert Baratheon across the table, and for a split second he felt unsettled by the fact their eye colors were the exact same shade of blue.

"Is it true?" Gendry asked him.

The blonde man made to intervene. "Robert…perhaps you should –"

"Be quiet, Jaime." Robert held up his hand to silence his brother-in-law, while his eyes never left Gendry's face. "The boy asked me an honest question, and he deserves an honest answer."

"Is it true?" Gendry repeated.

Robert nodded his head once. "Yes. It's true."

Of the people in the room, only Gendry's foster-parents reacted by inhaling sharply. Clearly, the lawyer and Jaime Lannister were already aware of the truth. Gendry did not react in any visible manner. Instead he remained unmoving, giving nothing away. He'd known it was the truth. Deep down, he'd already been prepared for it and had been psyching himself up to hear it, but he was still caught unprepared for the sensation of his stomach dropping to his feet.

This man is my father. Now that he was face to face with him, Gendry didn't know how to react. For so many years he'd been imagining what he would do if he ever met his father, and what he would say to him. He tried to think of the words he'd practiced in his head, but could only draw a blank at that moment.

"Of course it's true," he muttered, "you wouldn't be here if it wasn't."
Gendry tried to recall anything he had ever heard about Robert Baratheon in the media, but only the negative things came to mind. The riot, rumors of financial problems and his infidelity scandals.

*I'm proof of his one of his fucking infidelities.* Gendry thought bitterly, his eyes turning glacial as he continued to stare at Robert Baratheon.

"Did you ever intend to tell me that you were my father?" Gendry heard himself ask. "If someone hadn't blabbed to the newspaper, would you have come and told me yourself?"

"I can't give you a clear answer for that," Robert responded quietly, "have I thought about telling you? Of course, I have but I thought it was better that you didn't know. In fact, I still think that way. Whether I would have eventually told you…that, I can't answer."

"In other words, you didn't want to acknowledge another illegitimate son," Gendry spat.

"That's not it."

"If my mother had been French aristocracy instead of being a waitress at a diner, would you have acknowledged me, like you did with your other illegitimate son?"

"That's not correct either."

"Why did you bother leaving me all that money?" Gendry demanded. "It seems like you were making a half-assed attempt at finally taking responsibility for me."

"I didn't know you existed until a year ago!" Robert hissed.

Gendry blinked, taken aback, but he quickly recovered. "Bullshit."

"Gendry…" Tobho cautioned.

"He's lying," Gendry continued, "I know myMom told him about me. She wouldn't have kept me a secret from the father of her child."

"Are you sure you want to keep insisting on hearing everything, even if it means learning something unpleasant?" Robert asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Today's been full of unpleasant truths." Gendry shrugged. "What's one more?"

"Robert, I really think you should stop speaking now before that grave you're digging gets any deeper," Jaime interjected.

"It's that unpleasant?" Gendry scoffed.

"Keep out of it, Jaime. The boy has already made his mind up about me. You can see that written all over his face," Robert said, before he met Gendry's stare once again. "I didn't believe her."

Gendry's brows snapped together in a frown. "You didn't believe her?"

"Your mother," Robert grunted, "when she told me she was pregnant with my kid, I didn't believe her."

Gendry's stomach turned in reaction to Robert's words. The man had tried to warn him, but he'd wanted to hear him say it. Robert Baratheon had refused to acknowledge his existence even when he'd still been in the womb.
"Why would my mother lie about me?"

Robert made an exasperated sound. "Kid, adult relationships are complicated."

"Because you're a womanizer? Is that why your relationships are complicated?" Gendry bit out. "Or, was it because she was just a waitress? You thought my mother was another gold-digger out for your money?"

Robert made no response, and the silence after Gendry's tension filled question grew long, and awkward. Gendry hadn't been expecting him to answer, but Robert's silence was admission enough. Now, I know. Gendry now knew the whole sorry story of how he came to be, and suddenly he felt exhausted. The air-conditioned conference room seemed stuffy, and too crowded.

"I've heard enough." Gendry stood up from his seat and glanced at his foster-parents. "I'll find my own way home."

"Gendry, wait!" Ellen called after him as he walked towards the door.

"Let him go," Tobho said, and Gendry appreciated his foster-father's understanding.

The heavy glass door whooshed open and Gendry stepped out into the carpeted corridor. As the door closed behind him, he heard the distinct sound of Robert's voice.

"Attitude to spare, he has…I was just like him at that age."

**Sandor**

He checked the clock on his dashboard once again, and noted the time. He was one hour early. It was Monday morning, and he'd agreed to pick up Sansa so that they could go to school together. It would be his first time going to school in a week, and the first time he had ever come to Chateau Maegor to pick up Sansa Stark.

"Fuuuuuck!" he swore.

He'd come to Chateau Maegor numerous times before, because of Arya, but he'd never felt anxious then. He was nervous now, and he couldn't deny it. In preparation, he'd spent a good part of the previous morning washing and waxing his Mustang, and making sure the interior was spotless. Sansa was going to be in his car, and he'd be damned if she found food wrappers or unwashed t-shirts inside it. Looking around him, he knew that his car looked conspicuous in the wide, tree-lined street that was devoid of any other vehicles. He couldn't very well stay waiting in his car just in case one of the neighbors called for security to check on him. It was still too early to call on Sansa, as she was probably still getting ready for school.

Reluctantly, he started the engine and drove back the way he came. Spotting a popular cafe nearby, Sandor pulled off the main road into the parking lot. The smell of roasting coffee assailed his nostrils the moment he walked in and his stomach rumbled, reminding him that he hadn't eaten breakfast. He promptly ordered an espresso and a toasted sandwich, and took a seat by the window. Sandor took out his phone from his pocket and placed it on the table in front of him. He didn't want to miss a text message or call from Sansa.

He still couldn't believe it. He couldn't believe that Sansa had been in his house, telling him that she cared for him and that she wanted to be with him. It had been a surreal experience waking up to the sound of a piano, then finding Sansa at the baby grand playing his mother's lullaby. He'd thought for a moment that he was having an alcohol fuelled delusion, having fallen asleep tipsy. Then, he had sat
next to her on the narrow piano bench, as close as he had dared without actually touching her, in case he ruptured the delusion somehow.

Sandor had spoken to her without caution, about things he had never discussed with anyone else. He'd cried in front of her, but she hadn't seen his tears as a weakness or something he should be embarrassed about. She'd touched his face, cupping his cheek, and it was the warmth of her palm against his skin that convinced him he wasn't having a delusion.

"I like you," she had said, "I'm here because I want to be with you."

He had wanted so badly to kiss her when he'd heard her say those words. He had even lowered his head to initiate it, but doubt had made him pause when her lips had been an inch from his. Nothing had prepared him for the moment Sansa had closed the gap between them. Nothing could have. Flashing lights and neon signs would not have been enough, because he would never have believed it could happen. But, kiss him she did, and he'd drowned in the moment.

She had to know the significance of that kiss. She had to know that being with him carried with it all kinds of challenges as he certainly had more baggage than most, and he knew he had just as many shortcomings.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" he'd asked her, doubt still foremost in his mind.

"It is," Sansa had assured him, "absolutely. This…you are what I want."

After that, Sansa had initiated another kiss, which had quickly gained heat and had seen him lifting her from the piano bench and carrying her to the sofa on the other side of the room. He'd lowered himself at one end, leaning back against the armrest, and Sansa had made a little sigh as her weight had settled on top of him, pinning his right knee between her thighs.

Neither of them had spoken much, with the only sounds to be heard being the rasping of his breath and the little h m m s and a h h s that Sansa made against his lips. Her hands had been on his chest, knotting into the fabric of his shirt, while his own hands had been on her hips, wavering between possessively grasping her waist, and caressing her gently. His indecisiveness resulted in the alternate tightening and slackening of his grip on her body, sending Sansa shimmying against him in a way that had sent blood rushing below his hips. Slightly panicked, he had firmly but gently separated her from him, not wanting her to notice his hard-on.

"We need to slow down," he'd rumbled out in response to the questioning look on Sansa's face.

She had turned pink in the cheeks, and had moved herself to sit primly on the sofa beside him.

"Yeah," she'd agreed, "slowly. We…we should go slowly."

"It's past six. You should get going if you want to make it home by curfew."

"You're right." Sansa had glanced at her watch.

He'd made an apologetic gesture. "I drank earlier. I can't drive you."

"It's okay, I wasn't expecting you to drive me. I'll call a taxi."

While they had waited for the taxi to arrive, Sansa had shot him nervous glances. Sandor could tell that she had things she wanted to say, and that she was holding herself back.

"What is it?" he'd urged her.
"Um…can I call you later? I mean, I could text if you prefer…"

"Yeah," he'd rasped, "whatever you want."

She'd smiled at him. "Okay, I'll call around ten. Is that too late?"

He'd shrugged. "Call whenever."

Sansa had then proceeded to babble. "This is all just happening too fast…I never expected things would turn out this way…I can't believe this is happening!"

He had shared her sentiments, but he had stayed silent because he hadn't known how to respond. At length, Sansa had also become quiet, perhaps becoming conscious of his broodiness. He hadn't wanted things to turn awkward or for her to feel uncomfortable, so he'd struggled to find something to say to her.

"It's real, little bird," he'd grunted.

Sansa had blushed again, though she'd visibly relaxed.

When her taxi had arrived, he'd seen her off at the end of his driveway, where she'd promised to call him later that night. It was after the taxi's taillights had disappeared around the corner of his street that some semblance of thought returned to him, and he'd started to ask himself some questions.

*Does she really like me? Since when? How did this happen? What are we going to do now? Could we really be together? Could we really become a couple?* He never imagined ever having to think about these things, and the thought of the words leaving his mouth and verbally saying them out aloud had him feeling like an idiot, and more than slightly embarrassed.

Sansa would want to talk about these things. Girls always wanted to talk about love and relationships and *feelings* and Sandor did not know how he would fair in that type of conversation with Sansa. It had been hard enough having to admit his feelings towards Sansa when Arya had confronted him about them. Knowing what he did about Sansa, he had more than a strong suspicion that she would not be satisfied with the cryptic answers he had given to her sister.

When she had called him at ten p.m. that night, Sandor could hardly rasp out a greeting into his phone.

"Hel…hello."

"Sandor?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"How are you?"

"The same as when you saw me earlier,"

There'd been a pause on the other end of the line.

"Um…this is more awkward than I thought it was going to be…" Sansa had said, before giggling nervously.

*Awkward, and almost unbearable,* Sandor had thought.

He'd cleared his throat. "Look, I'm no good at this kind of talk. So, let's just have you say and ask
"everything you have on your mind, okay?"

There'd been another pause, and he'd cursed himself for sounding too coarse.

"Okay," she'd finally agreed, "well, do you…do you really feel the same way about me?"

"Yeah," he'd rasped, and made himself say the words she'd wanted to hear. "I like you, too."

She'd paused again. He had sweated.

"How long have you felt this way?" her voice had come out higher than usual.

"A while…a long while,"

"How long is a long while?"

Sandor had swallowed, and stared up at blank ceiling above his bed. "I…probably always did."

Sansa’s breath had hitched at his response. He'd once told her that he would always tell her the truth, and he had wanted to, yet this admission of his deepest feelings had left him raw and vulnerable.

He'd ached to know what kind of expression she was making at that time, yet glad that they were not face to face. He'd been glad she couldn't see his own mangled face contorted even further by his discomfiture.

"Um…between you and my sister –"

"It's over," he'd quickly said, fearing exactly what she would ask, but wanting her to be in no doubt about where he stood with his 'ex-girlfriend'. "It was something that should never have happened. Understand? That's all done with. It's over."

Silence had followed, but Sandor had no doubts Sansa still had plenty to ask about that subject and that he hadn't heard the last of it. However, it seemed she was willing to let it drop at that moment, because she moved back to the topic of them.

"It's been a long while for me, too," she had said at length, "I've liked you for a long time."

"Since when?" he'd heard himself ask, feeling all kinds of embarrassed.

"I can't say for sure," she had sighed, "but I realized it after the riot…when you came for me."

"The riot?" he'd done a quick calculation in his head. "Sansa, that was –"

"A long time ago, yeah."

"You were with Joffrey," he had stated.

"Yeah," she'd agreed, "and, you were with my sister for some time."

"But…" I was never with Arya, he had wanted to say. He'd wanted to tell her the truth about that, too. But it would open up an entirely new avenue of questioning that he wasn't prepared to get into, so he'd bit his tongue.

"Things were complicated," Sansa had said, "but, they don't have to be anymore."

After that, both of them had made an effort to keep the conversation to topics they deemed non-sensitive, with Sansa picking up on his discomfort and both keenly aware of each other's
"Everyone at school will talk about us, when they find out," Sansa had mused at one point.

"Do you care?" he'd asked roughly, "we'll ignore them, or tell them to fuck off."

"I don't care what people will say," Sansa's voice had been firm. "I'm done caring about what strangers think about me or what I do."

Sandor had been faintly impressed at the resolve he'd heard in her voice. This was a different side of Sansa that he hadn't seen before, and it had just occurred to him that Sansa had been doing and saying a lot of things he would have thought out of character for her. *She talked my housekeeper into letting her into my house while I was sleeping,* he had thought. *Who does that?*

Sandor had then tentatively broached the subject of seeing her on the weekend, but Sansa had been apologetic, citing commitments she'd already made with her mother.

"I'm sorry, Sandor. I really would rather see you,"

"It's fine." He'd shrugged off her apology. "You've made plans with your mom, you shouldn't break them."

"Then, how about you pick me up on Monday morning?" she'd suggested. "We can ride to school together."

Sandor now wiped his mouth with a napkin, having finished his toasted sandwich and coffee, and quickly popped a breath mint into his mouth before he glanced down at his phone to check the time. Deeming it appropriate enough to wait outside her house, he left the cafe and drove back to Chateau Maegor, where he refrained from texting Sansa, and chose instead to spend the remaining ten minutes browsing on his phone.

Gendry Waters was still in the headlines of the local news sites, as well as on Gossip Spyder's blog. The revelation that Gendry was in fact a long-lost Baratheon offspring had come as a huge surprise to him, and this topic had dominated the content of Sansa's text messages to him the whole weekend. Sansa had pretty much given him a blow-by-blow, up to the minute account of what had gone down the day the news had broken. He now knew that it was all true and Gendry, the poor bastard – *in all its literal meaning,* Sandor thought – appeared to be Joffrey's half-brother.

"You damned, unfortunate soul…” Sandor chuckled roughly as he scrolled through the news feed.

He had spent enough time with Gendry, during his acquaintance with Arya, to know that the guy was a decent human being who didn't deserve the life-long curse of sharing blood and DNA with Joffrey Baratheon. As it was, he wasn't close enough to the guy that he could send him messages of condolences.

His phone buzzed in his hand as Sansa's name flashed across the screen, and he quickly answered the call.

"Hey, I'm here," he said by way of greeting, sounding very eager. "I'm outside your house. Ready?"

"Yes, I'm ready," she replied, "come through the gate, I'll be at the door."

The electric gates slid open at his approach, and Sandor wondered if the driveway leading to the front door had always been that long, as it seemed to take longer to get there than usual. Sansa was waiting beneath the alcove by the door, dressed in dark jeans, boots and a sweater in a soft blue
shade that contrasted against the vividness of her auburn hair, which she'd styled to hang in gentle waves down her back. She was smiling as his car rolled to a stop in front of her, and Sandor took a deep breath as she opened the passenger side door and hopped in.

"Hi," she greeted him, "how are you? Were you waiting long?"

"I'm fine." He opted not to tell her that he'd actually been one hour early. "I haven't been here long."

Sansa buckled herself into her seat. "Thanks for coming to pick me up."

"I'd have come anyway," he said.

Sansa made comments about the weather as well as the latest news about Gendry, while Sandor made appropriate responses and navigated the driveway back out of the property and onto the road. He chose to take the less direct route to school, but one that wouldn't be so congested in peak-hour traffic. The last thing he wanted was to make Sansa late for school, on the first day she was depending on him for transport.

"Are you going to be in trouble for missing school all of last week?" Sansa suddenly asked him. "And, what about what happened at the game?"

"Don't worry about me," he replied, "Coach Selmy came to see me last week and said he'd speak to the principal on my behalf."

"What about the college football scouts?"

"Don't care about them," he shrugged.

"You don't?" She sounded surprised.

"I don't need any of them telling me whether I can play college football or not, and I don't need any of their scholarships either." He quickly glanced at the puzzled expression on her face, and he gave a chafing laugh. "I'm the Hound, remember? Those scouts would be blowing their load in their pants if I said I wanted to play for the college they represented."

"You're very confident, aren't you?"

"It's not confidence, little bird," he stated, "it's the truth."

Sansa seemed to find something humorous in what he'd said, as she let out a peal of laughter that left him nonplussed, but he conceded that hearing her laughter was worth his confusion. The scent of the fragrance she wore was wafting through the confines of his car, arousing more than just his sense of smell. He glanced at her again from the corner of his eyes.

Sansa Stark was really there, sitting beside him.

"You didn't change your mind," he murmured quietly.

"Why would I?" she returned.

Sandor didn't answer her. He could think of a great many number of reasons why any normal girl would have second thoughts about dating him, and there was still a big part of him that doubted everything that had happened. He couldn't relax his guard, not truly. She was with him, for the moment. How long that moment was going to last, he had no way of knowing. All he knew was that what he had with her was fragile, and he was a great big brute that had never been good around
They reached the grounds of King's Landing Prep far sooner than he would have liked, and he parked his Mustang in his usual spot. He rolled his shoulders in an attempt to ease some of the tension in his muscles. Sansa turned to face him in her seat, and he gave her a questioning look.

"Let's do this," she said with determination in her voice.

Sandor noted that her blue eyes were searching for something as she looked up at him. He didn't know what she was hoping to find, but for whatever it was worth, he wanted to reassure her that he would be by her side, for as long as she wanted him there.

"Don't worry," he said, "I'm right here."

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Gendry

There had been reporters waiting outside his house that morning, aiming to catch a glimpse and a few words out of him. Some part of him knew that there would be media interest in him, now that he'd been identified as Robert Baratheon's illegitimate son, but he hadn't expected that there would be reporters waiting outside his home. He'd almost run them over with his car when he'd reversed out of the driveway on his way to school.

"What the fuck?" He'd frowned as some guy with a camera took photos of him.

A woman blocked the road in front of him, and Gendry wound his window down. "Lady, could you move out of the way?"

"Gendry?" the woman asked, ignoring his request. "You are Gendry Waters, right?"

"Yeah," he replied, still frowning.

"I'm from the Westeros Gazette," the woman said, "how do you feel about finding out that you're the son of Robert Baratheon?"

"I'm not answering any questions, lady." Gendry glared at her. "In any case, I'm a minor by law, so you need to speak to my foster-parents if you want an interview."

He revved the engine loudly, and the woman was forced to move out of his way. He glanced in his rearview mirror as he drove away, and saw that the reporter and the photographer were looking at the camera and smiling. Clearly, they had got the photos they were after.

When he had got to school, every single person he'd encountered was either watching him, or pretending that they weren't looking. He'd somewhat gotten used to being stared at by strangers during all the hype surrounding the Battle of The Bands, but the attention and looks he was attracting now was altogether quite different. It was unpleasant, like having something crawl over his skin, and leaving him feeling violated.

"There he is…"

"He's Joffrey's half-brother…"

"They don't look anything alike…"

He was ambushed on his way to his homeroom class by Hot Pie, Edric and Beric. His friends all
wore concerned expressions beneath their smiles.

"Hey, guys," he greeted them, "did y'all have a nice weekend?"

Hot Pie was the first person he had called after walking out of the lawyer's office that afternoon. Hot Pie had picked him up and they'd driven around King's Landing, eventually ending up at the 'Lucky 8', where Hot Pie and Bruce had heard the whole story of how he'd met his biological father for the first time. Both had offered plenty of sympathy and understanding, but little advice on how to deal with suddenly finding oneself under the glare of the public eye.

"Your situation's unique," Bruce had said, "few people would ever know how you're truly feeling. All I can offer you is an ear for listening, and a place to come to if you ever want to get away from stranger's eyes."

"I'm not going to run and hide," Gendry had stated.

"I wasn't suggesting that," Bruce had corrected him, "all I'm saying is that if you need a place to breathe, my door's always open."

"Yeah, man." Hot Pie had punched his arm lightly. "I got your back."

Gendry had been grateful, and though he hadn't been able to express his thanks, they had understood what his silence had meant.

Edric and Beric now both glanced at each other, before Beric took his arm and led him into an empty classroom across the hall. Gendry hadn't been forthcoming with his responses when they had called and texted him over the weekend, mainly because he hadn't felt like repeating himself over and over. His friends were only concerned for him, he thought, and there was no reason for him to hide the truth.

"Gendry, is everything okay?" Beric asked him.

"Dude, that article in the Herald was crazy," Edric added.

Gendry glanced at Hot Pie. "You haven't told them yet?"

"Nah, man." Hot Pie shook his head. "It's not my place to say anything."

Gendry nodded his appreciation at Hot Pie's consideration, before he smiled at Beric and Edric, which earned him wary looks in return.

"Gendry?" Beric prodded.

"Surprise, guys!" Gendry said with a forced brightness. "I'm Robert Baratheon's long-lost, bastard."

Beric let out a low whistle, while Edric threw his hands up in the air with a loud exclamation. Gendry gave them some moments to recover, before he continued speaking.

"Apart from people talking and staring…and the press, I don't know what's gonna happen, now. As far as I'm concerned, this changes nothing. I'm still me."

Beric regained his composure first, and the older guy clapped him on the shoulder reassuringly. "I'm here if you ever need to talk, man."

"Same here," Edric offered, "if Joffrey or anyone else starts giving you a hard time, we're here for you."
"Thanks, guys."

It was one thing for them to offer their support like that, which truly did matter to him, but it was the fact they didn't pry or ask for detailed explanations that he appreciated most. One day, he'd be able to talk about it, but finally having a name and a face for the man who had fathered him was still such an alien notion to him, and he wasn't ready to get into it with so many people just yet.

"We'll see you at the Performing Arts building at lunch time, okay?" Beric said before leaving to head to his own class.

"Good luck out there today," Edric bade him, "don't listen to gossip, dude."

That was easier said than done, Gendry found out. From homeroom, all through first and second periods, the stares and whispers around him did not cease. At one point the teacher had even threatened detention for all she caught whispering during her class. Gendry wondered if he would have been better off staying home for a few days, at least until the craziness had waned, but he gave that idea a big 'nay' when he considered it the same as running away.

He bumped into Sansa Stark in the hallway later that day, and he would have been happy to keep on walking past her, but the red-head had blocked his way.

"Hi," he said to her awkwardly as she looked up at him.

"Hi." She offered him a gentle smile, and he could tell from the look in her eyes that she knew the truth about him. The source of her information was fairly obvious to him. It was widely known that Eddard Stark was BFF's with Robert Baratheon. "How are you?"

He really didn't want to be having such a public discussion with her right then, but Gendry had no reason to be rude to her so he made himself answer her. "I've been better."

People were glancing at them openly, and he shifted on the spot.

"Ignore them," Sansa said, her smile never wavering. "You have nothing to hide, and you don't owe them anything."

Her words hit a chord with him, and he straightened his shoulders unconsciously. He recalled telling himself that he was all in and giving everything he had, though at the time, he didn't really know what that entailed. It occurred to him at that moment, that Sansa would know all there was to know about dealing with unwanted attention and gossip. If anyone could give him advice on how to handle it, it would be her.

"Does it get easier?" he asked quietly.

"The less you care about what they're saying about you, the easier it is to ignore them."

"Why are you helping me?"

She shrugged lightly. "You helped me out, once. That day I broke up with Joffrey, you stayed and talked to me in the music room, remember?"

"Yeah, but I didn't really do anything."

"You cared enough to stay," she told him, "maybe it didn't matter to you, but it did to me."

He acknowledged that with a nod. She was entitled to feel grateful if she wanted.
"You know the truth, right?" he asked, wanting her to clarify something for him. "If you know, then Arya knows."

Sansa nodded. "Yeah…father wanted us to hear it from him, instead of listening to gossip."

"Arya knows," Gendry repeated.

Sansa managed to look uncomfortable. She was one of the first people who'd called him out on his feelings for Arya, though his feelings proved to be one-sided. Sansa was probably feeling awkward because it was clear that he still had feelings for her sister, but Arya had moved on with another guy.

"She was just as surprised as I was when we read the news," Sansa offered, "I'm sure she'll tell you herself."

"We're not speaking right now." Gendry shook his head. "Long story."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Sansa hastened to apologize.

"Don't worry." He smiled tiredly. "My fist kind of ran into her new boyfriend's face."

"What?" Sansa quickly processed his words and added two and two together. "Oh, boy."

"Yeah. Like I said, long story." Gendry noticed more and more people watching them as students emptied from classrooms into the hallway. "So, you got any other advice for handling all this attention?"

"Earphones," she promptly said, "listen to music, so you don't have to hear what people are saying about you, if ignoring them is too hard. Acting like it doesn't bother you works as well. Even if it does, looking like you're unfazed makes it boring if people think they can't get a rise out of you."

"Isn't that kind of like, running away?"

Her expression became understanding, and something in her demeanor shifted. Gendry found himself suddenly looking at a different version of Sansa Stark. One that looked tougher, and less delicate than he was familiar with.

"It's not running away," she said, "it's about making yourself stronger, and turning your weakness and insecurities into your armor. Steeling yourself against it, you could say."

"How's that?"

"You know that saying, like water off a duck's back?" she asked him, and at his nod she continued her explanation. "Well, that's kind of how it is for me, now. It took a while, but I learned to accept that there would always be rumors and gossip circulating about me, simply because of who I am, and that trying to disprove anything would be pointless. Eventually, it got to the point where there was just so much gossip going around about me that one or two more new rumors stopped being such a big deal. It's like when you hear something about a celebrity that's in the spotlight all the time or read something crazy in the tabloids and you question the authenticity of it, you know what I mean?"

He narrowed his eyes in thought, trying to see her logic. "You're saying, the more rumors there are about you, the less they bother you, because people are less likely to believe them?"

"Yeah, something like that." She nodded. "There will always be people who will believe anything they hear, but the most people will take it with a grain of salt."
"And, that's how your weakness became your armor?" he asked, slightly skeptical.

"I know it's strange." She gauged his skepticism. "Especially when I think back on how I let those rumors get to me. It's not absolutely perfect…I mean, sometimes the staring still gets to me, but this is how I'm choosing to deal with it. All I'm trying to say is that, you should find a way to deal with it that works for you."

He understood her. He knew exactly what she was trying to tell him. *I'm Gendry Waters, and my father is Robert Baratheon. Whether I like it or not, I'm now in the public eye, and the sooner I accept it and deal with it, the better off I'll be.*

"Accept and deal with it, huh?" he muttered. "You're right, I guess…I can't change the fact that my father is Robert Baratheon."

There must have been a hint of bitterness in his voice because Sansa now eyed him warily.

"Gendry?" she prompted.

"It's nothing." He shrugged off her concern and made to move past her. "Thanks, Sansa. For trying to help. It's appreciated."

"Gendry, if there's anything I can do…or if you have any questions…" Sansa left the sentence unfinished.

Gendry knew what she was saying, and he nodded. "Yeah."

As he walked away, he promptly stuffed earphones into his ears and turned up the volume a notch. Immediately, the sound of chatter was drowned out by rock music, but he could still feel the stares of people's eyes on him. Sansa was a black-belt at this ignoring business, he thought.

As the day wore on, he got more practice at acting nonchalant, and he thought he was getting better at it, until he walked into his last class of the day…and found Joffrey Baratheon in the same classroom. *Fucking great.* He had forgotten they had a class together.

The blonde jerk stared him in the face, the hostility clear and unchecked in the jerk's green eyes.

"What are you staring at, Baratheon?" Gendry challenged him, unable to help himself. "Got something you wanna say?"

The entire class went silent, waiting for Joffrey to respond.

"I was wondering when they started letting animals enroll into this school," Joffrey sneered.

"They day they let you in," Gendry returned, not missing a beat.

Someone snickered. Joffrey's face clouded over, and Gendry could almost see smoke rising from the jerk's ears.

"There's no way we're brothers. You don't even look like me," Joffrey scoffed.

"You mean, because you don't look like Daddy Dearest, and I do?" Gendry laughed humorlessly. "Maybe we should be asking a different question altogether, huh?"

Joffrey sprang up from his seat, shoulders set for a confrontation. "What are you implying, asshole?"

"Exactly what you think I'm implying," Gendry shrugged.
"My name is Baratheon. It's you the papers are calling illegitimate."

"A name is just a name, but DNA doesn't lie."

"You take that back," Joffrey hissed, "I'm warning you."

"Or else, what?" Gendry took a step closer to him, daring him.

They stared each other down, and Gendry's blue eyes burned with his distaste for the green-eyed blonde in front of him. In the end, Joffrey's eyes wavered first.

"Afraid of a fight, Joffrey?" Gendry taunted him.

"You're not worth the energy," Joffrey finally spat, "I don't care what father says, you're not a Baratheon."

Gendry shrugged. "You can keep your name. I don't want it."

The teacher came in at that moment, none the wiser about the confrontation that had just occurred, and Gendry had to curb his desire to laugh like a maniac. There had been moments in his life when his younger self had wished for siblings. Before he'd been placed with the Motts and he'd gained foster-sibling in Toby and Tabitha, he'd often wished for a brother or sister that he could play with, thinking that a sibling would somehow ease the loneliness he had often felt.

He had more siblings than he could want now. Joffrey, his younger sister and brother made three. Then, there was that other half-brother in France he'd read about in the newspaper. Four, apparently blood related siblings he'd never known about. As he'd thought, on more than one occasion now; be careful what you wish for, as it just might come true, and bite you in the nutsack.

Mercifully, after what felt like the longest forty-five minutes ever, the class ended and Joffrey was one of the first people to bolt out of the classroom. News of his altercation with Gendry quickly followed him out the door, and Gendry was sure it would be a headline on Gossip Spyder's blog at any moment. Gendry allowed himself to breathe, and took his time gathering his books and pens together, before exiting the classroom.

He had band practice that afternoon. Their gig at the Heart of Fire had been booked for the following Saturday night and he, along with the rest of the Brotherhood Without Banners, was excited to be playing their first paid event. The last band he had been part of, the Apprentices, had played their last live close to two years before, and while the Battle of The Bands had been a fantastic experience, he missed the high he got from performing in front of a more intimate crowd.

Looking forward to grabbing a burger at The Hollow, and a reprieve from the day that had proved more exhausting than he'd expected, Gendry made his way to the Performing Arts building to retrieve his guitar. He saw Sansa and her dark-haired friend from choir heading to the auditorium, presumably for choir practice, and he was reminded of the encounter he'd had with the red-head earlier that day. Advice can come from the most unexpected of places, he thought.

The natural progression of his thoughts led him to wonder about Arya. He hadn't seen her all day, not even a glimpse. He felt a pang of disappointment. He'd thought he would hear something from her, even a text message at least. Sansa had said Arya had been as shocked as she had been, but perhaps that shock didn't equate to caring enough to ask about him.

The Performing Arts building was still buzzing with students, all of whom were part of school bands and dance groups. He knew that there was some recital coming up, and presumably, everyone had extra rehearsals as part of preparations. It wasn't out of the ordinary for the music rooms to be
occupied, but what was unusual was the sound of a badly tuned acoustic guitar drifting from the doorway.

Frowning, and feeling a sense of déjà vu, Gendry walked inside to find Arya sitting on a stool, balancing the guitar on her knee. He stopped in his tracks. He wasn't expecting to see her, of all people.

She looked up at the sound of his footsteps. "Gendry."

She was wearing a dark green leather jacket, paired with black jeans tucked into her favorite pair of boots. Her hair was messy, like she'd been playing with it continuously, and he thought the look suited her. Cute, punk-rock pixie was still the best way to describe her, he thought.

"I just came to get my guitar. I didn't know you'd be in here." Gendry made to leave.

"Wait." Arya stood up and placed the guitar down. "Wait, Gendry."

He paused and calmly turned to face her. "What is it?"

"How...how are you?" she asked him.

"As good as can be expected, given the circumstances." Gendry sighed. "You know, there's a bit of noise about who my biological father turned out to be."

She made a face. "Yeah...that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"You don't have to worry about me," he quickly said, "I can handle things just fine."

"Really?" Her brows knitted together. "Are you really okay?"

"What does it matter to you, Arya?" he asked, keeping his voice calm.

She looked away from his searching eyes, but he'd seen that her concern was genuine.

"I know that things haven't been good between us," she began, "but, I still think of us as friends...I do care about what happens to you."

Gendry didn't say anything. He simply stared at her, and thought about the conversation he'd had with Bruce, about how he wanted to mend bridges, and possibly patch things up with Arya. He had missed her. He really had. Could he make it work? Could they go back to the friendship they'd had before? She had approached him first. She'd made the first move. She'd created this opportunity for him, by telling him that she still cared about him. *Maybe this is my chance.*

"You care about me?" he asked softly.

"Yeah." Arya nodded. "I do."

"I see." Gendry changed his grip on the handle of his guitar case, shifting its weight so that it didn't dig into his palm. "I wonder about that."

Arya's brow furrowed. "Why?"

"You knew for weeks, Arya," Gendry heard himself saying, "you knew, since the night of the Battle of The Bands. I kissed you. I made it clear that I liked you."

*Hold on,* he thought, *this isn't what I was going to say.* However, now that he'd opened his mouth,
there wasn't a thing he could do to stop the flow of words. He didn't shout. He didn't raise his voice. In fact, his voice remained calm and even as he continued to speak the words that he hadn't realized he'd been saving for this moment. Words he was now at pains to say to her.

"Gendry?"

"Hear me out," he said, "a part of you must have known, Arya. Part of you must have known that it was never going to be me. At any point in time...anytime at all...before the moment I saw you kissing him, you could have told me. Yeah, I would have been hurt...of course it would have hurt, but not as much as seeing you kiss another guy, when I thought I still had a chance with you. I don't believe you meant to lead me on, but you did. A part of you has to know that you did. If you care for me, like you're saying you do, I want you to think about how that would have felt...how it still feels for me."

Arya stared up at him, and he saw that her eyes were watering. He hadn't meant to make her cry, but he hardened himself against her tears. He needed her to understand him. If they were going to move past this...if they were going to somehow salvage their friendship, then Arya needed to understand how much she had hurt him.

"Look, I know you never promised me anything, and I made a lot of assumptions that I shouldn't have...I shouldn't have hit Jaqen. I do apologize for that, and I'll apologize to his face when I get the chance. You and I, we both made mistakes, and I need you to see that. We can't get past this, if you don't."

Tears were silently rolling down her cheeks now, and Gendry clutched his guitar case tighter, biting back the urge to walk over to her and thumb her tears away.

"Oh, and about me being Robert Baratheon's son," he continued, almost as an afterthought. "It doesn't mean much to me. He's just some stranger who never wanted to acknowledge that he was my father. I don't give a damn about the Baratheons. The unwanted attention and being Joffrey's half-brother sucks balls, though. But, don't worry, I can handle this."

He stayed there a moment longer, mostly because he needed to calm the racing of his heart. Everything about him outwardly might have appeared calm, but he was a raging storm on the inside. When he felt he could walk away, Gendry quietly began to move towards the door.

"I'll see you around, Arya."

"I'm sorry," she blurted out.

Gendry paused at the doorway.

"I'm so sorry," Arya repeated.

He finally sighed. "Yeah, maybe you are."

He kept walking, and once outside of the building he let out a ragged breath and shrugged his shoulders, mentally shaking himself. Those hadn't been the words he'd been planning to say, but he recognized that perhaps, they were the words that needed to be said.
Hey, everyone! How are you all doin' on this fine day?

I'm sure by now you all would have heard about Gendry Waters and the allegations regarding his biological father. Speculation has been rife in many of the popular media outlets, both local and national, about the truth behind the allegations. So far, no one from the Baratheon camp has made any comments, and it appears that attempts to contact Robert Baratheon on this matter have been met with silence.

There were photographs of Gendry in the *Westeros Gazette* recently, looking none too pleased about having his picture taken, and the article went on to say that Gendry had neither denied or confirmed the allegation when questioned by the reporter. You know what they say about silence being akin to admission – many are taking the silence by both Robert and Gendry's representatives to mean that it is all true! I've also heard about an altercation between Gendry and Joffrey in the classroom the other afternoon, and word has it that some nasty things were said which almost ended in a punch up – Boys! You could be brothers! Play nice, okay? LOL!

Meanwhile, Sansa Stark has been spotted on numerous occasions in the company of Sandor 'The Hound' Clegane. I have received several tips about Sansa being seen getting out of Sandor's Mustang in the school parking lot before classes, sitting together at lunch, and others claiming to have seen them together at Harrenhal Mall after school. Care to tell us what's going on guys?

Arya Stark has also been witnessed leaving the school grounds crying! What's wrong, Arya? Who made you cry, huh? Did those rumors about big sister being seen with your ex upset you? Let's hope that sexy new boyfriend of yours was around to comfort you.

In other news, the Brotherhood Without Banners are performing at *Heart of Fire* this Saturday night, and with all the interest surrounding their guitarist Gendry Waters, I've been told that the venue is expecting a full house. Get in early so you don't miss out!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

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Sansa

It was only a matter of time before people would figure out that she and Sandor were now dating, Sansa thought as she read Gossip Spyder's post. While they had not gone out of their way to publicly declare it, neither had they tried to be secretive about it. She shivered inwardly.

She was dating Sandor. Sandor was her boyfriend. She would have pinched herself, had she not been at the breakfast table with her family at that moment.

"Sansa, put your phone away," her mother admonished, "you know my rule about phones at the table."

"Sorry, mother." Sansa quickly slipped her phone behind her back and began to help herself to the plate of golden, warm and flaky croissants that her mother had just set on the table.
Arya came into the room at that moment and Sansa quickly glanced at her sister's face to see what mood she was in. Arya was unusually downcast, which made Sansa worry. Gossip Spyder's post about Arya being seen crying now concerned her, as she had doubted it at first. Arya did not cry in public, or so she had previously believed.

As it was, it wasn't the right time to ask her sister about it, and neither was it the time to ask whether she had read the gossip about herself and Sandor. Sansa wanted to be upfront with her about her relationship with Sandor, because she believed it to be the right thing to do. Regardless that both Sandor and Arya now regarded their relationship to be ill-judged or that Arya was now with someone else, it was a fact that Sandor was her sister's ex.

Sansa wasn't afraid to tell her sister. She just couldn't seem to get her timing right. Arya had taken to locking herself in her bedroom each night after dinner that past week, and Sansa hadn't wanted to disturb her. Looking back on it, Sansa realized that Arya had been behaving peculiarly all week. Had she not been preoccupied with her own newly-attached status and all things related to Sandor, she might have noticed it sooner. She glanced at her sister again. Arya was nibbling on a croissant. Singular. Only one. *Something is definitely wrong.* Arya had a strong appetite, and very few things could come between Arya and her love of food. Sansa developed a sinking feeling in her stomach, and felt her own appetite waning. Whatever was bugging her sister had to be bad.

After breakfast, Arya accepted a ride to school with their father while their mother shepherded Bran and Rickon out of the door in a bid to get them to school on time. Sansa waited for Sandor, as she had done for the past few days, looking forward to spending alone time with him. In the week that they had been together, she had learned very quickly that Sandor was not into public displays of affection. He was happy enough to hold her hand, or for her to tuck her arm through his. However, he had stood rigid and awkward the few times she had tried to embrace him in public, and worn such a scowl on his face that she hadn't even dared try to kiss him. She remembered that Sandor hadn't been very affectionate with Arya in public either, not that she liked to recall such things, but part of her had hoped that he would be different now that he was with her. *These things take time, don't they?* She asked herself. *Things won't always be so awkward between us.*

Sandor arrived to pick her up for school, wearing the now familiar expression she recognized to be a smile. He had rarely smiled at her in the past, at least not without a mocking intent behind it, and now seeing him genuinely happy to see her made the butterflies in her tummy flutter like crazy.

"Hi," she greeted him, pushing aside the concerns that had been bothering her over breakfast. "G'morning."

"Hi," Sandor rasped, and with only the slightest of pauses, he turned his face so that Sansa could place a kiss on his lips.

*One day, turning your face for my kiss is going to be second nature to you,* Sansa thought.

"What's up?" Sandor asked her as he began the drive to school.

"Oh, nothing much," she replied, "just wondering if we should go and see the *Brotherhood Without Banners* this weekend?"

"You really want to go?" Sandor sounded hesitant. "It's gonna be packed, I heard."

"It could be fun." Sansa shrugged.

"We'll see," he replied noncommittally.
Sansa smiled, understanding that he hadn't given her an outright no, meaning there was a good chance she could talk him around. For the rest of the ride to school she talked about nothing in particular, and Sandor grunted responses in the appropriate places, but Sansa couldn't help thinking that he seemed distracted. His facial expressions never showed it, but something just didn't feel right, and Sansa's senses only heightened to the feeling of wrongness as they pulled into the school grounds.

They had always attracted the gazes of people wherever they went, but there were always more stares when they were the recent topics of Gossip Spyder's blog. Being that they were on that morning's post, it was hardly surprising that eyes, and whispers followed them as they made their way from the parking lot to their respective lockers.

"Do you think they're dating?"

"But he was dating her sister!"

"They've been seen together a lot lately, maybe it's true."

"Maybe they're just friends?" someone asked, which was met with barely smothered laughter.

Sansa heard everything and ignored them, but she could see that Sandor was finding it hard to just walk away.

"I don't care what people say about us," she had told him again when the topic had come up during one conversation during the week.

"But, I do," he had growled, "people are going to start saying shit about you because of me."

"So? Let them. I can handle it."

"Maybe you can, but I don't know if I can."

By the way he was grinding his teeth, she could see that he hadn't been kidding. She pursed her lips. Sandor should be just as used to being the topic of gossip just as much as she was, and surely he had to have developed his own method of coping with it, so why was he suddenly so bothered by them now? *Is he truly bothered for my sake?* She wondered. She took a step closer to him.

"Relax," she whispered, and touched him lightly on the arm with the tips of her fingertips.

Sandor flinched, not obviously, but she noticed it just the same.

"Yeah," he said, "I'm trying."

The feeling that something wasn't right intensified and she had to wonder if Sandor was suddenly having misgivings about dating her. She knew all too well that there can be an immense difference between expectations and reality. Even if Sandor had been pining for her for a long time, perhaps how he'd imagined having her as a girlfriend was totally different from what he'd experienced in the last week.

Then there was that thing about Arya being seen crying, and she dreaded to think that there really was some connection with Sandor's current mood.

"It was something that should never have happened. Understand? That's all done with. It's over."

Sandor's insistent words had been true, she was certain of it, but maybe there were still some
lingering emotions that neither he nor Arya were acknowledging. Sandor walked her to her locker and waited long enough for her to dispose of her unneeded belongings before he excused himself to go to class.

"I'll catch you at lunch." He gave her a smile.

"Okay, see you later." Sansa smiled back at him and watched as he walked away, before she sighed and turned towards her own homeroom.

What am I going to do?

Sandor

He needed to come clean with her. He had always known that he would have to tell Sansa the truth about his relationship with Arya. Seeing the Spyder's post insinuating that Arya's tears were somehow caused by the rumors about himself and Sansa maddened him. He did not like being implicated in something he definitely had nothing to do with, especially when it had the potential to upset Sansa.

Their relationship was too new, and his position as Sansa Stark's boyfriend was far too precarious, in his opinion, that he couldn't afford to have anything unbalance the current equilibrium. That evening after Sansa's confession and they had spoken on the phone, Sansa had wanted to ask more questions about him and Arya, and he couldn't blame her for being curious given that he'd admitted to being attracted to her before and during his bogus relationship with Arya. He hadn't wanted to answer her questions then, because he hadn't wanted to lie to her anymore than he already had. More importantly he had not wanted her to get angry with him, and risk losing her when they'd just finally gotten together.

She hadn't brought the topic up again, but it was only a matter of time before Sansa's curiosity would rear its fearsome head. Sandor figured he would rather come clean on his terms, when he was prepared, rather than be caught unaware. Problem was he just didn't know how to broach the subject, because shit like this had never happened to him before.

"Buggering hell."

He remembered the look on Sansa's face when he'd flinched at her touch. It had been an impulse thing. He'd been preoccupied with thoughts of confessing everything that her touch had just startled him for a moment, but he'd seen the little-hurt-puppy look in her eyes and now he felt bad about it.

She'd told him to relax, which meant she could see that he was acting strangely, which meant that she would ask him what was wrong before long.

" Fucking…fuck!" he swore, knowing he was going to have to confess his sins much sooner than he wanted.

Sansa was waiting for him near the cafeteria at lunch, and she smiled at him in greeting. Seems normal so far, he thought, and smiled back at her. They bought lunch and together they found a secluded bench away from the quad, in one of the more sheltered parts of the gardens. The sun was out, giving much welcomed warmth and brightness to an otherwise cold, December day.

"How's your morning been?" she asked him as they began eating.

"Pretty standard," he shrugged, "I still haven't caught up on all the work I missed out on, so my teachers are still on my case about getting assignments completed before the winter holidays, and I
have more supplementary stuff I need to do for Chem 'cause I missed all the practicals."

"That sucks." Sansa screwed up her nose.

"It's not so bad." Sandor took a swig from his can of soda. "Contrary to what others might think, I'm not all brawn and no brains, you know? My grades are decent enough."

At her prompting, Sandor divulged his grades, though Sansa failed to look surprised as he was expecting her to be.

"I just knew it," she said when he questioned her reaction. "I mean, I've never once heard of you complaining about exam results or having to take make-up classes. I just knew you were smart."

She was grinning at him, like a proud Mom almost, and despite himself he felt a touch of pride swell in his chest.

"Um…thanks," he mumbled, feeling his cheeks turn pink.

"So, that means you don't have to rely on a football scholarship?"

"I don't," he confirmed, "academic merit alone will get me accepted, but a football scholarship would also mean I get my pick of the best schools too, and not just the ones I can afford."

"Will you be going to King's Landing College?"

He shook his head with a grimace. "Nope. My brother's there and I want nothing to do with him. He's graduating this year, but I still don't want anyone comparing me to anything he's ever been involved with."

"So, where?"

"I'm applying to the University of Valyria."

"The University of Valyria…" Sansa's eyes widened at the mention of the oldest and most prestigious of the elite universities in the country. "That's amazing!"

"Coach Selmy is helping me with my application…writing me a letter of recommendation and all. He says he's acquainted with the Dean or something. The scouts have been out to see me more than once, so my…um…performance… at the Championship won't be the only determining factor towards my acceptance."

"That's wonderful." Sansa reached over to give his arm a squeeze. "U of V is out of state though, was it always your first choice?"

Sandor nodded. "Yeah. I mean, Valyria looks at academic performance on top of sporting prowess, so my brother never had a chance in hell of getting in, and 'cause of that, I never considered going anywhere else."

"Have you decided on a major?"

"Sport Science, maybe?" He shrugged. "Or Sports Management, I guess. Playing football professionally has crossed my mind…but, if I can't then I'd still like to be involved in sports somehow."

"You've really put some thought into this…your future, that is."
"To an extent," Sandor agreed, "I have a general idea of where I want to go, but it's not as though I've planned every step of it."

"I'm envious," Sansa said, "you've got things figured out. I haven't got a clue what I want to do yet."

"You're a sophomore. You still have a few years to think about it."

"Things were a lot simpler when I was a kid…I used to believe that I'd grow up to be a princess, live in a great big castle and marry a prince." Sansa laughed softly.

Sandor's brows had furrowed before he'd even realized it.

"A prince, huh?" he rasped, "you probably could have found yourself a real prince."

Sansa's eyes narrowed at his tone, and there was a telling change in the mood.

"Lots of little girls dream about being princesses, and castles and knights in shining armor, Sandor. That wasn't literal."

"I know what you meant." Sandor gave her what he hoped was a convincing smile, to let her know he understood, before attempting to change the subject. "So, do you really want to go to the Brotherhod's gig on Saturday night?"

Sansa jumped on the new topic as he'd hoped, but even as they discussed the possibility of watching Gendry and his band, it was evident to both of them that they were avoiding the real discussion they should have been having. Sansa knew that Sandor had something on his mind. Sansa's comment about marrying a prince hadn't really bothered him that much, he admitted. He probably only reacted to it because he was already on edge, and the comment niggled at his insecurities, which he was already sensitive about. All his snarky comment had served to do was rouse Sansa's concern and suspicion further.

Still, he believed that the sooner Sansa knew the truth, the better it would be for everyone concerned. He hated that there was already a lie between them. It was not the best way to begin a relationship, even he knew that. No matter the intention behind the lie, it had now become burdensome, coming between not only himself and Sansa, but also between Sansa and Arya. Whatever Arya said, and no matter how much she bitched about her older sister, the Stark sisters really did care for each other.

He looked at the girl sitting half a foot away from him on the bench, carefully studying the perfect lines of her face, and the way the sunlight picked up the highlights in her hair turning the auburn locks into a rose gold halo. Telling her the truth was a risk, but not telling her was an even greater risk, in his opinion. The lie was a shadow, threatening to engulf the light that Sansa had brought to his world.

No, Sandor thought. I won't let it.

Arya

A week had passed, and still, the words that Gendry had said to her continued to sting. Gendry had been right, she thought. Somewhere, deep down, she had to have known that she was leading him on. No! No! I never meant to hurt him! I really wasn't certain about how I felt about him! I was unsure and confused, and it was stupid of me to ignore how he was feeling the whole time he was waiting for me!

However, even as she acknowledged the part she had played in the whole sordid, ugly mess of
things, part of her was screaming that it wasn't her fault. Not all of it, at least. She'd never had a 
boyfriend before, and outside of her brothers, she'd had very little interaction with boys before 
moving to King's Landing.

She never asked Gendry or Jaqen to fall for her. Things just happened, and just how was she 
supposed to know which decision was right? Thinking about it all made her head pound like crazy, 
because no matter how many times she ran each scenario over in her mind, regardless of the what 
if situations she came up with, it always ended with someone – or all of them getting hurt.

What if she had stayed single, and not made a choice between the two guys? She'd asked 
herself. *Jaqen and Gendry would be upset because I didn't choose either of them, but because I 
didn't pick a favorite, they'd get over it.* Arya sighed. *Then I'd be denying myself my own happiness, 
and I'd be miserable.* The last thought had made her frown. *I'm allowed to be happy, aren't I?* 

She groaned inwardly. *Where there is light, there is shadow. There's no escaping it.*

She had seen Jaqen briefly over the weekend at brunch on Sunday morning, before Jaqen had had to 
go into the studio to complete more recordings. She had been happy to see him, but he must have 
seen through her smiles, because Jaqen had pinned her with one of his intense gazes.

"You are still worrying about Gendry," he had stated.

Arya had winced. "I am."

"Has something happened with the Baratheons?" Jaqen had assumed Arya's concern was due to 
Gendry's paternity woes.

She hadn't corrected him. "Not much more, that I'm aware of. It's just that this past week, the gossip 
around school has been really bad."

"What about your father? Has he said anything about Gendry?"

"No." Arya had shaken her head. "Just that I should be there to support him if he needs it."

"You have spoken with Gendry, yes?"

"I have." Arya had averted her eyes. "We spoke briefly, but all...all he said was that he could handle 
it."

"You do not believe him?"

"I don't know," she had replied, but it wasn't entirely about Gendry's paternity problems that she was 
referring to.

"Give him some space," Jaqen had eventually said, "many things have happened to him recently, 
and perhaps the best thing you can do is step back, let him breathe and put things into perspective."

"Yeah, you're right," she had sighed. "The *Brotherhood* have that gig coming up, so I guess that will 
help keep his mind off things."

"That's right." Jaqen had raised his brow. "The *Heart of Fire* is one of the hottest spots in Braavos. 
In fact, we often compete with them for the same audience."

"I heard it's going to be the place to be this coming Saturday night. I hope it all goes well for them."

Jaqen had been watching her with the same guarded expression that he'd been wearing the first time
they had talked about Gendry, and Arya had once again wondered at the thoughts behind his hooded eyes. She guessed that talking about Gendry was not among Jaqen's favorite topics, and indeed Jaqen's expression did not clear until they started talking about their plans for the coming holidays.

Even before Jaqen had mentioned it, Arya had already been making a point to stay out of Gendry's way after their confrontation in the music room. She had learned that Gendry had taken to joining the other members of the *Brotherhood* at the Performing Arts building during lunch, and from the glimpses she caught of him as he walked through the hallways, Arya could see that outwardly, he looked fine.

More often than not, there was always a different girl by his side, and Gendry did not look as though he minded one bit. His popularity had been on the rise ever since the *Brotherhood Without Banners* placed in the top three at the Battle of The Bands, and since news broke about him possibly being another Baratheon progeny, his star had been shining brighter and brighter. People continuously greeted him, and he returned their greetings warmly without the awkwardness that she used to see around him. Gendry had never been comfortable with his popularity before, but now he was owning it. Something had changed about him.

She spent her lunch hour sitting with Hot Pie in the cafeteria on most days when he wasn't busy with extra-curricular activities. Hot Pie, ever understanding, ever forgiving, had sought her out one afternoon and offered to drive her home, specifically so he could speak to her about what had gone down between her and Gendry in detail. Having heard both sides of the story, he had shaken his head, concluded that it was unfortunate how things had gone down, and promptly got over it.

"Gendry will be fine," Hot Pie had said, "he told me what he said to you, and yeah he has a point, but I know that he knows that these things happen, and he knows you never purposely intended to hurt him. You can't help who you fall for. Just give it time, and I think things will go back to how they were before."

Hot Pie's words, as well as the evidence she had seen with her own eyes had helped to assuage some of her uncertainties, but not the sting that Gendry's words had left on her conscience. She had apologized to him, in the few words she'd managed to say, but she didn't know if things could ever go back to how they were.

Hot Pie had also told her how Gendry and the Mott family were being stalked by the press. On three occasions Mrs. Mott had seen the same TV news van lurking around their street, and Mr. Mott was on the verge of changing their home phone number because of the deluge of unwanted calls they were still receiving. Gendry's picture in the *Westeros Gazette* was just the start, as it turned out, with local newspapers in neighboring towns running copycat articles about him, and his alleged father.

Hot Pie had shaken his head. "Mr. & Mrs. Mott don't know how to handle the attention, and we can only imagine how Gendry is managing to deal with it. I mean, it's a big leap from what his life was like just a short while ago."

Arya could empathize, remembering the media attention that her family had been forced to deal with in the wake of the *Baratheon Incorporated* worker's riot, although her family had been better equipped to handle it given her father's public profile. She had never been one to just sit around and do nothing. If there was a problem, she wanted to get right in there and fix it. She was unused to being at an impasse, and she felt uncomfortable with restlessness at not being about to do anything to fix her situation with Gendry, let alone offer to help him with handling media scrutiny.

*Leave it well enough alone*, the voice of caution in her mind told her firmly. *Leave Gendry alone.*
Gendry

There was a pretty blonde girl talking to him, making a joke about something her equally pretty Asian friend had said. For the life of him, he couldn't remember what either of their names were, which could be potentially embarrassing as they'd been talking to him for the past thirty minutes. Edric had introduced them when the two girls had shown up at the usual spot they occupied at the Performing Arts building during lunch. To be fair, he'd met a lot of girls that past week, and he couldn't recall their names either. None of them had made much of an impression on him.

He entertained the people who greeted him, spoke to them and pretended to be all friendly with them just so he could keep his mind occupied with anything...anything other than Arya Stark. Thankfully, he had their upcoming gig to focus on, with Beric making them rehearse every night so that they had their set perfected. Rehearsals usually ended at 8:30 p.m. and as soon as he got home, he hit the books to complete his homework and assignments. Usually, it was midnight by the time he went to sleep. The Mott's had imposed a strict rule regarding his schoolwork after The Battle of the Bands, given Gendry's serious involvement with the band and the performances he'd committed to. In short, he had to maintain or improve his current grades if he wanted to remain in the Brotherhood. His worst subject was Biology, but so far he'd maintained his C average for the class.

Other than the band, schoolwork and his falling out with Arya, the next big issue occupying his mind was the fact that everyone now wanted a piece of him, because everyone wanted to know if he was really Robert Baratheon's son. His foster-dad had already disconnected their landline phone, and his foster-mom had stopped answering calls on her cell phone if the caller was from an unknown number. Gendry was also aware of the constant presence of reporters around their home, and recently, around his school as well.

It's one thing for them to bother me, but being a nuisance to my family is wrong. Gendry had spoken to his fancy-pants lawyer about the media presence, and he'd been advised to keep his silence and not engage them unless he was spoken to first, at which he should insist that all interviews and questions should be directed to the law office of Pycelle & Associates. He had also been informed that there was some pre-existing legal ban in place, preventing media from getting too close to the grounds of King's Landing Prep, as a safety precaution for the students whose parents had public profiles, such as the Baratheons, Tyrells and Starks. Yet, just outside the perimeter of the media-free zone Gendry was sure he'd seen the same lady reporter and photographer from the Westeros Gazette who'd ambushed him outside his house.

"...won't you, Gendry?"

Gendry mentally shook his head and focused his blue eyes on the pretty Asian girl who was looking up at him expectantly. He hadn't been listening.

"Of course, he will," Edric replied, saving his ass while giving him a pointed look. "Gendry's a sweetheart. He'll definitely make sure to look out for you in the audience on Saturday night."

Smiling gratefully, Gendry cleared his throat. "Just cheer loudly so that I'll hear you."

"Absolutely." The girl grinned. "I'll text you when we get to the club, so can I have your number?"

"Only if you give me your number first." Gendry saw no reason why she couldn't have his number, and he slid his phone out of his pocket. "So, how do you spell your name?"

"Oh, with a Z," the girl said, "J-A-Z-M-I-N-E."

"Jazmine, with a Z." Gendry stifled a chuckle as he punched her number into his phone.
"And mine is spelled with a K," said the pretty blonde, "J-E-S-S-I-K-A."

He fought to control his laughter from spilling. "Jessika, with a K."

Jazmine and Jessika stayed and flirted a while longer, before sending him off with sweet smiles at the end of the lunch hour so they could get to class. After the girls were out of earshot, Edric turned to him with a cheesy grin splitting his face.

"Smooth, Gendry. Real smooth."

"What?" Gendry raised his palms and feigned ignorance.

"We saw that blank look on your face when Jazmine asked you about Saturday night, didn't we Allyria? You were barely listening to what she was saying."

Gendry managed to look sheepish. "Thanks for the save, man."

Allyria laughed. "And you asking her to spell her name…that was so smooth it was slick."

"Come on," Gendry attempted to defend himself, "do you have any idea how many girls I've met lately? There's no way I could possibly remember them all."

"Oh, now you're just bragging." Beric clapped him on the shoulder. "Way to go, man! You're finally realizing just what a stud you are."

"Oh, my god…" Allyria crinkled her nose. "I can't believe you just called him a stud."

"Seriously, though. Are you really going to use those numbers Jazmine and Jessika just gave you? Because I know for a fact that Jazmine is a super sweet girl and she never gives her number to just anyone, and Jessika recently just became single again." Edric raised his brows at him curiously.

Gendry's friends had taken his cues as far as Arya was concerned, and while they lamented the current state of their friendship, they respected his privacy and didn't ask more questions than necessary. As for the talk around his true parentage, they said nothing after the day Gendry had admitted to being Robert Baratheon's son.

He was also grateful for the fact that they tried to divert his attention anytime he looked like he was moping, like that morning when Gossip Spyder had made mention of Arya being seen crying on school grounds, and he was reminded of the fact he was the one who'd made her cry, for example. Edric had distracted him by pointing out the cleavage on a statuesque brunette that had just walked by.

"I don't know." he shrugged in response to Edric's question. "Jazmine seems nice."

"Oh, so she's piqued your interest, eh?"

Again, Gendry shrugged. "She has really…pretty hair?"

His friends laughed.

Gendry's friends from Flea Bottom had also contacted him when the article in the Herald had broken, but Gendry knew that Lommy Greenhands could not keep a secret. As old as their friendship was, Gendry just could not tell his old friends the truth just yet. Bruce had promised not to tell them either, knowing that Gendry would speak to them in his own time. Lommy would forgive him, he was sure.
After school that day he collected his guitar from his locker, and witnessed Sansa Stark kissing Sandor Clegane in an empty music room in the Performing Arts building. He almost baulked in shock, but fear of the Hound mistaking him for an eavesdropper made him keep his mouth shut.

"...choir practice is about to start," Gendry heard Sansa say.

"I know," Sandor rasped, "I'm going. Call me later, okay?"

Gendry walked away hurriedly, his eyebrows were still somewhere up in his hairline when Sansa's dark-haired friend spotted him in the hallway.

"Hey." He inched closer to her when she paused in mid-step at his greeting. "I just saw Sansa and the Hound...are they...you know?"

The dark-haired girl looked up at him curiously, hesitating for a moment before she replied. "Sansa says you're a friend, so I guess it's okay to tell you, and it's not as though they're really hiding it...yes, they're dating now."

"Wow," Gendry muttered, "just...wow."

"Yep, sure is."

Gendry thanked her for telling him, bade her farewell, and continued walking towards the student parking lot still dumbfounded with the news. Sandor the fucking 'Hound' Clegane got his girl, huh? Gendry was happy for the ugly brute, given everything the guy had suffered while watching her get abused by her douche of an ex-boyfriend. He didn't know how, but Sansa Stark obviously returned Sandor's affections. It looked as though the rumors on the Spyder's blog were true. Miracles do happen for some, he thought. Good luck to them.

He had almost reached his BMW when he noticed an older gentleman in a long dark coat waiting by the gate. Gendry frowned, his first reaction was to suspect the man as a journalist, but he kept walking towards his car even as the man began to walk in his direction.

"Gendry Waters?" the man called out to him. "May I have a quick word with you, Gendry? I promise I won't keep you too long."

Gendry's guard came up immediately. "I have nothing to say to the press, so you'll have to contact my lawyer about those questions."

"I'm not from the media, I assure you."

"Like I'd believe that." Gendry sniffed and unlocked his car, stowing his guitar in the backseat.

"My name is Davos Seaworth, I'm the Executive Assistant to Stannis Baratheon --"

"You work for the Baratheons?" Gendry's lips curled into a sneer. "If that's the case, then I really have nothing to say to you."

"I don't work for Robert Baratheon," stated Davos Seaworth, "I represent his brother, Stannis...your uncle, as it were."

"He's not my anything."

Davos smiled kindly. "Ah, forgive me. I spoke without thinking. I meant no offense, Gendry."

Gendry responded to the honesty in the man's words. "None taken, but no matter what those papers
say, I can’t ever consider those people as my family. Got it?"

"I understand." Davos Seaworth’s smile transformed into a business-like countenance. "I know you've probably been through a lot lately, and I also understand your hesitation to speak with me, but I must tell you that Stannis Baratheon would like to offer his support to you and your foster family, in whatever capacity within his power."

"Why?" Gendry's eyes narrowed. "How do I know you're who you say you are?"

"Ah, a moment please." Davos Seaworth reached into his coat pocket and pulled out two business cards. "My details are on this card, and Stannis Baratheon's direct lines are on the second card."

"These could be fakes." Gendry eyed the cards, refusing to take them.

"I see that you need further proof." Davos Seaworth looked bemused. "I would be suspicious too, in your position."

"I'm glad you understand my position then." Gendry made to get into his car. "I've got to go, so like I said before, call my lawyers."

"Miss Stark!" Davos Seaworth suddenly called out into the distance. "Am I glad to see you. Might I borrow a few moments of your time?"

Gendry swiveled his head to see Arya standing on the path at the edge of the parking lot, her brows knitted above her eyes as she stared at the man who had just called out to her, quickly glancing towards Gendry, clearly hesitant. She paused for a moment longer before she began crossing the strip of lawn towards them, the frown between her brows clearing when she recognized the man standing next to him.

"Good afternoon Mr. Seaworth," Arya greeted him, confirming that she knew him. "Looks like you have something to discuss with Gendry, so what can I help you with?"

Davos smiled genially at Arya. "I won’t take up much of your time, I merely require that you vouch for my identity. As you can understand, Gendry is wary about strangers at the present time, given the circumstances."

"Oh, okay." Arya turned towards Gendry and glanced up at his face before quickly averting her eyes. "This man is Davos Seaworth, and he works directly for Mr. Stannis Baratheon. I've met him on a couple of occasions at functions at The Red Keep. Stannis Baratheon owns an importing company, separate from Baratheon Incorporated, and as I understand it Mr. Seaworth helps to manage Stannis Baratheon's affairs."

Gendry's own brows now met in a frown as the confirmation of Davos Seaworth's identity and position raised suspicion about Stannis Baratheon's interest in him.

"Ok, so you are who you say you are." Gendry still did not lower his guard. "Why does Stannis Baratheon want to help me? Is Robert making him do it?"

"Stannis is acting independently of Robert, I guarantee you that. I will also add that Robert has no knowledge of this, and for the time being, it is best that it stays that way."

"Why is that?"

Davos Seaworth looked to be choosing his words carefully, and Gendry got the impression that the man was quite a skilled negotiator.
"There are certain sensitivities that must be observed due to the nature of the circumstances, and Stannis believes keeping his involvement quiet will prevent toes being stepped on unnecessarily, as it were." Davos pierced him with a measuring look. "I know you will not acknowledge it, but you are a Baratheon by blood, young man. You cannot escape this fact, and Stannis would like to help you understand what it means to have this blood in your veins, and to deal with the changes happening around you."

Gendry remained unmoved. "Tell him thanks, but I'm not interested. Like I said, I want nothing to do with the Baratheons."

"Then, at least take our business cards." Davos pressed the slips of card into Gendry's palm. "Give some consideration to what we've discussed."

"You're wasting your time." Gendry huffed a breath. "I'm not going to change my mind."

"Hmm." Davos leaned in half a step, a glint in his eyes. "What if I were to tell you that it was Stannis who first learned of your existence?"

"What?" Gendry blinked, and he noticed that Arya's eyes had snapped to the older man's face at his words.

Davos paused, seemingly for effect before opening his mouth again. "What if I told you that it was Stannis who found you, and not Robert? Would that help to sway your mind? What if Stannis finding you was the catalyst that started it all?"

"Why would he do that?" Gendry asked roughly. "It makes no sense why he would look for his brother's illegitimate son, so why?"

Davos sighed. "I'm afraid I don't know the answer to that, but I'm sure Stannis must have a good reason. He's not a man taken to flights of fancy or do things by halves. If you want to know, you will have to ask him yourself."

"Of course," Gendry scoffed and shook his head, before muttering under his breath, "...nothing's for free."

"That may be the case," agreed Davos Seaworth, an expression on his face that suggested he understood what Gendry meant. "Now, I did promise not to keep you so I'll be on my way. Take care of yourself Gendry Waters, and I hope we'll be hearing from you soon...Good day to you, Miss Stark, and thank you for your assistance."

"We'll see," Gendry said, and watched Davos Seaworth walk towards the gate, and out of the school grounds.

Arya had not moved or said a word since confirming Davos Seaworth's identity, and now Gendry noticed that she was standing there awkwardly, looking unsure as to what to do next.

"Do you believe him?" Gendry asked her, needing a second opinion, suddenly finding himself more than agitated with the information he'd just learned. "Do you believe that Stannis really wants to help me?"

Arya shook her head. "I don't know, but if he sent his EA here to speak to you then he has to be serious."

Gendry was thinking the same thing, which only agitated him more. Arya was now chewing on the side of her lip, looking down at the ground.
"You going somewhere?" he suddenly asked her.

"Um…just home." She held up her phone. "I was about to call an Uber."

He motioned to his car impatiently. "Get in, I'll drive you."

"Are you sure?" She looked surprised. "I can get home on my own."

"I'm not going to bite your head off," he told her, "just get in, and tell me everything you know about Stannis Baratheon."

Her expression cleared. "Oh, okay."

He waited just long enough for her to snap her seatbelt into place, before pealing out of the parking lot into the street.

"Um…what do you want to know about him?" she eventually asked when he didn't appear to make any effort toward conversation.

"Everything," he replied, "what does he look like? Is he close with his brothers? Does he have kids? Anything…I'm just trying to understand why he would want to help me, and why he bothered looking for me."

Arya sighed and um'd and ah'd for a moment, her forehead furrowed as she thought about how to answer him. Gendry didn't know if she could help him, but she was his only tangible link to the Baratheons who was in any position to give him answers without wanting anything in return.

"He's the second brother, and he's big and tall like Robert and Renly, but he's bald," Arya began.

"Does he have blue eyes?"

"Uh…yeah," Arya said after some thought, "he does have blue eyes. All the Baratheon men do."

Gendry gave her a sideways glance at that last statement. "Joffrey doesn't. What about his brother and sister?"

"Myrcella and Tommen have green eyes, like Joffrey, but I always thought it was because they took after their Mom."

"Not all the Baratheon men have blue eyes, then." Gendry shrugged. "Does Stannis have kids?"

"Yeah, he has a daughter. Her name's Shireen and she's nine."

"What does she look like?"

"She's got black hair and blue eyes, and she's really quiet but sweet. She was diagnosed with a skin disorder when she was a baby, and unfortunately it left some scarring on her face. I think she gets bullied at school because of it."

"Oh, that's sad for her…so, I have a little black-haired and blue-eyed cousin." Gendry took a moment to process the thought. "My family continues to expand…what else can you tell me about Stannis?"

"Well, I've heard stuff that my parents say about him, and what I've seen for myself at those business parties and what I can say for sure is that he runs a successful import company. He imports exotic foods or something like that."
"Exotic foods?"

"Gourmet and artisanal foods and ingredients," Arya elaborated, "apparently he started off with importing heirloom onions and some kind of preserved fish from Scandinavia, and now he brings in charcuterie and delicatessen specialties from all over Europe, as well as organic matcha tea from Japan and special spice blends from India."

"Char-cu…what?" Gendry frowned.

"Charcuterie, it's a French cooking word that refers to preserved meat products like fancy types of hams and paté," Arya explained.

"Okay." Gendry put that away in his French repertoire and moved on. "Does he have any involvement with Baratheon Inc.?"

"Yeah, he's on the Board of Directors, but I don't know how involved he really is. I've heard my dad say that Robert is giving more weight to Renly's opinions or something."

"Even though he's still in college?"

"He's more of a people person, apparently."

"People don't like Stannis?"

"My mother says he's just not a fan of polite chit-chat, and he's a straight-talking kind of man who doesn't have time for idle chatter."

"Do the brothers get along outside of business issues?"

"I have no idea," Arya replied, "before we moved here I'd never met any of the Baratheons, and Robert is supposed to be one of father's oldest friends. Stannis and Renly were just names I'd hear in conversations between my parents."

"I'm not any closer to figuring out why Stannis could want anything to do with me." Gendry thumped the steering wheel in frustration. "Nothing makes sense!"

"Do you really want to know?" Arya asked cautiously.

"Yes…and no," Gendry laughed humorlessly. "I just hate having unanswered questions going around and around in my head."

"Then maybe it couldn't hurt to meet him just once, and at least try to get some answers," she suggested.

"Executive Assistant Davos Seaworth baited me," Gendry stated, "I guess I'll think about it."

They lapsed into silence, and for some minutes Gendry navigated the traffic building on the roads, while Arya fixated on something on her jacket sleeve. It had been weeks since she’d last been in the passenger seat of his car, and having her there beside him now felt...right. Completely clichéd as it was, she was the first and only girl who'd ever ridden shotgun and his car had missed her presence… Okay, so it was he who'd missed her, and in all honesty, asking her to tell him about Stannis Baratheon had, in part, been an excuse to get her into his car. Perhaps he had a masochistic tendency that he never realized before, because even as he'd known how painful it would be, he still wanted her with him, even if just for a few moments.
"You, uh…know about your sister and Sandor?" he asked at length, breaking the silence.

"Hell yeah!" she replied brightly. "Sansa came home deliriously happy the other night, and even though neither of them has actually confirmed it to my face, I know they've been together a lot. I mean, my bedroom overlooks the driveway, and I don't know anyone else that drives a black Mustang with license plates that reads; STRANGER."

"Stranger? Is that what it says?"

"STR4N6R," she recited, "it's all the letters except the E."

"Hmm…I never noticed it before. Why Stranger?"

"How would I know." She shrugged, completely disinterested. "Maybe it's like a warning or something, so other drivers on the road don't tailgate him. Stranger danger, you know?"

"That's lame." Gendry snorted a laugh despite himself. "So, you're not surprised they're together? I saw them kissing earlier and I nearly swore at them in shock."

Arya giggled. "Nah, I'm not surprised. I've known that Sansa's been crushing on him for a little while now, but I guess she was holding back for some reason."

"She has?" Gendry was shocked again, for the hundredth time that day.

"Yeah, but I don't have details. I kind of worked it out by accident."

"Does she know the truth about you and Sandor yet?"

Arya grimaced. "I don't think so, and I don't think I'm ready to confess anytime soon."

"What if Sandor's already told her?" He glanced at her briefly and saw the horrified expression on her face.

"He wouldn't!" she cried. "Not without telling me…I don't think…and if he has, then there's no way Sansa would let it slide without tearing me to pieces!"

Gendry laughed, and for the rest of the drive to Chateau Maegor they talked about school, the Brotherhood's upcoming gig and their respective family's plans for the festive season ahead. It was a normal, enjoyable conversation, and with a glimmer of optimism Gendry thought that perhaps, it was possible to have Arya's friendship again one day.

Their conversation waned as they approached the gates of Chateau Maegor. Gendry rolled his window down to punch in the security code Arya dictated to him, and waited for the big gates to slide out of their way. He became aware, as he slowly pulled up to the front door, that Arya was gearing up to say something. She turned to him as the car rolled to a stop.

"I'm sorry, Gendry," she said softly, and sincerely. "I'm sorry about not thinking about how you felt, and for hurting you, and for being a coward and not being honest with you. I'm sorry about everything."

"I'm sorry, too," he returned, "I didn't mean to lash out at you like that."

"You were angry, and I hurt you…I understand."

"No, that's not exactly why I'm apologizing," he admitted, "I'm guilty of ignoring your feelings, too."
Arya's eyes clouded with confusion, and he sighed deeply before continuing.

"I think I…was probably putting too much pressure on you," Gendry said, "I was pushing you to make a choice, and I wasn't considering that perhaps you really did need time to make up your mind. I was impatient, and I'm sorry...for everything."

All I did, he thought, was drive you further away from me, and into Jaqen's arms. He stared at Arya as she let his words sink in, seeing that she accepted them, and he let her see that he accepted hers.

"I want you to be happy," he said, his voice suddenly thick. *Even if it's not with me.*

"I want you to be happy, too," Arya said in a near whisper.

Gendry forced himself to smile. "Yeah, I'll be fine. Everything will be just fine."
Episode 25 "Opened Eyes"

Chapter Notes

*Sexy times ahead from this point on...*

Gossip Spyder

Tonight's the night, ya'll!

The *Brotherhood Without Banners* are featuring at the *Heart of Fire* tonight, with their set scheduled for a 9 PM start. Don't be late! I've heard that their set will include all the songs featured at the Battle of the Bands, plus all new original songs. The *Heart of Fire* is *the* place to be, so make sure you are there!

In other news, I have been getting more and more drops in my inbox from witnesses claiming to have seen Sansa Stark and Sandor Clegane sharing, shall we say…intimate moments, in quiet corners around school recently. Check out this fuzzy snap someone sent in – that mane of auburn hair, and this guy's ridiculously broad shoulders look all too familiar, don't they?

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Jaqen

He had the afternoon free and he was going to spend it with his girlfriend. He normally spent Saturday afternoons rehearsing, or recording in the studio if he wasn't preparing for their regular performances at *The House of Black and White*. He still had to be at the club that evening, if only to play host. Given the hype around the *Heart of Fire*, his uncle knew better than to compete for audience numbers, and instead he had lined up crowd favorite artists to come and perform, hoping to appeal to their most loyal of clientele. Almost every week, a good portion of their audience was comprised of regulars who had been coming to the club religiously since the club had first opened its doors.

"Music is our god," a regular had once told him, "and this place, *The House of Black and White*, is our temple."

Sure, Jaqen expected numbers to be down that night, but they would still make a respectable amount in covers.

Arya was meeting him at Harrenhal Mall, and he checked his appearance in the hallway mirror before he headed to his Jeep. He sent her a quick text message to let her know that he was on the way, and got on the road to drive the twenty-five minutes it took to get to the mall. Taking the exit from Kingsroad Expressway, Jaqen hoped that the shadow that had been hanging over Arya the past week had vanished, because he didn't like seeing her down and being unable to do anything to lift that shadow. He was very aware of the reason behind her dark mood, and it did nothing to improve his own mood to know that another guy, namely Gendry Waters, was its cause.
There was Gossip Spyder's post from earlier in the week claiming that Arya had been spotted crying as she'd left school grounds one afternoon, but he knew better than to believe everything he read on the blog, and until Arya said anything about it, he wouldn't bring it up. Still, the possibility that it could be true upset him. If she really had been crying, then there really could be only one possible reason why.

Jaqen understood, being the empathic type of guy that he was, that Arya was concerned about Gendry. He understood the guilt she was feeling because she had hurt a friend, and he understood her anguish over the revelation of Gendry's biological father and what that meant for her friend. Hell, everyone had been shocked by that news, and he understood that Arya would not be able to leave Gendry alone. Jaqen could sense that Arya was keeping secrets on Gendry's behalf, and though she had told him a few basic facts about Gendry, he hadn't pried into the issue that was truly eating at her, because he could see that she was reluctant to speak about it. There was also the fact that he didn't want to talk about Gendry Waters, so he'd held his tongue, and silently endured the jealousy that came over him whenever Arya's eyes would take on that blank, faraway look.

He arrived at Harrenhal Mall on time, parked his car, then made his way to their agreed meeting place in front of a new sushi restaurant that had recently opened up. To his surprise Arya was already there waiting for him, and looking entirely more feminine that he'd ever seen her before.

"Lovely girl..." he greeted her, reaching for her hand and raising it to his lips so he could kiss her knuckles.

She was wearing a pink sweater in a soft fabric that molded to her petite frame, paired with a white denim miniskirt. Her legs were covered by black opaque tights, and leather booties emphasized her slim ankles. There was a thin choker made of black leather wrapped around her neck, and she'd worn her hair in a messy knot on the top of her head.

"Hi –" she managed to say to him, just before he dropped a kiss on her lips.

He increased the pressure of his kiss for a moment, before he finally released her and flashed her a grin. "A girl looks fantastic! I hope you have not been waiting long."

"I haven't, I only just got here myself," she assured him, slightly breathless.

"Are you hungry? Would you like to have lunch now?"

"Sure," she looked up at the plaque above the restaurant, which read Tetsuya's. "I've wanted to try this place since they opened."

With a hand on her back, Jaqen led her inside, where they were promptly greeted with a chorus of 'irrashaimase' before being shown to a table by a waitress.

"Do you like sashimi?" Arya asked him as they began to peruse through the menu. "I know not everyone's into raw fish."

"I do." Jaqen nodded. "I am quite adventurous with food...among other things."

Arya gave him a look of mocking disbelief. "You say some cheesy things, Jaqen."

"Cheesy, you say?" He leaned across the table and through hooded eyes, he said in all seriousness; "Then perhaps it is a good thing you are not intolerant to lactose."

"Oh god..." Arya wrinkled her nose before promptly bursting into laughter. "That's terrible!"
Jaqen managed to keep a straight face for all of ten seconds before he too was reduced to laughter, part in embarrassment, but mostly because he was happy to see her laughing.

"That was lame," she said when her laughter had died down, "I'm gonna go ahead and ask, but what else are you adventurous with?"

Jaqen lifted his eyes, and all it took was for him to raise one eyebrow and the corner of his mouth in a suggestive manner to set Arya laughing again.

"Get your mind out of the canals, Arya," he tutted, "I am not as debauched as you are imagining. The truth is I actually just enjoy rock climbing, and jet skiing when I get the chance to do those things."

"Okay, okay I get it." Arya calmed down at last. "Just don't make that face again or I'll start laughing again. Oh, and it's gutter, not canals."

Jaqen frowned. "Really? I think 'get your mind out of the canals' has a better ring to it."

"What? A gutter isn't wide enough to contain all of your dirty thoughts?" Arya returned.

He raised a brow at her. "Would a girl like to know about my…dirty thoughts?"

Arya dropped his gaze, unable to look into his eyes any longer. "Unbelievable…"

Jaqen laughed, and thought the pink in her cheeks looked lovely on her.

Between them they shared a bowl of edamame, delicate plates of selected sashimi, nigiri and uramaki. Jaqen was pleased to observe that Arya was in a much better mood that she had been over the last couple of weeks. She was joking with him and talking animatedly without a trace of the shadow that had been following her around. Something had happened, he was sure of it, but he wasn't sure that prying into it was the right thing to do. He decided that he would wait, and perhaps Arya would volunteer the answer herself if he was patient.

After lunch, they bought fruity iced-teas with chewy balls of tapioca pearl from a popular tea shop to wash out the lingering aftertaste of soy sauce and pickled ginger, before they wandered around the mall viewing the Christmas displays. However, with Christmas being only two weeks away, the mall was crowded with shoppers making it quite difficult to window shop in a leisurely manner.

"Perhaps we could go back to my house for the rest of the afternoon? We can purchase dessert to take with us?" he suggested after once again getting smacked on the shoulder by shoppers rushing by.

"Awesome idea," Arya agreed, dodging a lady in a mobility scooter.

Jaqen reached for her hand before leading her towards a popular French Patisserie. They selected macarons and some little fancy cakes, which were wrapped and placed in a box for them to take home. During the drive to his house, Arya questioned him about rock climbing and jet skiing and he told her how he first got into rock climbing in middle school when a school friend had invited him to an outing with his family. It turned out that his friend's father and uncles were adrenaline junkies, and eventually Jaqen was later introduced to jet skiing.

"I do not get to do either of those activities very much these days," Jaqen explained, "I had a bad fall once and injured my wrist. Uncle Otto was horrified because there was a chance the movement in my hand would be compromised, and my Umma was in tears because she thought she would never listen to me play the piano again. Luckily my wrist healed, but in deference to my uncle and aunt, I
have diverted my adventurous spirit…elsewhere."

He gave Arya a sideways glance, with the same lift of his eyebrow and mouth that he had given her earlier.

Arya thumped him on the arm playfully. "You're so baaad!"

Jaqen laughed, catching her hand before she could thump him again.

When they reached his house, Jaqen explained that his uncle was already at the club preparing for that evening's opening, while his Umma was with her ladies social club and wouldn't be home for some hours yet, meaning they had the whole house to themselves. He helped her put away the macarons and cakes for later, before giving her a tour of the house that she didn't get to do the first time she had visited.

"You have a music room!" Arya exclaimed upon seeing the room that was filled with all kinds of musical instruments. "This is amazing."

"Well, my uncle did teach music privately for a number of years when we first came here, and one of the first things he did when he and Umma bought this place was to build a space that he could dedicate to teaching…the result is this room. It is fully soundproof as well."

The music room was housed in a separate wing that had been added to the main house, accessible both internally, and externally by a separate door for guests and students. There were glass cases lining the walls, with various music instruments on display including a flute, clarinet, saxophone and a trumpet. There were also stands holding guitars, both acoustic and electric, as well as a selection of Uncle Otto's collection of traditional drums from around the world. In another corner of the room was a baby grand piano, while an ancient upright piano was tucked against the wall and covered with a protective cloth.

"Can you play any of these drums?" Arya asked him, appearing fascinated by his uncle's collection.

Jaqen picked up what looked like a large tambourine without the jingly parts, as well as a two-headed wooden stick. He played a short series of rhythms against the taught skin of the drum, demonstrating the sound of the instrument and the flick-of-the-wrist technique he employed to wield the stick. Arya clapped her hands when he finished.

"This is a bodhrán from Ireland, and it is most commonly played with this two-headed cipin like you have just seen me do."

"That was awesome," Arya said, "do you know how to play all of them?"

Jaqen shrugged. "I can play rhythms well enough, but I will not dare to insult the professional players who have taken years to master their art by saying that I can play all of them well."

He then proceeded to name a few of the other kinds of drums on display, describing them briefly and where they had originated, including a tabla from India, a djembe from West Africa, as well as the Latin American congas and bongos that Arya was able to readily recognize.

"Do you still teach students, Jaqen?" Arya asked him. "You sound like you'd be a great teacher. Syrio at the guitar shop once said something about you teaching guitar lessons…in fact, I remember you once offered to teach me."

"I previously taught elementary school kids for extra money, and also for the experience," Jaqen admitted, "however, that was before the Faceless Men became my main focus. So, no I longer teach.
Why? Would you like a private lesson with me now?"

"Seriously?" Arya's eyes lit up.

He'd only been half-serious, but seeing her excitement, he just couldn't turn her down. "I cannot
refuse if my girl wishes to have a lesson. Come, I have my acoustic in my bedroom."

Taking her by the hand, he led her back through the main house and upstairs toward his bedroom at
the rear of the house. Grateful that he had thought to tidy up his room that morning in case Arya
agreed to return with him, he now ushered her to sit on a chair while he sat in front of her and
reached for his guitar.

"Firstly, you must show me what you know." Jaqen handed her the instrument, and immediately he
saw her nervousness, so he took her left hand and steadied her fingers against the frets. "Do not be
nervous, lovely girl. You are with me."

"That is exactly why I'm nervous." Arya laughed. "You're Jaqen H'ghar!"

"I am also your boyfriend," he stated calmly, "when you are with me, I am just me…not the
performer you see on stage."

Arya's grey eyes became steady as she held his gaze, and her posture relaxed. "Okay, I'm calm
now."

"Good." Jaqen smiled at her reassuringly. "Now, let me hear you play."

For the next forty-five minutes Jaqen went through the basics with her, correcting her grip and
showing her some new chords. He was attentive, and amused by how serious she had suddenly
become. She was a fast learner, and by the end of the forty-five minutes she had mastered the song
he had taught her.

"Your basic technique is sound, though you do need to keep practicing. You said that it was your
brother who previously taught you, correct?" he asked when she handed him back his guitar.

"Yeah, Jon taught me. He and Gen…he went to the trouble of buying me a Hummingbird for my
birthday, but I haven't played it as much as I'd like."

Jaqen noticed her slip, and he was pretty certain whose name she'd been about to say, but he let it go.
Instead, he took her hands in his and pulled her onto the bed beside him.

"Let us take a break, hmm? Your fingertips are now red." Jaqen gently massaged the said fingertips,
before moving to her wrists which were unused to the strength required to hold a guitar for extended
periods of time.

"That's a great idea," she replied, "we have those cakes downstairs. Want to eat them now?"

Jaqen reluctantly let go of her hands and stood up. "I will prepare them. Stay here and relax, I will be
right back."

He returned shortly, bearing a tray laden with cups of tea and the sweets they had bought. Arya
cleared a spot on the floor for him to place the tray, and together they shared the cakes between them,
seated on the carpeted floor. Afterward, when he had pushed the tray to the side, he indicated for
Arya to move closer to him by holding out his hand.

"You are sitting much too far away," he said quietly.
Arya took his hand, and with a sudden tug of his arm, she was suddenly sprawled across his lap, gazing up at him with wide eyes.

"You could have warned me, Jaqen," she said.

"I could have," he agreed, "but I like my way better."

He lowered his head then, and kissed her. Slowly at first, beginning with gentle presses of his lips against hers, and when he felt her fingers reaching up to his chest, he increased the pressure of his kiss until she had to part her lips. She tasted like caramel, and of jasmine tea, and she was warm and eager for him to deepen the kiss. Jaqen obliged by pulling her closer, wrapping an arm around her waist, while the other supported her head.

Some moments later and with barely a break in their kiss, he maneuvered his body so that he could pick her up, and as he lay her down on his bed he gently settled himself beside her. He was careful about each of his movements, because the last thing he wanted to do was spook her, but he was also painfully aware of his own wants, and he fought hard to keep his cool. They had made out before, but he'd kept his hands strictly above her clothes.

"May I touch you?" he whispered into her ear as he pressed kisses on her cheek, then along her collarbone.

"Yes," she replied, her voice husky. "May I?"

"You may." Jaqen chuckled lightly, and returned to kissing her mouth.

He touched her first on her right knee, before he ran his palm along the length of her thigh, feeling her tremble beneath the black tights covering her skin, letting his palm come to a rest on her hip. With the tips of his fingers, he eased her sweater, and then her undershirt from the waistband of her skirt before slowly sliding his palm over her abdomen. Her skin was hot to touch, smooth and quivering under his fingertips. Little by little, he traced the skin over her stomach, and over her ribcage until his fingers brushed the underside of her bra. When his hand finally closed over her breast and he gave her a gentle squeeze, Arya let out a little gasp, and the sound of it encouraged him to continue.

He raised his head so that he could look at her face, while his hand under her shirt continued his exploration of her body.

"Jaqen, don't watch me," she said, her cheeks becoming bright pink from sudden shyness.

"Why not?" he countered, "you are extremely lovely, like this."

"It's embarrassing," she replied.

His thumb brushed against the fabric of her bra, right above her nipple. Arya inhaled sharply and turned her face. Jaqen took that opportunity to lay claim to the expanse of her exposed neck, which he began to nuzzle. Arya began to push at his chest, giggling, but soon she stopped pushing as the tickling sensation gave way to something much more intense, and infinitely more pleasurable.

Jaqen then nudged the neckline of her sweater down so that the top of her bra was exposed, and with painstaking self-control, he placed a single gentle kiss on the curve of her breast, watching her face all the while, before pulling the neckline back into place.

Arya groaned. "You're teasing me on purpose, aren't you?"
He was, but doing much more meant he risked losing his control. Jaqen was ready for more, but he was certain that she was not.

"In time, lovely girl," was all he replied, before he started kissing her again.

Jaqen then lifted himself over her, parting her knees and coming to lie between her thighs. Arya seemed emboldened all of a sudden, perhaps in direct response to his teasing, because she now took to exploring him. Jaqen felt her tugging his shirt from his waistband, slipping her hands beneath the cotton. He was both pleased and surprised by the confidence in her hands as she touched his bare skin for the first time. Her hands played over the muscles on his shoulders, and then his chest. Her thighs tightened involuntarily around his hips after he nibbled on a sensitive spot on her neck, and the action pulled him even closer to her, so close that she was left in no doubt as to how turned on he was.

"Jaqen?"

"Yes," he replied in answer to the question he knew was running through her head, breathing raggedly. "But I will not do anything you do not want me to."

He was about to begin his onslaught on her lips again, when the sudden peal of his phone ringing cut across the silence of his room. He swore, letting the phone ring a few more times, but excused himself apologetically when it appeared the caller was insistent. It was his uncle, sounding rather panicked, asking him to come to the club as soon as he can.

"The man is from an important recording label, Jaqen. He would like to meet with you this evening. You must come right away," Uncle Otto implored.

Sighing, Jaqen turned back to the girl on his bed and found Arya sitting upright, fixing her clothes into order.

"All right, Uncle. I will be there soon."

Jaqen hung up and gave Arya a smile, dropping his head tiredly. A phone call from one's middle-aged uncle was just as good as a cold shower, he thought, and the adrenaline that had been pumping through his veins mere moments ago now dissipated, leaving him feeling deflated. The discomfort in his pants had begun to ease, and he shifted his stance self-consciously, trying not to think about how he'd been pressed against Arya in the most intimate way just moments before.

"I am sorry, Arya," he said, "I must go to the club. That was my uncle, and he says we have a VIP music producer coming shortly who would like to meet with me."

Arya nodded, her fingers fidgeting with her hair. "You have to go, I understand."

"I'll call a ride for you."

"Thanks." She stood up. "May I use the bathroom?"

Jaqen pointed her towards the door on the other side of the room, and he called an Uber while he waited for her downstairs in the living room. When she came back down, both of them were neatly dressed once again, and Arya's topknot had been fixed. He held his arms out to her, and she came to him eagerly. Jaqen kissed the top of her head.

"I am sorry, Arya. I wanted to spend more time with you. I promise I will make it up to you."

"It's okay, you don't have to apologize. I know how busy you are."
"Then, I am extremely lucky that you are so forgiving."

"I'm not really that forgiving, you know?" she corrected him, twisting in his arms to look up at him. "It's just that I like you."

He chuckled, not forgetting for one moment that the same girl standing sweetly in his arms was the same girl who picked a fight with a quarterback who was known to be a bully, struck up a friendship with a ferociously scarred linebacker with a mean reputation, and not forgetting the fact that she managed to have two guys vying for her affections at the same time.

"It is good to see you back to your normal self," he said, "I have missed this side of you."

"I had a good week, this week." She shrugged carelessly.

"Did something happen?"

"Nothing in particular." She shook her head dismissively.

Jaqen frowned, noting how Arya's eyes had suddenly taken on that faraway gaze he'd become familiar with of late. "You have heard from Gendry?"

Her gaze shifted, but she did not avoid the question. "Yeah. I spoke with him the other afternoon, and we sort of agreed that we both could have handled things differently. He doesn't hate me, and…I think we're still friends."

"That's good," Jaqen said, managing to smile. "That's great."

Arya smiled back, looking relieved at his reaction, but her eyes kept the same faraway look that they attained only when she was thinking of Gendry Waters.

When her ride arrived, Jaqen saw her safely with the driver and made her promise to text him when she was home. He thought about her answer to his question as he watched the car drive away, wondering what the implications might be not only for her friendship with Gendry, but also for their own relationship. He valued her honesty and he was glad that she had answered him truthfully, but he realized that having his eyes opened to the truth meant that his perception of his environment, and his reality, was now radically changed.

In his case, the truth was that the return of Arya's cheerful mood was due to Gendry Waters. Gendry had the power to influence Arya's emotions, and deeply at that. The knowledge that another guy held so much sway over his girlfriend had him worried, and Jaqen was determined to do all he could to sever Gendry's hold on Arya.

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**Sansa**

There was no denying that the fuzzy picture on Gossip Spyder's blog was of her and Sandor. Her hair was just so unmistakably red and he was just so unmistakably big that there was no question of the couple in the photo, kissing so unmistakably, being anybody but them. Her friends had been texting her almost all morning freaking out over the photo.

"Are you going to be okay about this?" Jeyne had asked, and Sansa had assured her that she would be fine.

"Sansa! OMG! Is it true?" Randa texted, which she followed up with; "You need to give me details ASAP, got it?"
What Sansa was most surprised by was the fact that it was Margaery who was first to message her, almost as soon as the blog had updated, in fact.

"You're a fast worker, Miss Stark! Congrats on getting your man. Don't worry, nobody will say one word to you."

Sansa understood who Margaery had been referring to, but frankly, she didn't care one bit what her ex-boyfriend's opinion might be. She was also confident that Sandor could handle Joffrey just fine.

She had spent that Saturday morning helping her mother with her Christmas shopping in the city, visiting one boutique after another. They had a large family to shop for when her mother's extended family were counted. Sansa had done a mental tally, trying to recall what was in the shopping bags that had dangled from her mother's arm. They had already bought presents for Grandpa Hoster, Great Uncle Brynden, Uncle Edmure, her widowed Aunt Lysa and little cousin Robert.

"What about Uncle Benjen?" Sansa had asked.

"Your father is sending him six cases of that Arbor Gold wine that he took a liking to when he came to stay over Thanksgiving."

"Six cases?"

"Your uncle is stationed in remote locations for most of the year, and I imagine good wine is not readily available where he is."

"He's not coming to spend Christmas with us?"

"Unfortunately, not this year," her mother had replied, "though that might be for the best, actually. Your father has agreed that we join the Tyrell's for dinner on Christmas Eve, not to mention the other commitments your father has to fulfill at this time of the year. He simply just won't be able to entertain Benjen."

"We're spending Christmas Eve with the Tyrell's?" Sansa had repeated, surprised.

"Yes. Did I not mention it before? Anyway, have you and Arya completed your shopping?"

"We have." Sansa had nodded.

"Oh, when? I don't believe I've seen you coming home with shopping bags."

"Online, mother," Sansa had replied, "we do most of our shopping for the boys online, especially because they all like different things. Did you know that those books from Bran's favorite author are only available from one bookstore in the entire country? Or that those sweatshirts that Robb collects can only be purchased online, and whenever a new design is released they are only available for sale for seventy-two hours? It's just easier that way."

"I get it, I get it." Her mother had rolled her eyes. "So, what did you buy for your sister?"

"Ah, I actually went to a boutique for her present. I got her this structured leather jacket from Balmain."

"More leather." Her mother had sighed. "She's been wearing a lot of studded leather lately."

"Trust me, mom. Even you would like the one I chose for her. It's sleek, but tough without the studs you're concerned about. I bought a similar one for myself, too."
"You did? Then, I suppose it should be fine." her mother had seemed placated with that, knowing Sansa's taste in fashion was entirely feminine. "I just hope that your older brothers don't leave their shopping to the last minute."

Sansa had laughed and given her mother a look. "Really, mom?"

Her mother had then chuckled. "Of course, what am I thinking?"

"We'll probably all get similar things in different colors, like last year when they got us those snuggle blankets with sleeves? As if we'd ever use them!"

Her mother glanced away tellingly.

"You've used it haven't you, mom?"

"Well…they are wonderfully snuggly." Her mother had grinned.

"Oh, mom…"

Their last stop for the morning had been Burberry, where they had collected the wool and cashmere capes her mother had ordered for the wives of Eddard Stark's business partners. Each of the coveted capes came personalized with the wife's initials. Sansa briefly spotted a cape with the initials C.L when it was brought out for her mother's inspection.

"C.L…." Sansa had frowned, "Mom, shouldn't Cersei's be C.B?"

"No, sweetheart. Cersei kept her maiden name when she married Robert…I remember she was quite adamant about that at the time."

"So, she's still Cersei Lannister?"

"Correct."

Sansa had shrugged, it wasn't uncommon for women to keep their maiden name after marriage after all. Soon afterwards when her mother had completed her shopping and their driver had come to assist with the bags and parcels, Sansa had excused herself to go her separate way.

"I'm meeting a friend for lunch, so I'll go on ahead."

"All right." Her mother had smiled as she'd settled herself inside the car. "Have fun, dear. Will you be late tonight?"

"I'm not certain yet. Gendry Waters and his band are having a concert tonight so we might go."

"Will your sister be going with you?"

"She hasn't said, though I'm sure she has her own plans," Sansa had replied.

"There are boyfriends involved," her mother had stated with a knowing expression on her features. "Both you and your sister. Don't think I don't know."

"Mom…"

"I'm not saying anything," her mother sighed. "Just take care of yourselves, okay?"

Sansa had nodded, and waved her mother off as their driver pulled away from the curb. Then, she
had flagged down the nearest taxi and called Sandor to let him know that she was on her way to his house.

Now she stood at his front door waiting for him to let her in.

"Hi," she greeted him when he opened the door.

"Hey." Sandor stooped down to let her kiss his good cheek, before he stepped aside to let her inside, quickly closing the door behind her. "It's getting real cold now."

"What are you talking about?" Sansa asked. "It doesn't snow this far South. You wanna know about cold? You should head North, I remember one winter where we had over eight feet of snowfall."

Sandor made a noise of disgust. "You Northerners are insane."

"Hey, we're bred tough up there," Sansa corrected him.

"So I've noticed," Sandor grunted. "Have you had lunch? We can go somewhere or order takeout, it's up to you."

"Order something," Sansa replied automatically, wanting to spend alone time with him. "Pizza?"

"Sounds great." Sandor took his phone out and began to place their order, leading Sansa into the living room where he had left the television on.

Sansa took a seat on the sofa and waited for him to join her, taking notice of his school books sprawled over the coffee table in front of her. It appeared he'd been doing his Chemistry homework while he'd been waiting for her to arrive. It was strange for her to observe his studious side, especially because he just didn't look like he was the type who took schoolwork seriously.

"Pizza will be here in thirty minutes," Sandor took a seat next to her and began to put away his school things. "I've caught up with everything, fucking finally! Chem was doing my head in…I swear, my teacher gave me extra shit just to spite me."

"Yay! You've finished!" Sansa clapped her hands, earning an eye-roll from Sandor. "That means we can go and see the Brotherhood tonight?"

"Hmm."

"Please?"

"Hmm."

"If we're going, then we need to be there early. Like, five p.m. if we want a chance at getting seats, or at least by seven if you're fine with standing in the audience."

"I didn't know you were such a big fan," Sandor commented.

"Well, I am," Sansa stated, "and, I wanna go out and have some fun. Don't you?"

Sandor made some grumbling noise and put up a half-hearted complaint about why her idea of fun was no good, to which Sansa laughed and jokingly teased him about being stuck in the 60's and that Jimi Hendrix was not the only rock star on the planet.

"He might not be the only rock star," Sandor agreed, "but he is the greatest."
She sensed that she would lose this argument if they ever got into it, so she distracted him by sidling up against him and suggesting they watch something on Netflix.

"You sure you only want to watch something?" He raised his good eyebrow at her.

"We can chill later," Sansa replied with a teasing grin, knowing exactly where his mind was heading. Sandor coughed, and shifted in his seat.

Their pizza arrived, and they ate while they watched a new release action flick. Sansa learned that Sandor often liked to heckle the actors on screen, especially if the movie was a remake of some classic he had seen before. It took an exceptional performance from an exceptional actor for him to truly appreciate any film. This side of him reminded her of Jon, and also Robb to some extent. It amused her to see him display what she considered a childish trait, because he was much too serious at all other times.

Sansa quietly accepted the piece of gum he offered her after they had eaten, and when the movie had finished, she helped him to clear away their leftovers. With just a nod of his head and little said between them, she followed him to his bedroom upstairs. The first time she had been to his bedroom she had been surprised by how neat and organized everything was. As everywhere else in the house, the color palette in the room was a grey monotone, and sparsely decorated. The furniture was mismatched, and Sansa had to assume that each piece was bought only to replace the original ones that had been outgrown, or had broken.

Sandor's bedroom, though large, was dominated by a king-size bed which he required to accommodate his extraordinary height. One wall was taken up by a built-in closet, while a large desk was pushed up against another. Sandor's schoolbag was placed neatly at the foot of the desk, while his books were stacked in ordered piles on the table beside his laptop and desktop printer. Beside the desk was a bookcase which was crammed with all of his sporting trophies and ribbons that she had once sought to find. Other than the trophies, there was nothing in the room that gave away Sandor's true personality, Sansa had thought at the time, though she had kept her thoughts to herself.

Without a word, Sandor now sat on top of his bed pushing his back up against the pillows along the headboard. Sansa followed him, climbing onto his lap so that she could straddle his thighs, and without waiting a second longer, she pressed her mouth against his, letting him know what she wanted. He parted his lips, and she slipped her tongue between them to deepen their kiss.

Sandor preferred to make out in his room, she had learned. Even though he was completely alone in the house, Sansa sensed that the only place he seemed to be the most relaxed was in his own room. The muscles in his shoulders would lose all their tension, and his breathing seemed to become deeper. She liked seeing him lower his guard around her, because only then could she glimpse the real Sandor Clegane that she had fallen for. Her Sandor was affectionate, sensitive and intensely passionate, with a vulnerability that contrasted against his fierce and intimidating persona, and took the edge off his general cynicism.

Her hands now stole up around his neck, and she gently began to rub her palms across his broad shoulders, wanting to physically feel his body loosen up as the final wall around him fell away. She kissed him some more, coaxing him to let go of the reserve he continued to hold when he was with her. She began to place kisses along his jaw, and down one side of his neck searching for that one spot she knew he was particularly sensitive. However, despite his rasping breath, the muscles under her palms remained tense and rigid.

She paused and pulled away far enough so she could look at his face. "What's the matter?"
"Nothing," he replied, and she knew that he was lying.

Sandor had been behaving oddly all week, and she'd hoped that whatever had been bugging him was something inconsequential and that he'd get over it soon, but it appeared she'd been hoping in vain. Her insecurities came rushing over her in an instant, and she slid from his lap to sit a foot away from him on the bed.

"Have I done something?" she asked.

Sandor frowned. "Why would you think you've done something?"

Sansa flinched. She'd had a bad experience with an ex who used to blame her for everything, and now she'd automatically assumed that she'd done something wrong.

"You've just been kind of distant these past few days, and I was wondering if I'd done something to upset you."

"You haven't," Sandor rasped.

"Then what is it?" Sansa pressed, looking up at him pleadingly. "If it's me, you have to tell me so I can fix it."

---

**Sandor**

He didn't like this situation one bit. Sansa was looking up at him with an expression he never wanted to see on her pretty face ever again. She was blaming herself for whatever imagined wrongdoing had caused his current mood.

"It's nothing you've done," he hastened to assure her, "believe me."

Sansa did not look convinced, and she now began to fidget, smoothing her skirt over her knees and tugging on her sweater.

"I know you have something on your mind," Sansa said softly, "I know it's been bothering you since Gossip Spyder's update last Monday…"

Sandor's eyes narrowed. He knew that Sansa had noticed.

"…Arya was mentioned."

"What?" Sandor's nerves began to prick at the mention of Arya's name.

"Does it have something to do with Arya?" Sansa asked him.

He said nothing. He didn't know how to respond. It was precisely about Arya, and now that the moment he'd been dreading had arrived, he couldn't find the words to even begin answering her.

"I'm right, aren't I?" Sansa said calmly.

He nodded. The corners of her mouth quivered, and she took a deep breath in, exhaling with an audible sigh.

"She was crying. Apparently, someone saw her crying at school. Is that true? Do you know anything about that?"
"I don't know –"

"Do you still care for her? I mean, you probably still do, because you're you and I know that you would, but you said that it was over."

"We were never –"

"You guys broke up so suddenly, and then she hooked up with Jaqen so soon afterwards, and even though you said you were better as friends I'm sure it had to hurt to see her with someone new that soon!"

"Sansa –" he tried to speak. She was getting it all wrong.

"I don't know how to make it better," Sansa continued to ramble, "but, I want to make it better because I really like you, and I want us to make it work –"

"Sansa, shut up!" Sandor growled and took her face between his hands.

Sansa reacted to his tone, and he automatically loosened his grip. He had her attention now.

"What is it?" she asked him, her blue eyes teary.

"Arya and I were never together," he spat out, "it was a lie. All of it was pretend."

She frowned, his words clearly confusing her. "What did you say?"

He cleared his throat. "Arya and I were never a couple. None of it was true."

Sansa's eyes now widened. "I don't understand…why would you say that?"

"Because, it's the truth."

"But…why?"

Sandor sighed and released her face, before he ran a hand through his hair. This was it. He would lay it all out, and whatever happened was in the hands of the gods.

"It's a long story," he said, and he began to tell it to her.

He spoke for some minutes, his voice hollow but steady, telling Sansa about the moment Arya had found out about his crush on her, and about Arya's concerns for her safety because of Joffrey's temper, and how Gossip Spyder seemed to know the identity of the mystery guy at the pizza parlor that she had been spotted with.

"But, there were photos of the two of you kissing…were they fake?"

Wincing, Sandor admitted that the kiss was real – "It only happened the one time, I swear!" – before explaining that it was after those photos had been made public that he and Arya had hatched the idea of pretending to be boyfriend and girlfriend.

"I can't believe I'm hearing this…I just can't…I need to talk to Arya." Sansa stood up and began to pace the floor.

Sandor then picked up his phone and dialed Arya's number.

"Hello?" Arya answered his call with a wary note in her voice.
"Where are you?"

"In an Uber on my way home. Why?"

"I need you to come to my house right now."

"Again, why?"

"Your sister is here, and she wants to talk to you."

There must have been an ominous tone in his voice, because Arya had quickly asked for his address and told him she'd be there in ten minutes.

It was one of the worst ten minutes of his life, it turned out to be, as Sansa had refused to say anything to him while they were waiting for her sister to arrive. He'd been forced to sit there, enduring her icy stares, unsure how to even begin fixing the situation. It was almost a relief when they heard the doorbell downstairs and Sandor had jumped up to answer it.

"What happened?" Arya asked as soon as he'd let her in.

"I told her the truth," Sandor replied, and saw the color drain from Arya's face.

Sansa had followed him into the hallway, and now she glared at the both of them, her gaze blazing with a silent fury.

"We need to talk, Arya," Sansa said, "privately."

Sandor led them into the living room before excusing himself, ignoring Arya's pleading look as he passed her on the way to the kitchen. For the next fifteen minutes, he listened to the low murmurs coming from the living room, punctuated with the odd bursts of indignation and pleas from one or both of the sisters.

"Believe me, Sansa!" he heard Arya say, "if there'd been any other way I would have done it!"

"How did you think I would feel?" he heard Sansa demand.

"How was I supposed to know you'd end up dating him?" Arya returned. "You were never supposed to find out."

"You were going to keep this a secret from me forever?"

Sandor dropped his head onto the countertop, unable to help thinking that Arya was digging both of their graves.

"Why aren't you getting mad at him? He's as guilty as I am."

"Don't think for one moment that I'm not angry with him, because I am. I really am."

Sandor banged his head on the countertop again.

The murmuring continued, and Sandor remained in the kitchen, though he was tempted to check on the sisters at one point when he heard someone crying.

"I'm so sorry, Sansa!" wailed Arya, "I had no idea!"

"You couldn't have known," Sansa sniffled, "you were trying to protect me from Joffrey."
"You were so blinded by him, and I was so mad that you couldn't see what he was really like."

"I was an idiot!" Sansa cried. "But what I don't understand is why you and Sandor kept pretending to be together even after I broke up with Joffrey."

"Uh…you'll have to ask Sandor about that."

"Why can't you tell me?"

"Because he had his reasons and I think he should be the one to tell you."

"Hmmm…"

"But, what I can tell you is that he really likes you, Sansa. I mean, he really, really likes you. I know it seems stupid now, but he did it to protect you, too. Even when he thought he didn't have a chance with you, he still did it anyway, expecting nothing back."

Sandor almost wanted to hug the little bitch. Almost. There was a giggle from Sansa, which Sandor saw as a good sign. He thought that perhaps their talk was coming to an end, but he was mistaken when even more tears came to follow, because it appeared Arya was now telling Sansa how their lie had affected her own relationships.

"Oh, my God! Gendry was furious when he saw those photos, and my friends stopped speaking with me, and Jaqen cancelled our date…"

Sandor had been ready to doze off when suddenly Arya appeared in the kitchen, her face puffy from crying. He sat up hurriedly.

"What?"

"Your turn." Arya pointed towards the living room. "She wants to speak with you, now."

Sandor took a deep breath and headed to face his girlfriend. He found her seated on the sofa, her eyes red and clutching a Kleenex in her hand. He walked towards her, but instead of sitting next to her, he bent his knee and knelt on the floor before her so that they faced each other eye-to-eye.

"I apologize," he began gruffly, "whatever our intentions were, we shouldn't have lied to you."

"Stop apologizing," she said with a sigh, "believe it or not, I can understand why you both thought you had to do it. I'm still kind of mad…but, I'm not as angry as I was before."

"Okay," Sandor nodded, unsure what to say.

"So, Arya says I need to ask you why…"

"It's a stupid reason, Sansa." Sandor cut her off, knowing what she was going to ask him. "I thought I never had a chance with you. I thought you wouldn't be able to get past my looks, and I felt that I wasn't good enough for you, but I wanted you to see that even if you didn't want me, someone else did."

"Sandor…" Sansa's eyes began to water at his words.

"I know it sounds ridiculous now," Sandor continued, "I mean, there was no way you would have seen it that way."

"I did!" Sansa cried. "I saw, Sandor. Every day that I saw you with my sister, every time that I saw
you talking and laughing and holding hands…I was wishing that you were with me."

Her tears were falling freely again, and she was dabbing at her eyes trying to stem the flow somehow. She was sniffling and breathing raggedly. Sandor wanted to take her into his arms, but he stayed still, waiting for her to give him a sign that things would be okay between them.

In the end, when her tears had subsided, she made the first move and reached her hand out towards him. His own hand had shot out to meet hers so fast that he saw an afterimage. She gave him a watery smile. They still had things to talk about, he understood that, but at least now there were no secrets between them.

"Thanks," she said, "thank you for telling me."

Silently, Sandor leaned in to accept her kiss, tasting the salt on her lips left by her tears. He felt a tremendous sense of relief at that moment. Sansa still wanted him. The shadow had gone.

They were interrupted by a cough at the door, and both of them turned to see Arya making a face at them, having witnessed them kissing.

"Are we good here?" she asked as she entered the room.

Sansa nodded. "Yeah, I think we are."

"Good." Arya smiled at them. "What do we do now?"

"Do?" Sandor wondered. "What's there to be done?"

Sansa cleared her throat. "We should go and do something fun."

"What do you have in mind?" he asked.

"We should all go to Braavos and watch the Brotherhood's show tonight."

"We should?" Arya raised her eyebrows.

"We are," Sandor stated, reading Sansa's mood. "We're going to Braavos."

"But I've just come back from Braavos…" Arya began to protest, but Sandor shot her a sharp glance which shut her up. "Don't argue, he glared at her. "Okay, then I guess we're going!"

Sansa grinned at them both. "Excellent! Now, let me go and freshen up. You too Arya, your mascara's all smudged."

She was having one hell of a day, she thought. It had been nothing but shocks and surprises so far, and the day wasn't over yet. Her wristwatch read 5:30 PM, and she was currently riding in the rear passenger seat of Sandor's car, half-listening to the conversation he was having with her sister who occupied the seat beside him. She'd had an eventful afternoon. She'd had a good day to be sure, but she'd definitely had some eye-opening moments.

She'd gone further than ever with Jaqen, letting him slide his hands inside her shirt and touching her body like no one else had ever done before. She'd felt Jaqen's weight on top of her, and had her thighs spread apart so he could lie between them. She'd felt his erection against her…Oh, my god! Arya screamed inside her head. Thinking about it was making her cheeks flush, and she was
thankful for the darkness inside the car that hid her embarrassment.

Belatedly, she wondered how far they would have gone if his phone had not started ringing, but in truth, she had no idea how prepared she was to go all the way. She was incredibly attracted to Jaqen, and she knew that he would never push her, but she was so inexperienced that almost anything he did to her was an unbelievable turn-on. Ever since the moment Jaqen had first taken her in his arms and she'd sensed how much more experienced he seemed to be, Arya had thought about sex with increasing frequency, and the very real possibility that she might soon lose her virginity had made her all kinds of giddy and nervous. However, Jaqen's phone had rung, and ultimately she was glad she had more time to mentally prepare herself for that moment.

There had been one potentially sticky minute when Jaqen had asked her about Gendry, but she'd been surprised when Jaqen had been quite calm about her answer. She was wary about mentioning Gendry's name around Jaqen, and she'd tried to avoid doing so whenever possible. Still, she didn't want to lie to him, and hearing him respond quite positively about her recent conversation with her friend had been encouraging. Perhaps it was possible to have a boyfriend, and maintain her friendship with Gendry after all, she thought.

Receiving Sandor's sudden call, and then having an unexpected heart-to-heart with Sansa had been the next shock of the day. They had both shed tears, they had hugged, and shed some more tears, but by the end Arya had been surprised by how free she had felt after she had confessed everything. No longer would she have to watch her tongue every time she spoke around her sister, hooray!

Her sister had also made her own confessions. Sansa had told her that her feelings for Sandor had surfaced much earlier than she had realized, and that she had placed too much importance on how people saw her, letting rumors and her need to please people get in the way of her making the right choices.

Arya learned that Sansa had wanted to break up with Joffrey even before she and Sandor had 'gotten together', and that Sansa bitterly regretted not being able to find the strength to rise above the perceptions and expectations people had placed on her at the time.

"I knew I had a crush on Sandor," Sansa had said, "but those rumors about me cheating on Joffrey got to me, and even though I never did, I knew that breaking up with him at that point would make it seem like I really was guilty of cheating. I was so stupid! I stayed because the opinions of people I didn't even know got to me. I wish I'd been stronger, because if I had broken up with Joffrey back then…who knows? Maybe Sandor and I would have got together sooner, and you and Sandor would never have needed to concoct that ridiculous scheme…if only, if only, huh?"

Arya had agreed with her, but she'd seen how badly Sansa was beating herself up over it, and she didn't want to add to her sister's pain by adding her own thoughts on the matter. Sansa had changed. She wasn't the simpering fool she'd been when they first moved to King's Landing, and knowing that her sister had now developed a backbone of steel was enough for her.

"The past can't be changed, Sansa," Arya had told her, "you have Sandor now, so just look ahead and stop thinking about the bad things that have happened. Go and make new and happy memories."

Sansa had given her a wan smile. "Promise me you'll never pull a stunt like this again, okay? Promise me that if you ever feel the need to help me, you'll never kiss Sandor again."

"Yes! Yes, I promise. I triple promise!" Arya had readily agreed.

Sansa had then coerced them into going to Braavos to see the Brotherhood's show. From the odd verbal to-and-fro'ing they'd had earlier, Arya worked out that Sandor had agreed on going to
Braavos simply because he wanted to keep Sansa in a good mood, given the emotional wringer they'd just put her through. Arya's plans for that night had included washing her hair and catching up on a TV series she'd started watching, but Sandor's glare and the glint in his eyes had warned her that she should just do as Sansa wanted. She had agreed, partially because she feared Sandor would have bound and gagged her and thrown her into his car unwilling, if it came down to it.

Sansa had dragged her to Sandor's guest bathroom where they both washed their faces and redid their makeup with the products Sansa kept in her purse in case of emergencies.

"You carry all that makeup in your bag every day?" Arya had gawked.

"I carry only the necessities," Sansa had shrugged, "but, I bet you're glad I've got them now, huh? Now, seeing as we're going to see a rock band at a club, I think you need more eyeliner."

Arya had let her sister do her makeup however she wanted, and even let her fix her hair as she wanted, releasing the topknot and mussing her dark locks with some gel she'd borrowed from Sandor so that her hair was now fashionably tousled.

"You met up with Jaqen today, right?" Sansa had asked as she'd begun to work on her own makeup.

"Yeah, we had lunch together," Arya had replied.

"How's Gendry dealing with…everything?" Sansa had glanced at her from the corner of her eye.

Arya had returned the look. "Just what do you know, Sansa?"

"I know that Gendry had a crush on you, and that he somehow ended up punching Jaqen in the face."

"How do you know about that?" Arya's mouth had gaped in shock.

"Gendry and I talk now and then." Sansa had shrugged. "I run into him at the performing arts building a lot these days."

"I can't believe he told you that!"

Sansa had smiled. "I don't know the details, only that he punched your boyfriend. I'll admit I'm curious, but you don't have to tell me about it right now. So, how's Gendry?"

"I'm starting to think you might know better than me," Arya had replied, "you seem to talk to him more than I do. I mean, you're going out to support his band and I know you don't really like rock music, so you must be on good terms with him."

"I don't know him that well," Sansa had stated, "Gendry's just a nice guy and he talks to me normally when he sees me. Though I do genuinely like the Brotherhood's music, so I thought it would be fun to go tonight. No other reason."

Arya had sighed. "Yeah, he's a nice guy. He really is. I think he's doing okay."

"Are things okay between the two of you now? He did mention that you guys weren't talking at one point."

"You do know a lot, don't you?" Arya had frowned. "But, anyway…I think things will slowly go back to how they were. It's a long story, but I hurt him, so we're just going day by day."

"That's good, I think," Sansa said as she'd packed away her cosmetic purse. "And how is he
handling the fallout from being revealed as a Baratheon scion?"

On the drive to Braavos, Arya had updated her sister and Sandor on what she'd learned about Gendry from other people, and what Gendry had told her himself. For the moment, she chose not to tell them about Davos Seaworth or Stannis Baratheon's involvement.

"You know the Baratheons best out of all of us," Arya had said to Sandor, "what do you think will happen to Gendry?"

Sandor had made a grunting noise in response. "I've known the Baratheons long enough to know that the whole family is unpredictable, and that Gendry needs to keep his guard up. Joffrey's been quiet so far, but that's not always going to be the case. I guarantee that. Gendry's birthday is, what… three months before Joffrey's? That makes him the older son, and even if he is illegitimate, Joffrey will see him as a threat to his inheritance. He's not going to let that go."

Her sister and Sandor moved on to a new topic – or more accurately, Sansa moved on to a new topic of conversation, bringing up the end of year Performing Arts recital being held just before the Christmas break and the Blue Rose Song Festival which was being held in the first week of the new term. Sandor had obliged her, and Arya had tuned out, choosing instead to play with her phone.

There had been a text message from Jaqen, wondering if she'd gotten home safely, and Arya had sworn when she realized she'd forgotten to message him.

"Sorry I didn't text. Got a call from my sister. Hanging out with her tonight. TTYL."

"Okay, tell me later. As long as you're safe," Jaqen had replied, ending his text with a kiss-face emoji.

When they reached The Port at Braavos, Sandor insisted on stopping for a meal at a Thai restaurant they passed on the waterfront. Both Arya and Sansa had witnessed him being hangry before, and knew it was in the best interest of all to let him eat. Consequently, by the time they had eaten their pad thai, larb gai, and gai pad krapow, it was close to 7 p.m. when they finally arrived outside the Heart of Fire.

"Wow, look at that line!" Sansa observed, part in dismay. "I don't know if we'll get a table at this rate."

The queue went down the block and around the corner as far as Arya could tell, and when they joined the end of the queue she began to wonder if they'd get inside at all. The line moved slowly, and while they waited Arya recognized faces of people she had seen around school. They, in turn, were attracting attention too. She blamed it on Sandor, who was one of the most recognizable identities in King's Landing given his football star status. Once people saw him, it was natural to then wonder in whose company he was in. Soon enough, there were murmurs all along the line.

When they finally reached the head of the queue, the bouncer checked their ID's and issued color coded wristbands limiting their beverage choices strictly to the non-alcoholic variety. The guy collecting their cover-charge kept staring at Arya while they paid, and she stared back at him questioningly.

"You look familiar," the guy said, "what's your name? Are you on the VIP guest list tonight?"

"Oh, I won't be on the list," Arya replied, "I'm no-one."

"You are hardly no-one," a sultry voice suddenly declared, and all three of them turned to see a beautiful woman dressed in a crimson sequined cocktail dress and stiletto heels. "A pleasure to see
"Good evening, Melisandre," Arya greeted the club's proprietress.

"You are not with Jaqen tonight," the woman observed, eyeing her sister and Sandor in turn.

"No, he had to work tonight," Arya replied, "I'm here with my sister Sansa, and her boyfriend Sandor."

"Welcome to the **Heart of Fire.**" Melisandre gave them a charming smile. "I take it you are all friends of the **Brotherhood Without Banners**, correct?"

Arya could see on the woman's face that she knew exactly how she and Gendry were acquainted, but she bit back the retort that had been on the tip of her tongue.

"Yes, we are," Sansa replied for her, "we're friends with Gendry, actually."

"Then I must see to it that you get good seats tonight." Melisandre turned to a waiter hovering nearby and gave him some instructions, before she turned back to them with another gracious smile. "Have a wonderful night, enjoy the show, and please let my staff know if they can help in any way."

Melisandre sashayed away to greet more customers, and the three of them were then led up a short flight of stairs to a bar table at a section that was undeniably reserved for VIP's.

"Nice work, Arya." Sansa grinned at her as she settled into the high stool. "Why didn't you tell us that you knew the manager here?"

"She's the owner, in fact," Arya corrected her, "and, I don't actually know her. Jaqen is the one who knows her. He just introduced us, that's all."

"Connections are connections." Sansa glanced around them, observing the blood-red decor and the layout of the room. "This table is awesome! We can see everything!"

Indeed, they had not only an unimpeded view of the stage, but their elevated position also let them observe the tables on the lower level, as well as the standing room only balconies that lined the perimeter of the room. Arya noted that there were red leather lounges and coffee tables not far from their section, designed to cater to larger parties. All of the lounges were currently occupied, except for one which had a 'reserved' plaque on the table.

"This is a great turnout for the band, huh?" Sansa said. "This place is going to be absolutely packed shortly."

Sansa was proven correct when moments later, the crowd had almost doubled, with all of the tables below as well as all standing spaces now filled to capacity. Sandor had ordered soft drinks for all of them, and while he remained stoically silent he looked happy enough to be there just watching Sansa enjoying herself.

There was a duo on stage at present, a guitarist and singer performing some up-tempo number that the audience was enjoying. Arya tried to relax, but somehow she was finding it hard to unwind. Part of her was excited that she was getting to see Gendry perform again, and she wondered how he would react if he saw her in the audience. Hot Pie had said that he would be there tonight, but she figured that he would be backstage with the rest of them. She felt a twinge of envy mixed with sadness then, because had the circumstances been different she would have been right there with them, supporting and encouraging Gendry at his side…not as a nameless no-one in the crowd.
She thought about sending Hot Pie a text message to let him know that she was there, but she thought against it when she realized that Hot Pie would then feel obligated to meet her, and she didn't want to take him away from the group and Gendry's side.

At long last the clock finally struck nine, and the host made the introductions that everyone had been waiting for.

"I think we've all waited long enough," the emcee began, "ladies and gents, boys and girls, give it up for the Brotherhood Without Banners!"

The crowd burst into loud applause as the lights dimmed, and Arya found herself sitting on the edge of her stool as the spotlight hit the stage. Beric came out first, leading the way for his band, followed closely by Edric, Thoros then Tom...and then there he was. Gendry climbed onto the podium to an ear-splitting peal of girlish screams, to which he responded by shyly raising his hand in acknowledgement. The screaming got louder.

"Gendry looks really hot tonight," Sansa commented.

"Hey," Sandor growled, his eyes narrowing in false affront.

"You know what I mean." With a roll of her eyes Sansa laughed and touched her boyfriend's arm.

"Yeah, okay." Sandor shrugged, agreeing with Sansa. "The guy looks prettier than usual."

Arya said nothing, though she agreed with them. Gendry wore a black, urban-utility style vest that showed off his tanned muscular arms, clearly placing his bull's head tattoo on full display. His long legs were encased in black jeans, with scuffed black biker boots on his feet. His hair had been slicked back in a style Arya had never seen on him, and she had to admit he looked really hot.

"Is it me, or did it just get hotter in here?" Beric said when he picked up the mic, laughing when his question was met with shouts of appreciation from the crowd. "Good evening, Braavos! Thank you all for coming out here to see us, and a big, big thank you to Miss. Melisandre for inviting us here to the Heart of Fire to perform for all of you. We really appreciate your support, and I hope we can entertain you all tonight...let's go!"

Edric counted them in, and with a crash on the high-hat followed by the wail of a chord from Gendry's Les Paul, their first set was underway. They were on fire right from the very first note, and everyone could see that the hype that had preceded them was not just all talk. They more than lived up to the hype, exceeding the expectations people had built since the Battle of the Bands. They had begun with a song they had played at the Battle, which many in the crowd appeared to be familiar with. Each of the guys had their fair share of admirers, though it was clear that Gendry's fangirls outnumbered the others.

"We love you Gendry!" and cries of a similar sentiment could be heard from all over the club.

Below them, Arya spotted a group of girls to the left of the stage standing as close they were allowed to get to the performers, waving and cheering enthusiastically. The most enthusiastic of them was a stunning Asian girl with the most beautiful mane of black hair that Arya had ever seen cascading down her back, wearing skintight jeans, stiletto boots and a tight-fitting midriff top.

Arya saw that the girl's efforts had not gone unnoticed when she saw Gendry flashing the girl a smile. This annoyed her. It's because girls like her only became interested in Gendry after his name got published in the media. They're after notoriety, they're not really interested in him. Throughout the hour-long set, Arya couldn't help but notice how Gendry kept paying special attention to the girls by the stage. She had never seen him behave like this before, and she wondered if all the female
attention was going to his head.

The crowd truly heard Gendry's singing voice for the first time that night, taking everyone by surprise when he stepped in front of the lead microphone. In one of their new songs, instead of only providing backup vocals for Beric like usual, he had sung the lead vocals, with Beric providing harmonies in the chorus.

"Even brave men blind themselves sometimes, when they are afraid to see..." Gendry sang with his eyes lowered, while his fingers strummed the strings on his guitar. "How can I recall what I don't remember? I was reborn in a grove of ashes, with the taste of fire in my mouth and a hole in my chest...But I'll swear before the eyes of gods and men, to protect you...I'll be brave, I'll obey, whatever you choose to lay upon me...I'll be there when you need me!"

Ever the dramatist, Beric's lyrics were bordering on theatrical, but somehow the huskiness of Gendry's voice made it work – to brilliant effect. The audience loved it.

"Did you know he could do that?" Sandor asked her, looking quietly awed.

Arya nodded. "Yes. I was there when he auditioned."

"He's fantastic!" Sansa gushed. "Beric was right to make him sing that song."

Arya had grown silent towards the end of the hour, unaware that Sansa and Sandor were giving her curious glances when she failed to applaud the last few songs. Only when the Brotherhood had played their last encore did she finally put her hands together.

"Thank you all!" Beric shouted into the mic. "You've been great, we really appreciate it...please show some live to my boy Edric on the drums...Tom-Tom on the keys...my man Thoros on the bass...and our resident heartthrob Gendry on the guitar!"

The club's host jumped back onto the stage, taking the mic from Beric. "Ladies and gents, once again please give it up for Beric Dondarrion and the Brotherhood Without Banners! You guys rock!

The resulting whoops and applause lasted for some minutes as the guys walked off the stage and into the audience immediately in front of them, shaking hands, slapping hi-fives, bumping fists and, in the case of Gendry and Edric, being mobbed by screaming fangirls. The pretty Asian girl had thrown herself at Gendry, who caught her in his arms as though he'd been expecting it.

"I've seen that girl before," Sansa suddenly said, having noticed the direction of Arya's gaze. "I think she's in the dance club, same as her blonde friend."

They watched as the guys wove through the crowd following a waiter who was guiding them through, patiently waiting as they frequently paused to greet people. Eventually they were led up the short flight of stairs towards the VIP area, stopping at the red leather lounges that had been marked 'reserved'. The Asian girl and her blonde friend were right with them, with the Asian girl hanging onto Gendry's arm.

Arya saw that Allyria, Tom's girlfriend Jenny, and Hot Pie had also made their way to the VIP lounge from wherever they had been watching the show. In fact, it was Hot Pie who first spotted them as he made to sit down, his eyes meeting hers unexpectedly.

"Hey, Arya!" he called out to her over the noise, and as one, everyone within earshot turned to look.

Arya froze for a moment, but quickly regained her calm. She smiled back at her friend and waved.
"Do you want to go over and say hi?" Sansa asked her.

"I should," Arya replied, and nimbly hopped off her stool, smoothing her skirt down around her thighs.

"Can we come with you?" her sister wondered.

"Sure," Arya answered, grateful that she wasn't going over there alone.

Arya knew that the three of them made a sight as they walked over to greet her friends. Anyone who recognized them, and Arya was sure that many of the people in the club did, would be confounded to see Arya Stark, walking next to ex-boyfriend Sandor Clegane, who was now rumored to be dating her sister Sansa Stark, who flanked his other side. Indeed, she saw that confusion on the members of the Brotherhood, who remained in the dark about the true nature of things.

"Hi guys." Arya forced a brightness into her voice that she didn't feel. "You guys were awesome out there."

"Hey Arya!" they greeted her, darting quick looks towards Gendry, before greeting Sansa and Sandor with polite nods.

"Congratulations on your singing debut, Gendry." Arya directed her grey eyes towards him, though she failed to meet his eyes.

"Yeah, you were brilliant," Sansa added, "Beric, needless to say, you were incredible."

"You're too kind, Sansa." Beric bowed theatrically.

"Thanks." Gendry returned their smiles. "I was nervous, but I think it worked out okay."

"You were more than okay," giggled the Asian girl, now currently sitting so close to Gendry that she was almost on his lap. "You were perfect!"

"Yes, Gendry. You were perfect," Arya parroted, still smiling. "I'm Arya Stark, by the way. This is my sister, Sansa, and I'm sure you've recognized Sandor by now."

The girl's expression told Arya that she was already aware of their identities, but she seemed taken aback by the introduction.

"Oh, I'm Jazmine —" the girl began.

"Spelled with a Z," Edric interjected.

"— and this is my friend Jessika."

"Spelled with a K," Edric continued.

Arya gave Edric a glance. "Thanks for that, Edric…Nice to meet you, Jasmine…and Jessika. It looked like you both really had fun tonight. We could hear you from our table."

"We did, they were amazing! We had no idea Gendry had such a sexy singing voice."

"Gendry is full of surprises, isn't he?"

"Speaking of surprises, Arya," Hot Pie butted in, "how come you didn't tell me you were coming tonight?"
"It was a last-minute decision." Arya shrugged. "I didn't know I was coming until just a few hours before."

"Really? How did you manage to get that table on such short notice?" Jazmine wondered.

Gendry cleared his throat. "Arya has connections, don't you Arya?"

Arya turned to him, but she wasn't sure how to interpret the benign expression on his face.

"Oh?" Jazmine looked at her curiously.

"Her boyfriend, the famous Jaqen H'ghar, is a friend of Melisandre's." Gendry's eyes were still on her, and for some reason Arya found it disconcerting.

"You're right, Jaqen does know Melisandre." Arya wasn't sure why Gendry had brought up Jaqen's name. "It's a good thing too, because with my height, watching from the balcony would not have been fun."

"So, you really are dating Jaqen?" Jessika with a K’s eyes flicked to Sandor for a split second. "Is he here with you?"

"Yeah, did he come with you tonight?" Gendry asked.

Is that what you want to know?

"No," Arya replied tightly, "I was with him earlier, but he got called in to meet with a producer."

"Are the Faceless Men getting signed?" Beric suddenly asked, eyes wide.

"I'm not sure, Beric, sorry." Arya shook her head. "All I know was that a man had approached his uncle, and Jaqen went to meet him."

"They're getting signed…they have to be getting signed!"

"Chill out, Beric. They're just talking to a producer. Don't forget you've talked to producers before, too." Allyria placated her boyfriend and gave Arya an apologetic look. "Will you guys care to join us? We've got plenty of room on these lounges."

Arya glanced at Gendry, and quickly focused her gaze on something else when she saw that Gendry's arm had been stretched out behind Jazmine's shoulders on the lounge. No, she thought, I'm not welcome.

"Thanks for the invite, but we really should be going," Arya refused graciously. "It's a long drive back to King's Landing."

"Aww…that's a shame." Allyria reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. "We've missed having you around."

"Yeah," Arya said quietly, "me too."

"Thanks for coming out to see us, you guys. Appreciate it." Edric smiled at them as they said their farewells.

"Bye, Arya. Seeya on Monday." Hot Pie waved her goodbye.

Gendry nodded towards Sandor, and gave Arya and Sansa a small salute but said nothing as they
walked away. Arya was not aware of the pair of blue eyes that stared after her retreating back.

Outside the club, the cold night air hit her lungs sharply, yet she inhaled deeply. The club now seemed stifling and claustrophobic in comparison. With Sansa's hand firmly in Sandor's grip, and his other hand pushing Arya along in front of him Sandor guided them away from the crowded sidewalk back towards his car. He leaned in towards Arya once they'd bypassed the worst of the crowd.

"What the hell was that back there, little bitch?" he growled. "Could you have acted any weirder?"

"What are you talking about?" Arya feigned ignorance.

"Are you okay?" Sansa asked her. "You seemed a little…distracted, in there."

"Was I?" Arya frowned. She thought she had behaved perfectly normal.

"Yeah, little bitch. You were."

"Why do you call her little bitch?" Sansa asked Sandor.

He shrugged. "You're little bird, and she's little bitch."

"I think I asked him that same question once," Arya added, glad that the attention of her companions had been diverted.

"How did that come about?" Sansa demanded.

While her sister and Sandor discussed the origins of their nicknames, Arya took several more calming breaths. *What's the matter with me?*

It wasn't until they were back in Sandor's Mustang that Arya realized she'd been clenching her fists the whole time.
Episode 26 "Puppets & Masters"

Gossip Spyder

This just in everyone!

The Stark Sisters have been spotted at the Heart of Fire in the company of Sandor Clegane. Okay – the three of you, just WTF is going on? All signs are pointing to Sansa and Sandor now being a couple, and with the three of them being seen together at the Brotherhood Without Banners show, we can only assume that little sis' is totally fine with big sis' hooking up with her ex-boyfriend. If proven to be true, then my opinion of Sandor Clegane will have to be completely re-evaluated – the big guy is more of a heartthrob than I ever thought!

Speaking of heartthrob – the Brotherhood Without Banners have literally lit the Heart of Fire – on fire! LOL! Their one-hour set ended just moments ago and these guys rocked! Frontman Beric Dondarrion performed with his signature dramatic flare, but it was the husky rawness and goosebump inducing voice of "new resident heartthrob" Gendry Waters – to quote Beric Dondarrion's outro – that surprised and blew everyone away! Clips of the show's highlights will be posted shortly!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Gendry

He watched Arya's back as she left the club. He watched as her tiny frame was swallowed up by the crowd until he could no longer see her and only the back of Sandor's head was visible above everyone else. He hadn't expected to see her that night, and her presence had affected him more than he thought it would. She had come to watch him. It didn't matter how last minute it was, or how she came to be in the audience. She was there, and that's all that mattered.

It had puzzled him for a second to see her with Sansa and Sandor, and the thought that Jaqen H'ghar might be with them – like a double date or something – had occurred to him, so he'd brought Jaqen's name up and was pleased when he learned that the smug bastard was not with her. However, Arya had seemed...defensive, he decided. He didn't want her to feel as though she had to defend, what was essentially her right, to be with Jaqen.

Only a few days had passed since that afternoon he'd driven her home, and while they had reached a kind of truce, it was still too soon for either of them to think that things were back to normal between them. He had been relieved when Arya had declined Allyria's invitation to join them, yet predictably disappointed at the same time.

Gendry sighed, and that was when he noticed the brush of silken hair against his bicep and the soft
warmth of the girl sitting in the crook of his arm.

"Are you okay?" Jazmine asked him.

Her interest in him was unmistakable, and he was incredibly flattered, but as much as he enjoyed the attention the truth was he was using her, and he needed to stop it before she got hurt.

"I'm fine," he said, before he shifted her from his arm. "Excuse me."

"Where are you going?" Edric asked him when Gendry stood up from the lounge.

"I need to powder my nose," Gendry replied with a smile before he headed towards the restrooms.

He kept the smile on his face as he walked past groups of well-wishers and fans, but the smile disappeared as soon as he was out of view. He had no intention of dating Jazmine, or anyone else in the foreseeable future, but it was easier to continue convincing his friends that he was fine without Arya when girls like Jazmine were around.

Zipping his fly back up, Gendry washed his hands and splashed water over his face before grabbing a handful of paper towels to wipe away the stickiness left by the perspiration he'd shed under the bright stage lights. He studied his reflection in the mirror, unable to see himself in the same way now that he knew where his looks had come from. The Baratheon men were handsome, and it was thanks to their genetics that girls were now flocking to him. *Their looks and their money too, no doubt,* he thought.

Sighing again, he went back to the lounge wondering how to discourage Jazmine in the nicest possible way. There were two newcomers standing by their VIP table, and Gendry's face split into a grin when he recognized who they were.

"Yo! Lommy! Teddy!" Gendry called out to them as he approached.

"Gendry!" Lommy and Teddy rushed him, taking turns to man-hug and clap him on the back.

"I can't believe you guys made it tonight." Gendry smiled at them. "Were you here the whole time?"

"Yeah, man," Teddy replied, "we got here just in time, but by then it was standing room only."

"Dude, you guys were awesome!" Lommy greeted the rest of the members of the band before turning back to Gendry. "Hey, was that little Weasel just here? I swear I saw her a moment ago."

"Yeah, she was here." Gendry understood who Lommy was referring to.

"Is she still around?"

"Nah, she had to go."

"What a shame." Lommy clicked his tongue. "I would have liked to say hello. She's a little firecracker, that girl…and speaking of girls, when did you get to be such a babe magnet?" Lommy shot a glance towards Jazmine and Jessika.

"It's not like that," Gendry replied and decided to distance himself from anymore of Jazmine's advances.

He invited Lommy and Teddy to party with them and after introducing them to the group as 'my oldest childhood buddies', he promptly sat between the two guys for the rest of the evening. Jazmine looked disappointed, but Gendry had a feeling she wasn't going to give up so easily.
Melisandre came to sit and chat with them at some point in the evening, but by then Gendry was ready to leave, exhausted not only from performing, but of keeping up the facade he'd been wearing since Arya had left.

It was close to 2 AM when he finally got home, but still he forced himself to shower and change his clothes despite his fatigue, knowing he'd feel disgusting if he allowed himself to fall asleep smelling of sweat and the perfume of the girls who'd pressed themselves against him that night.

"You're fucking crazy, man. You could be getting laid by any of these ladies, but instead you wanna go to sleep? You're fucking insane!" Lommy had crudely pointed out.

As he finally settled under his blanket, he wondered if he was the only seventeen year old guy in the world who would pass up sex in favor of sleeping alone.

It was well past noon when he woke up later that day. He went downstairs to find Tobho arranging his tools in the garage and his foster siblings watching cartoons in the living room. Ellen had gone to the grocery store. It was a perfectly normal Sunday, which was a relaxing contrast to the manic night he'd had before.

"How did it go last night?" Tobho asked him as Gendry searched the fridge for the spaghetti and meatballs that Ellen had put away for him.

"We rocked." Gendry shrugged nonchalantly. "The girls loved me."

"Of course they did." Tobho laughed. "Did your friends come out to see you?"

"Yeah. Hot Pie came in the van with us, then Lommy and Teddy showed up later."

"What about Arya?"

"She was there too, with her sister and her sister's boyfriend."

Tobho gave him a curious look. "It's funny, isn't it? How you met and became friends with the Stark girls…it's almost serendipitous, when you consider who --" Tobho broke off suddenly, and gave him an apologetic smile.

"When I consider who my father turned out to be?" Gendry finished for him. "Yeah, I've thought about that too."

"Sorry to bring it up."

"It's fine." Gendry shrugged, blowing on the spaghetti he'd just removed from the microwave. "Sometimes I think that my life was never totally mine to begin with. It's like there's a puppet-master pulling strings in the background, and that meeting Arya and the Starks was inevitable – maybe it was fate after all?"

"You should get Beric to turn that into a song." Tobho suggested, lightening the mood. "It sounds like the kind of thing he'd sing about."

Gendry laughed. "I'll mention it to him."

After he'd eaten, Gendry spent some time checking messages on his social media accounts, finding himself tagged in a bunch of photos on Facebook, amused when he found even more candid shots when he checked #HeartthrobBWB on Instagram that girls kept mentioning. Beric invited him to a private, post-concert celebration at The Hollow for later in the afternoon, and Gendry texted back
with an OK. In the meantime, he caved in to Tabitha's pleading and played Mario Kart with her on the Playstaton.

He heard Ellen's car pull into the driveway when she returned home from the grocery store, and as Tobho helped her unload the shopping, Gendry overheard their conversation.

"It's not getting any better," Ellen said, "more and more people are starting to recognize us, and strangers were coming up to me asking if it's true, and whether we knew all along who Gendry's father was."

"Calm down, Ellen."

"I can't calm down," Ellen's voice sounded strained. "They're judging Gendry and our family, I just know it."

"What? How can you say that?"

"Did you know that they sell caviar and truffles at the grocery store here? Real truffles, at ninety-five dollars an ounce. Can you believe that? This is The Forge Estates, Tobho."

"What are you getting at?"

"I mean, we could never afford to live here before, and now everyone knows that we came from Flea Bottom. People are saying that the Baratheons must have paid us to keep quiet about Gendry's paternity."

"Who are you hearing this from?" Tobho wondered.

"The gardener who works for those folks around the corner, and the lady who walks the dog for that old widower across the road, and the hairdresser at the boutique I went to the other day."

"The gardener? Dog walker? Ellen, why would you listen to that kind of gossip?"

"They're people like us, Tobho," Ellen stressed. "Good, hardworking folk from humble roots who have listened and heard these rich folks talk about us and about our son. These rich folks are wondering how Gendry Baratheon has been brought up, and comparing him to Robert's other children who've been raised with proper etiquette and manners and poise --"

"Gendry chews with his mouth closed and doesn't put his elbows on the table," Tobho pointed out. "What does he need to know?"

"I don't know!" Ellen cried. "That's what I'm saying...I don't know what he's missed out on. I don't know what these rich people teach their children, and I don't know if we can prepare him for the life he has to lead now."

"Gendry's not affected by any of that nonsense, and he's made it clear that he doesn't care about the opinions of strangers."

"He may not care about it now, but he might in five or even ten years from now. Anything can happen between now and then."

"Gendry doesn't have to prove himself to anyone."

"It's easy to say that now," Ellen said sadly, "but, we are not Gendry and we'll never truly understand what he will have to face in the future. In ten years time...I don't want to feel like I've let him down..."
by not being able to give him the tools he might need to deal with those challenges, because he will be compared, Tobho…*Gendry will always be compared.*" 

Gendry had given up on Mario Kart by this time, and he told Tabitha to play on her own for a while before he got up and walked into the kitchen.

"Is that how you really feel, Ellen?" he asked from the doorway.

"Oh, Gendry… I didn't intend for you to hear that," Ellen sighed tiredly. "It's just that everyone knows who you are, and people are going to watch everything you do. I'm sure you know by now that Robert Baratheon has some harsh critics out there, and I'm afraid those same people will one day target you just because he is your father."

"I'll never blame you, Ellen." Gendry stated strongly. "Or you, Tobho. You both took me in and raised me like your own son, and I know you're both doing your best with all the changes we've been through these past few months…and you're still doing your best to protect me now. I'll never blame you for anything."

Ellen walked over and hugged him. "You're a sweet boy Gendry, and one day you're going to be a wonderful man. I don't want anyone thinking any less of you because of where you came from and how you grew up. You're as much of a prince as those other Baratheon boys – in fact, you're better. You'll be a king in your own right someday."

Gendry had to smile at Ellen's choice of words. "Thanks, Ellen. That means a lot to me."

"Never forget that, okay?"

"I won't." Gendry assured her. "But, trust me when I say that the only thing remotely princely about Joffrey Baratheon is that he's a giant, royal douche."

"Gendry!" Ellen smacked his arm, but she was smiling.

Tobho snorted while trying to smother his laughter. Gendry laughed at their expressions, but he couldn't help being reminded of something that Executive Assistant Davos Seaworth had told him.

"…*You are a Baratheon by blood, young man. You cannot escape this fact, and Stannis would like to help you understand what it means to have this blood in your veins…*"

Gendry understood Ellen's concern, because even as he hated to admit it, he knew that he was a marked man. Everything he did, from the way he ate, how he spoke and who he spoke with, how he dressed…everything was open for criticism.

*I'm all in,* he had once told himself. But, how could he be sure that he was playing the best hand? He'd played enough games of poker to know that sometimes having the best hand was not enough. You also had to know how to play your cards, be able to read your opponents and bluff your way through if necessary, and not give away anything that your opponents could use against you.

However, he wasn't playing high-school boys for loose change anymore. This time the game he was playing had his life and future on the table – and he knew next to nothing about his opponents.

Later that afternoon as he was getting ready to meet up with his friends at *The Hollow,* Gendry shook out a pair of jeans to empty out the pockets of whatever detritus he'd managed to collect in them during the school week. Two business cards fell out onto the top of his table, and Stannis Baratheon's name caught his eye.
"Give some consideration to what we've discussed," Davos Seaworth had told him.

And give it some consideration he did.

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**Sandor**

Gossip Spyder had pretty much confirmed that he was dating Sansa. That Monday morning when they reached the school parking lot, Sandor did not bat an eyelid when Sansa took his hand as they walked to her locker. He was feeling pretty confident with how things were between them, given that he'd confessed to the lie he'd been keeping from her and yet she was still there, happy for people to see her beside him. He'd 'dated' one Stark girl before, so he assumed he would be prepared for the flak thrown at him this time around.

He was wrong.

While people had been shocked that Arya Stark had 'hooked up' with him, there'd been no real objections to their relationship for two main reasons. Firstly, Arya was not popular like Sansa was, and while many found her attractive, her aggressive demeanor and confrontational personality intimidated most guys from approaching her. Secondly, people just did not take them seriously as a couple, and no one had been surprised when they had 'broken up'.

However, his dating Sansa was completely different. Sansa had many fans and admirers, and just as many guys who thought themselves in love with her. Nobody was willing to believe that the tough and mean Sandor Clegane had somehow attracted the affections of the sweet, beautiful and gentle Sansa Stark.

"If he wasn't good enough for Arya, what makes him think he's good enough for Sansa?"

"He's just going to end up hurting her."

"She's Sansa Stark. She could have anybody. Why did she pick him?"

Sandor could take the shit they said about him, but he couldn't stomach the fact people were questioning Sansa's sanity. They seemed to think Sansa had gone crazy and that breaking up with Joffrey must have affected her on a deeper psychological level.

Joffrey had obviously heard the gossip, and the jerk pounced on him when they passed each other in the hallway. Sandor had been expecting it.

"I knew you'd been acting weird." Joffrey had sneered. "You stopped sitting in the quad with the rest of us and none of the guys had heard from you after you bailed at the championships…Who knew you were busy picking up my leftovers?"

"What do you want?" Sandor had growled.

"You are un-fucking-believable!" Joffrey laughed. "First Arya, now Sansa. Is that your thing, Hound? You have a fetish for fucking sisters? I didn't know you were into kinky shit like that, but good luck if you think Sansa's going to let you fuck her."

"Shut up, and get out of my face, Joff."
"I'm not done speaking." Joffrey continued "Look, I can understand why you want her. She's a fine piece of ass after all, and maybe she'll let you feel up her tits and grab her butt, but her pussy is as dry as an old lady's wrinkled, graying snatch."

Sandor's lip curled. "How would you know that, Joff? You go around feeling up old ladies snatches often?"

Joffrey's mocking face stiffened at the dig, while Trant and Blount who stood behind him tried to cover up their laughter.

"Don't for one minute believe she's really into you, Hound." Joffrey spat. "You're her rebound guy, that's all. Sooner or later, she'll snap out of it and dump your ugly ass. Hell, if I'd known her standards were so low I would have never gone after her."

Joffrey sniggered as he walked away. Trant and Blount followed him, both of them giving Sandor a resigned look that confirmed how they were merely Joffrey's puppets. It angered him to realize that he'd been a puppet too. For years he'd just followed Joffrey around without question…but not anymore. I am nobody's puppet.

Joffrey's words however, had put images into his mind that caused his blood to boil. Sansa had told him that she was still a virgin, and he believed her, but he had seen Joffrey groping her ass in public in the past, and now images of the blonde jerk's slimy hands sliding over Sansa's breasts and snaking into her panties had him seething. Joffrey had meant to rile him up, and the jerk had succeeded gloriously.

Sandor slammed his fist into a bank of lockers as he stalked down the hall – something he hadn't done in a long time – causing everyone around him to scatter out of his way. His dark mood followed him all morning, and by the time lunch rolled around, he was virtually shaking with pent up energy.

Sansa met him outside the cafeteria as they had agreed, but instead of going to buy food, he grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the opposite direction.

"Sandor?" Sansa asked, concerned by the pressure of his grip. "What's wrong?"

He didn't answer, and instead he barged through a side door into an alley between the cafeteria and the science building.

"Where are we going?" Sansa asked when he led her in through another side door, and into a deserted corridor in the science building.

"Somewhere private," he rasped, leading her to a darkened flight of stairs. "This way."

He tightened his hold on her hand as he pulled her up the stairs, not stopping until they had climbed all four flights. Sandor pushed through the emergency exit door and led her onto the rooftop.

"I didn't know you could come up here," Sansa said when she realized where they were. "You can see the whole school from here."

Sandor had not brought her there for the view. He pulled her into a shadowed corner, pushing her back against the wall as he stood in front of her, barely an inch between them.

"What's going on, Sandor?" Sansa looked up at him questioningly, surprised.

"Don't talk," he said, and dropped his mouth to hers.
He kissed her hard and roughly, forcing her lips apart with the pressure of his own so that he could slide his tongue between her teeth. She inhaled sharply and moaned against his mouth. He wedged a knee between her thighs, trapping her against the hard concrete behind her and the solid wall of his chest. His hands were on her waist, possessively clutching at her hips, and after a moment of fumbling, he'd worked one hand under her sweater so that he could stroke the smooth skin of her back.

Sansa recovered from her surprise and wrapped her arms around his neck so she could pull him closer to her, making him distinctly aware of the heat between her legs that he could feel on the top of his thigh. Sandor wanted more, and he made short work of the clasp on her bra. Once the lacy material had sprung apart, he worked his second hand into her sweater and cupped one breast in the palm of his hand. He squeezed her and stroked her, feeling her shiver and tremble under his touch. First her left breast, then her right, he molded his palm and fingers over her soft flesh so that he had memorized the texture of her skin, their shape, and their weight in his hand by the time he pulled his head back for a breath.

"What's gotten into you?" Sansa managed to say as she too caught her breath.

Instead of answering, he lifted her and pinned her to the wall so that she was left with no other option but to wrap her legs around his waist. Her eyes were wide, with a twinkle of excitement in their blue depths. Sandor's grey eyes locked on her face as he pushed her sweater up over her chest, bunching it under her chin, watching the change in her expressions. Her breasts, when he saw them for the first time, were fuller than he'd first thought, creamy pale and tipped with rosy nipples that were taught from his stimulation. Now, they tightened even further from being exposed to the cool air, and his gaze. He drew his thumb over one pebbled peak, and watched her eyelashes flutter shut before he lowered his mouth over her.

"Oh, gods..." Sansa whispered above his head, reflexively arching her back in response, pushing her breasts into his face.

He hoisted her higher upon the wall so that he could take her other breast into his mouth, and Sansa tightened her legs around his waist and lifted her chest obligingly. He flicked his tongue over her, marveling at the contrast between her soft flesh and turgid nipple. She smelled sweet like oranges and candy, and she was burning up under his hands.

"Sandor..." Sansa's breath had become ragged, and her fingers were tightening reflexively where they clung to his shoulders.

He needed to touch her. He wanted to erase the images of another guy's hands on her body and replace them with images of himself kissing her, caressing her and engulfing her. He wanted to observe her reactions while he did these things to her so that he could imprint these images into his mind knowing that she was sighing because of him and fluttering her eyes and parting her lips because of him. He wanted to memorize the sound of her voice her calling out his name as he devoured and dominated her in the most explicit ways possible.

He eventually ceased his onslaught on her breasts when her nipples became swollen, and he began a new attack along her jaw, the sensitive skin of her neck, and her collarbone. He'd had a hard-on from the moment he'd pinned her to the wall, and he now ground himself against her as he wrapped his arms under her thighs. Sansa responded by grinding back.

"Fuck! Little bird..." he growled into the crook of her neck, "you're mine, right?"

"Yes," she murmured, "I'm all yours."
Sansa turned his head so that she could kiss him on his mouth, before pushing herself into him in an
instinctively intimate motion, slowly repeating the movement again and again so that the friction
between them became almost too much to bear. He had sought her out with only two things on his
mind; possession and lust. He'd taken her to the rooftop to prove to himself that he could – that he
now had the **privilege** of being able to take her into his arms whenever he wanted to, and kiss her as
often as he wanted. However, things had escalated faster and further than he'd intended, and now he
was worked up almost to the point where he wouldn't be able to turn back.

He broke the kiss reluctantly and grabbed her hips to stop her movement, pressing his forehead
against her.

"We have to stop," he rasped.

Sansa placed her palms against his chest, and he knew that she'd be able to feel the rapid beating of
his heart.

"Yeah, we should," she whispered, shifting in his arms in a way that brought his attention back to
her still bared breasts.

He groaned audibly. "We're at school."

"So we are." She agreed with a smile playing across her lips. "Are you going to put me down?"

"Sorry." Sandor carefully set her back onto the floor.

"I wasn't complaining," Sansa said as she began pulling her clothes into order, reaching behind her to
re-clasp her bra. "What is this place anyway?"

"It's the old science wing," Sandor replied, smoothing his jacket down around his waist. "Since the
new wing was built this place has been used mostly for storage. Hardly anyone ever comes this
way."

"How did you know about this rooftop?"

"Found it by accident when I was a Sophomore." He shrugged. "Teacher asked me to grab some
beakers from the store room, and I was on my way back when I heard a door slamming open and
shut. I went looking, and found the emergency door unlocked. I figured couples must come up here
to make out, and someone had left the door open."

Sansa giggled. "Really? That was the first conclusion you jumped to?"

He shrugged again. "It's as good as any."

"So...have you been here to test out your theory before?"

He gave her a serious look. "I've never brought anyone here but you."

Sansa's expression turned serious then, and she gave him a questioning look. "What was all of **that**
about, Sandor?"

He shook his head, not pretending to misunderstand her. He didn't want to tell her that he'd pinned
her to the wall out of a jealousy fuelled lust. He didn't want to tell her that he'd undressed her and
touched her in such an explicit way out of some primal need to possess her and mark her as his, to
wipe away all trace and thought of anyone who had come before him. He couldn't tell her, because
he didn't want to keep bringing up his insecurities. His jealousy was his problem, not hers, and he
didn't want her to worry about it while he figured out how to deal with it.

"I...I needed you," he rasped in response.

"You needed me?" she repeated with a raised brow.

"Yeah," he said, because it was the truth. The rage had left him. "I'm calm, aren't I?"

"Okay," she said, "if you're sure?"

Sandor pulled her back into his arms, slowly this time, and gently. "I'm sure."

"You were kind of...insistent, Sandor."

*Meaning I was too rough,* he realized.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" he asked in alarm.

"No, I'm fine." She was quick to assure him. "I've just never seen you like that, and I...didn't dislike it."

Sandor snorted at her roundabout way of saying she'd been turned on. "Like I told you, little bird, I needed you. I've been holding back, and if you'd kept grinding on me like you were before, I'm not sure I could have held back much longer, just so you know."

"You wouldn't have let yourself lose control like that," Sansa stated. "We're at school *and* in public."

Sandor gave her his evilest grin, which froze her smile comically. "There's always a first time, little bird. You wanna try pushing my control to the limit? I'm game if you are."

Sansa blushed bright red, and he laughed. It was still hard for him to process that Sansa was there with him, allowing him to do things he'd only fantasized about...and simply just wanting him beside her too.

"Sansa," he said when their laughter had died down.

"Yeah?"

"You're...you're mine, right?" he asked her again.

She looked up into his eyes, clearly trying to find a deeper meaning to his question, but she smiled up at him regardless of what she saw in them.

"Completely," she replied.

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**Arya**

It was nice to finally be back on good terms with her sister, she thought. Their relationship had returned, for the most part, to how things were before they had moved to King's Landing. They were talking candidly and unreservedly with each other as before, but now they had found a new respect for each other, for the first time really seeing each other as individuals. This development had not
gone unnoticed within the Stark household.

"I see you've made up with Sansa." Bran observed one evening after dinner.

They were sitting at her desk in her room going through her math homework once again.

"You noticed, huh?"

"Everyone has." He pointed out. "Mother, Father, Jory…Chef Martin even."

"Yeah, okay. I get it."

"So, what happened? You'd both been edgy around each other for weeks."

"Do you really want to know?" Arya narrowed her eyes. "Or is it Mom and Dad that want to know and they've bribed you to find out somehow?"

Bran shrugged tellingly. "A bit of column A, and a bit of column B…"

"Hmm…” Arya considered her options, but gave him an inch in the end. "We just cleared up a few things about what happened with Joffrey and stuff, and we found most of our issues were just misunderstandings."

"That's it?" Bran looked disappointed.

"That's all you're getting." Arya clarified.

"Boring." Bran rolled his eyes before he went back to the math equation she was struggling with.

Arya was on her third equation, finally understanding where she was going wrong, when Bran posed another question for her.

"So, I hear you have a boyfriend now?"

"What?" Arya looked up, her pencil paused in mid-stroke.

"You're dating Jaqen H'ghar, right?" Bran asked her, "Sansa has a new boyfriend too, I heard."

"Who have you been talking to?"

"Mom,"

"What?"

"Mom didn't actually tell me, per se…” Bran grinned. "She was telling Dad."

"WHAT?" Arya exclaimed in shock.

"It's okay," her brother said in a placating tone, "Dad already knew."

"Oh, my god!" Arya dropped her face into her hands.

Bran was openly laughing at her now, enjoying her mortification far too much, Arya thought. It wasn't really that surprising that her parents had found out about their respective boyfriends, as neither Jaqen or Sandor had been discreet when they came to the gates of Chateau Maegor. There was a security camera directly above the pin-pad at the gate after all, and her father's right-hand-man, Jory Cassell, was good at his job.
"What did Mom and Dad say?" Arya demanded, wondering how she would approach the issue if her parents were to ask her about it.

"Well, Mom is a little concerned for you because you've never dated before, and Dad is wondering if you were actually friends with Sansa's new guy, because Jory says he'd seen you being picked up in that Mustang before."

"They know so much!"

"They didn't know about Jaqen being famous though," Bran told her.

"Why, and how did that enter the conversation?"

"Jaqen's dossier apparently only said he was in popular local band, so I showed Dad Jaqen's YouTube videos and his Facebook page and the coverage on the Battle of the Bands."

"Brandon Stark, why would you do that?" Arya threw a stuffed toy at him, which he caught easily, before she began launching more stuffed animals and pillows at him as he laughed and tried to defend himself.

"He was going to find out anyway!" Bran reasoned, dodging a stuffed panda. "At least this way Dad got to hear from me that Jaqen's a nice guy, because I've met him, and that even though he's a rock-star, he seems like a serious and responsible type."

Arya stopped throwing toys at her brother when his words registered. "Oh. You did that for me?"

Bran shrugged. "I did the same for Sansa, too."

"How?"

"I told dad that I'd overheard Robb and Jon talking about Sandor Clegane. You know, about how he was the one who protected Sansa during the riot?"

"Dad didn't know?"

"You knew?" Bran asked curiously.

Arya shrugged, but refused to be drawn into how she came to know about it.

Bran continued regardless. "It looks like Sansa didn't tell anyone because Robb and Jon were surprised that Sansa had stayed quiet about it. They were shocked that they had to hear about it from Renly Baratheon, who was there at the riot, and who was the one who drove Sansa home that day."

"I'm surprised she didn't say anything about Sandor earlier," Arya muttered.

Bran chuckled. "So was Dad!"

"Why would you do this for us, Bran?"

"Oh, I need someone to come with me to this symposium I want to attend."

"Eh..." Arya grimaced, knowing very well what kind of symposiums Bran liked going to. "Who's the principal speaker this time?"

"Brynden Rivers."
"Is he that guy on TV that people refer to as The Three Eyed Raven? The guy who claims that anyone can awaken their third eye and unlock their mind's full potential?"

"That's him." Bran grinned.

"Ehh…”Arya made a sour face.

"Just think about it, okay?” Bran implored. "The symposium is still a few months away, so work it out between you and Sansa."

"Ehh…”

"At least now you don't have to tip-toe around Mom and Dad when your boyfriend picks you up for dates, or when your phone rings when you're at the table."

"Yeah…there is that." She agreed, looking at the positive.

"Want me to help pick up these toys now?"

"Please."

Sometime later that night after eventually completing her homework, Arya had just returned from her shower and was preparing to get into bed when her phone buzzed on her bedside table. Jaqen's name flashed on the screen along with a text.

"Still awake? Can I call you?"

Arya slid under her duvet and settled back against her pillows, happy to get his text, but also cautious. Their conversation from the previous evening had left a less than sweet note on her palate, as Jaqen had not been pleased to learn that Arya had attended the Brotherhood's show from reading Gossip Spyder's blog.

"Why did you not tell me about it?" he had asked. "You said that you were with your sister."

"I was," Arya had replied. "It was her idea to go, and I couldn't say no. I didn't think I needed to tell you my exact whereabouts."

Jaqen had paused. "Of course not. That is not what I meant, nor how I want you to feel."

"I know." Arya had sighed. "I didn't mean to be on the defensive either. It's just that I know how you feel about Gendry."

There had been a silence then, because both knew that the real issue was the fact he did not like that she'd gone to watch Gendry perform. It did not matter whose idea it was to go.

Arya had felt confused, following the odd behavior that both Sandor had Sansa had claimed she'd displayed that night. She couldn't explain why she'd made a point of introducing herself to Jazmine either. In the days that came after, Arya decided that she would put it down to concern. Gendry was in an emotionally vulnerable state at present, and she didn't like seeing girls potentially using that to get close to him. It's only because I'm worried for him.

"It is not easy for me to see my girlfriend spend time with a guy, who has claimed to have feelings for her," Jaqen had said.

Arya had sighed again. "All we did was watch from the audience, and we didn't stay long afterwards because we had to get back by curfew."
"You do not have to explain, Arya. I know you just wanted to support your friends…Gendry included."

Jaqen had relaxed and had then changed the topic, telling her about his meeting with the producer. However, Arya had remained sensitive to his jealousy since.

Still wary of his jealousy, Arya now texted him back. "Video chat?"

Her phone buzzed mere seconds later, and Jaqen's face soon filled her screen, smiling at her.

"Good evening," he greeted her, his voice husky.

"Good evening, Jaqen." Arya said, relaxing at the sight of his smile and noticing that he was also in bed doing much the same as she was – leaning against his pillows – but somehow he was making it look sexy in a way she knew she never could.

Jaqen's long hair was loose about his shoulders, but had been pushed back away from his face. He was also shirtless, and within the frame of her phone screen she observed the lines of his broad shoulders and toned chest, thinking of the last time they had been together and recalling how she'd ran her hands over that same expanse of skin.

"I miss you," Jaqen murmured in that buttery, molten caramel tone she'd become familiar with. "It has been four days since you were here on my bed, and your scent has almost faded from my pillow."

"I miss you too," she said as memories of what they'd been doing on his bed flashed through her mind, and Arya's cheeks flushed pink.

"When can I see you again?"

"How about Friday?" she suggested, "I can ask my parents to extend my curfew."

"Excellent." Jaqen grinned. "Where should we meet?"

They talked for a while longer, agreeing on a meeting time and place for Friday, before they spoke of each other's day at school. Jaqen, being a senior, was still in the process of deciding which college to attend, but was being asked by his uncle to consider attending the Baelor Conservatorium of Music. Arya told him about her struggles with math and Bran tutoring her, but she chose not to tell Jaqen that her parents were aware of his existence. She was not ready to introduce him to her parents, and she suspected that Jaqen would insist on meeting her father were he to find out about the dossier Jory had compiled on him, just so he could personally assure her father that he was no threat to her.

Arya covered a yawn, and Jaqen mentioned that it was quite late. "Get some sleep, Arya."

"I will," she said tiredly. "You get some sleep too."

"I shall." Jaqen then made a cheeky expression. "Might I ask something of you, lovely girl? So that I might have sweet dreams tonight."

"What's that?"

"What color is the bra you are wearing now?"

Arya managed to look suitably scandalized, before she drew down one side of the loose sleep shirt she was wearing, far enough down her arm to expose one bare shoulder and the curve of her breast.
"I'm not wearing one," she whispered, watching Jaqen's face take on a tortured look.

"What about your panties?"

She gave him a mock-glare. "Goodnight, Jaqen."

Jaqen laughed, suitably chastised. "Why must you be so far away? I do not know that I can wait until Friday!"

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," Arya told him.

"Will you tell me what color panties you will be wearing tomorrow?"

"Maybe I won't wear any..." Arya shrugged. "Maybe I'm not wearing any now."

Jaqen gasped and his eyes widened at her reply. "Lies! You tease too much! How will I sleep now with that image in my head?"

"Goodnight, Jaqen." Arya said again, smothering her laughter.

"All right." Jaqen acquiesced. "Goodnight, my lovely girl."

With a lingering smile on her lips, Arya ended the call and placed her phone back onto her bedside table, switching off her lamp before settling down to sleep as the room was engulfed in darkness. She had barely closed her eyes when her phone buzzed once more, having received a text. Arya smiled again. It was probably Jaqen sending yet another cheeky and altogether cheesy comment, and she reached for the phone in the dark.

Except it wasn't Jaqen, and her smile froze on her lips when she read the name on screen, because the text had come from Gendry. Warily and curiously, she read the message.

"I called Davos Seaworth. I'm going to meet Stannis Baratheon. Can I speak to you tomorrow? I know it's really late. Sorry to wake you if I did."

She frowned. This was a big deal. Gendry would not have messaged her if it wasn't, and replied back to him. "Sure. I'll see you tomorrow. Goodnight, Gendry."

"Thanks. Goodnight, Arya."

She dreamt of Gendry that night. She dreamt of his muscular arms wrapped around a petite girl with dark hair. The girl was stroking his shoulders and tracing the bull's head tattoo on his bicep with the tips of her fingers. The girl in his arms however, did not have the face of the stunning Asian girl. Instead, the face had been her own.

She woke up frowning the next morning, unnerved by the dream, and despite getting adequate sleep she was still tired. Wondering if she had also just dreamt about Gendry's text message, she picked up her phone and checked her messages, finding that it was real, with the words written there as evidence.

Her phone buzzed in her hand as she was still staring at the words, startling her when a new message from Gendry flashed onto the screen.

"Do you need a ride to school? We can talk then."

She sensed some urgency from him then, because he wouldn't have disturbed her so late at night, or this early in the morning otherwise.
"Okay, I'll be ready in an hour."

"PIN code still the same? I'll come to your door."

"Yep. See you soon."

Trying to shake the memory of the dream from her mind and the discomfiture it had left her with, Arya showered and dressed. She was feeling strangely nervous, wondering why Gendry was seeking her out. She must have been too quiet at breakfast, because even her father was prompted to ask if she was okay.

"You're awfully quiet this morning, Arya. Anything the matter?" he asked.

"Oh, it's nothing really," she replied. "I'm still sleepy, I guess."

"You're not staying up on your phone all night, I hope?"

"No, father,"

"Hmm." He shrugged. "Am I driving you to school this morning?"

"Actually, Gendry is coming to pick me up."

Sansa flashed her a look then, but Arya ignored her.

"How is Gendry?" her father asked, a look of concern on his features. "I worry that he might not be getting the support he needs at this time."

"How do you mean, Ned?" Catelyn asked, her face mirroring Ned's concern. "Is Robert doing nothing?"

"I don't know because Robert refuses to be drawn into it. The Lannisters are furious, as you can imagine, but I had hoped that Robert would put aside his family's anger long enough to do more for Gendry and his foster-family. All this media attention can't be doing them good. I hate to think that Robert's sense of responsibility for the boy was limited only to financial support."

"What can you do about it?" Catelyn prompted him, seeing the cogs working in his mind.

"I'm going to offer him my assistance," Ned replied, "Robert will probably disagree with me, but it seems wrong to leave the poor boy and his foster-family to deal with the fallout all on their own."

"Are you sure that's wise?" Cat's expression had become thoughtful.

"I'm not about to overstep my bounds, Cat." Ned assured her. "I'm just going to extend him my hand and the choice is his to take it, should and when he needs it – Arya, please ask him to come inside for a moment when he gets here."

That's what Arya did. She was waiting for Gendry at the door when he drove up to the house and she quickly jogged to the driver's side window.

Gendry wound it down on her approach. "Hey. What's the matter?"

"Hi," she greeted him, "my father would like to speak with you. If you don't mind, can you come in please?"

"Did he say why?" Gendry asked, even as he parked his car to the side and killed the engine.
"He said he'd like to offer you his assistance," Arya replied, leading him into the foyer just as her father came out to greet him.

"Good morning, Gendry. Good to see you again." Ned held out a hand which Gendry grasped in a firm handshake.

"Good morning, Mr. Stark."

"I was hoping we might speak for a moment." Ned glanced at Arya. "I gather Arya has told you why?"

"Yes, sir. Of course,"

"Good. If you'll follow me to my office…Arya, just wait a while. We won't be long."

Gendry paused to glance at Arya as he followed her father down the hall. Arya sat down on the lowest step of the grand staircase in the foyer, wondering what her father and Gendry were discussing that they couldn't say in front of her. As she waited, the rest of her family began to depart for the day. First, her mother and brothers.

"Do mind the time, Arya." Her mother advised in passing. "Interrupt if need be, and don't be late to school."

Soon after, Arya heard the familiar rumble of Sandor's Mustang, followed shortly by Sansa's soft treads on the staircase behind her.

"Is father still with Gendry?" Sansa asked in hushed tones.

"Yep."

"Why is Gendry picking you up anyway?" Sansa slung her tote bag over her shoulder and gazed at her with undisguised nosiness.

"He said he wanted to talk to me."

"Very cryptic," Sansa said before opening the door to meet Sandor.

Arya glimpsed Sandor's face through the opened door, and on seeing his expression, she gave him the middle finger in response to his raised eyebrow and pointed glances at Gendry's car. Sansa tsked and shut the door.

Ten minutes later her father and Gendry finally returned to the foyer. Arya got up and picked her backpack up from the floor, ready to leave.

"Thank you for your time, Gendry, and please keep in mind what I said."

"I will, and thank you, Mr. Stark. This is unexpected, but greatly appreciated."

"And, about what we discussed, I'm sure Arya will give you her full support…won't you, sweetheart?"

"Sure," Arya agreed obediently.

"Good. Let me know how it goes, Gendry." Ned then excused himself to prepare for work. "Have a nice day, both of you, and take care on your way to school."
Waving at her father, Arya and Gendry set off for school. Arya sensed an excited tension about Gendry, but he did not begin to speak until they were on the Expressway.

"Your father is a good man," he said, "I never expected he'd be so generous towards me, considering he barely knows me. I don't think he offered to help me because I'm his best friend's illegitimate son either."

"Yes. My father is a good man," Arya agreed.

"You're lucky to have him as your father," Gendry said with a sigh. "I guess I can be thankful for one thing about being Robert Baratheon's bastard."

"What's that?"

"He's filthy rich, and he's not stingy about his money," Gendry replied with a wry grin. "I could have been the bastard of some dirt-poor asshole, but somehow I was born to an asshole with money."

"Is that what you call looking at the bright side, Gendry?"

"I have to, don't I?" he laughed hollowly. "You know, I almost gave all the money back at one point? That's how much I didn't want anything to do with them, but I thought about Tobho, Ellen, Toby and Tabitha, and I couldn't make them go back to the life we left in Flea Bottom... so, I'm gonna stick this out, whatever happens."

There was steel in his voice, and Arya wondered what had happened.

"What made you change your mind about meeting Stannis Baratheon?"

"I had a talk with Ellen and Tobho, and I learned of a few things that Ellen was worrying about."

Briefly, Gendry told her about them.

"She's worried about people judging you, and that you won't fit in with other rich people?" "It's a valid concern Arya." Gendry glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "What is it that you rich kids know, that us Flea Bottom rats don't?"

Arya gaped at him, flabbergasted that he had likened himself to a rat. "I don't know. I mean, how would I know?"

"Exactly," Gendry huffed. "You've been raised doing what all rich kids do, and you don't even realize you do these things. I want to find out what that is."

"It's that important to you?"

"Nah, I don't give a shit about these things, but I'm doing it for Ellen's sake. I don't want her feelings being hurt when she hears how I'm being compared to my pedigreed half-siblings. She's been my mom for seven years, and even after I'm legally emancipated, I'll still think of her like my mom."

"Where does Stannis come into it?"

"I'm hoping to kill two birds with one stone," he replied, "or something like that. I figured that if I'm going to learn to walk and talk like I've been raised by rich folks all my life, I may as well learn it from the folks that would have raised me... my own family, you know? Stannis apparently wants me to learn what it means to be of Baratheon blood, so I'll learn everything I can about my blood. When I'm done, I'll use everything I've learned not to become just like them, but to be better than all of
them."

His answer stunned her, not because of what he had said, but because of the many emotions she heard in his voice. There was anger most definitely, but also sadness, bitterness…and a determination she'd never seen in him before. Gendry meant every word he had said.

"Why did you want to talk to me?" she finally asked him.

"Because I wanted to ask a favor from you."

"Which is?"

"Come with me." Gendry looked at her, taking his eye from the road for a second. "When I go to meet Stannis, I really would like it if you came with me. Please?"

"Is this what my father was talking about? This is what he meant when he said I'd support you?"

"It is." Gendry nodded. "I told him about Davos approaching me, and about Stannis, because your father was kind enough to offer me his help, and I realized that I couldn't repay his kindness by dragging his daughter into my business without his knowledge. I meant to talk to you about it before anything else, but your father got to me first."

"You told my father you wanted me to go with you to meet Stannis, and he was okay with that?"

"Ahuh," he confirmed. "It works out better actually. I want you to come with me because I don't want to go alone, and I can't trust anyone else. Your father pointed out that your presence would encourage…would ensure, that Stannis plays it straight."

Arya thought about it for a moment and saw the logic behind her father's thinking.

"Okay," she said, "I'll come with you."

"You will?"

"Yeah, I will."

"That's great! Thank you, Arya."

Arya smiled at the relief she heard in his voice. "When are you going to meet him?"

"Tomorrow," Gendry replied, "Friday evening."

"Friday night, huh?" Arya repeated, a sinking feeling suddenly forming in her stomach.

"Yeah. Is that gonna be a problem?" Gendry shot her a look. A hopeful look. A desperate look.

Arya's stomach sank to the soles of her feet.

"No…it's not a problem."
Hi everyone! For those that are not familiar with book-cannon events, or who may have forgotten the role Stannis Baratheon played in the discovery of Gendry, please refer to the excerpts in the footnotes. Stannis’ involvement in this story is loosely based on these events.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gossip Spyder

Sandor the 'Hound' Clegane has been seen arguing with Joffrey Baratheon according to witnesses, and it's safe to say that there is no love lost between these two former best buddies. With Sandor now confirmed to be dating Sansa Stark – yeah, we all saw the two of you holding hands! – it would have been very interesting indeed to be the spyder on that proverbial wall to hear what Joffrey had to say about his ex-girlfriend hooking up with his ex-best friend!

Joffrey has also been seen in public stare-downs with Gendry Waters whenever they are within spitting distance of each other, leading many of us to wonder what it is these two know that we don't – and I am determined to find out, so watch this space!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Jaqen

One more day, he thought. One more day until a man gets to see his lovely girl again. It was Thursday evening and he had just returned home from rehearsal with his band. He wanted a shower, then go to bed so that he could call Arya right away, but he was also hungry and he had a term paper to complete waiting for him on his laptop. Wearily, he dragged himself to the kitchen where he found Umma and Uncle Otto seated at the dining table sipping their evening cups of chamomile tea.

"Welcome back, my boy," Uncle Otto greeted him, "how did your rehearsal go this evening?"

"It was fine, uncle," Jaqen replied, "we have finalized a new set that we will begin playing at the House starting in the new year."

"Hmm," his uncle said, glancing at him shrewdly from over the rim of his glasses. "And how are your studies coming along? Do not forget this is your final year of high school and you have some very important decisions to make not too long from now."

"I know, I know!" Jaqen threw up his hands. "My GPA has not slipped. And yes, I have read all of the brochures you left for me about the Conservatorium."

"And what of your young girlfriend? You are not stretching yourself too thin with all of your commitments, I hope?"
"Arya and I are managing to see each other only twice a week, if we are lucky. It's not enough time, but I cannot demand more from her. Do not worry, Uncle. I know my responsibilities."

"How old did you say Arya was?"

"Fourteen," Jaqen replied.

"And you are?"

"Eighteen and five months, if you would like me to be precise," Jaqen glanced at his uncle questioningly. "Why is this important?"

"Hmm," his uncle said once more, "in the scheme if things, I suppose it is nothing. However, at this very moment of your lives, I wonder if those four years and five months really do make a difference? You will soon leave for the conservatorium –"

"That has not been decided, Uncle."

"– and your Arya will be left here to attend high school. You will meet new people, and you will experience new things while being apart from one another. I know that you will cope without her, my boy. Will she cope without you?"

"You cannot speak for either of us, uncle," Jaqen frowned. "Even if I should decide to attend the conservatorium, that is still months away. Anything can happen between now and then. If Fate decides, I may end up staying here to attend King's Landing College."

His uncle's look softened a fraction. "Arya is a lovely girl, and I know you are fond of her. But, you would seriously consider attending King's Landing College, so that you can stay close to her?"

Jaqen's frown deepened. "I like her. I really do."

His Umma sighed and gave him a gentle smile, and Jaqen could see that his aunt would support him whatever he should decide to do.

"Do not underestimate the young, Otto," she said with a chuckle, "and never underestimate the young who are in love."

Jaqen gave his aunt a hug. "No woman will ever replace you in my heart, Umma."

His aunt laughed. "Go on and eat, my boy. Ignore your uncle for now."

Jaqen did just that, eating the casserole his Umma had left in the oven for him, before heading back to his room to shower and finish his term paper. When he emerged from his bathroom, he glanced at the clock and noted that he would have plenty of time to complete his paper before calling Arya. It was a nightly ritual to him now, and something that kept him going until he could see her again.

He had been in the process of printing out the final draft of his paper when his phone suddenly rang, and he smiled when he saw Arya's name on the screen.

"Good evening, lovely girl," he greeted her.

"Jaqen…hi," Arya said, her voice sounding tight.

Jaqen immediately sensed that something was not right. "What is wrong, Arya?"

There was a crackle over the phone, as though Arya had just taken a deep breath. "Jaqen, I'm so
"Sorry, but I can't go on our date tomorrow night."

"What has happened?" he asked gruffly.

There was another crackle, and a further moment's hesitation before Arya began to speak.

"It's Gendry…" she began, and after that Jaqen barely heard a word.

She proceeded to say something about a man called Seaworth, and of another man called Stannis Baratheon, and of how Gendry needed her to be with him when he went to meet his uncle. All Jaqen really heard was that Gendry Waters was once again exerting his influence over Arya, and once again, Arya was allowing her emotions to be swayed. He didn't respond when she had finished speaking, his anger rendering him speechless. As his anger burned, the silence between them grew deeper, and colder.

"Jaqen?" she said his name when the silence had stretched too long.

"I'm still here," he finally responded with a sigh, "you are choosing him over me."

"It's not like that,"

"You are, Arya," Jaqen bit out. "You cannot come to see me, because you are choosing to be by his side."

"It's not as black and white as that, and you know it," she pointed out.

"Why must it be you?" he demanded, "why can't someone else go with him?"

"My father is Eddard Stark," Arya replied, "and that means something to the Baratheons. My being there would mean that anything they say or do could potentially be repeated to my father, and he will not just sit and watch if he thinks Gendry is being mistreated or taken advantage of in any way. If nothing else, then at least Stannis will know that my father is looking out for Gendry too. That is why I have to go with him."

"It is a complex game that the Starks and Baratheons take part in," Jaqen said with a note of frustration in his voice.

"I didn't choose this," Arya snapped, "neither did Gendry. This is just how things are. I can't help being Eddard Stark's daughter anymore than Gendry can help being Robert Baratheon's son."

"Do you want me to say that I understand?" Jaqen's frustration finally broke through, and his voice took on a hardness he couldn't recall ever using with her. "I do understand, Arya. I understand he is your friend and that you were once close. I understand that you harbor a sense of guilt about hurting him when you turned him down, but I cannot understand why you allow him to use this guilt to keep you by his side."

"He's not making me do anything I –"

"But he is!" Jaqen insisted hotly. "He is, and you do not even realize it. Arya, if you were hoping that I would be understanding this time, then I am sorry but…this, I cannot do."

Jaqen hung up without waiting to hear her response. Immediately he regretted it, suddenly without the sound of her voice. However, his anger and disappointment and jealousy were overwhelming. Had he stayed on the phone, he was likely to have said things he would regret even more.
Jaqen abandoned his desk in favor of his bed, turning off the light before burying his head under his pillow. In times of stress and frustration, he often reverted to his native German when swearing, and he did plenty of it then, beginning with a lambasting of his rival. *Das arschloch! Das fotze! Der scheisskerl hunersohn! Fick dich, Gendry Waters!*

Eventually, Jaqen told himself to calm down. *Mensch, reiss dich zusammen!* He needed to pull himself together. He needed to find a way to break Gendry's grip on Arya, and he needed to do it quickly, he thought.

*A man will have a long, sleepless night.*

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**Gendry**

Joffrey Baratheon had been getting on his nerves all week. They still shared a class together, and they couldn't avoid running into each other even if they wanted to. Gendry had considered changing to a different class despite all the trouble it would cause, but knew that it would only spark more rumors, and make it look as though he was running away. Joffrey glared at him every chance he got, puffing his chest out and regarding him like he was something gross stuck on the bottom of his overpriced sneakers. He'd make aside comments to his two football player cronies too, who'd laugh and respond loud enough for everyone to hear. If he heard the words gold digger, hood-rat and bastard, Gendry was sure it was Joffrey who had uttered them.

Gendry had given as good as he'd got, however. Not afraid of anything Joffrey could throw at him, because in reality, Gendry knew he could floor the guy if it came down to it. He grew up in the toughest neighborhood in King's Landing, and he knew how to fight. On one occasion, Joffrey had stood so close to him that they'd almost been rubbing noses. Again, Gendry had used his own spectacular resemblance to his biological father to goad the blonde jerk.

"Every time I look at you, Joffrey," he had taunted him that day, "I can't help but wonder who your real father was, because I still don't see any resemblance. Do you?"

"You think you're such a smart bastard, don't you?" Joffrey had hissed in return.

"I don't just think it," Gendry had snorted, "I am smart, and it turns out I am a bastard. You're nothing but a hairy axe wound – Oh, what? You need to go look that up, because you're too dumb to know when someone's calling you a pussy?"

"You asshole!" Joffrey's momentary look of confusion vanished when his temper finally boiled over.

"Your mother was a whore, a nasty cock-sucking cum-dumpster."

"Who knows?" Gendry shrugged, snearing when Joffrey resorted to insulting his mother, refusing to let it get to him. "But at least she knew who my father was. Unlike your mother."

People close enough to hear had snickered. Joffrey had looked around to glare at those laughing, before he faked a lunge towards Gendry. People around them flinched, but Gendry had not. Seeing that he didn't get the reaction he wanted, Joffrey laughed it off.

"You're a fucking waste of space, Gonad Waters." Joffrey had snapped, before stalking away.

"Whatever, Jerkoff Baratheon."

It was stupid, and repetitive and pointless, but he couldn't help provoking the blonde jerk. He knew that one day, sooner rather than later, one of them was going to throw a punch.
On top of dealing with Joffrey's constant harassment, Gendry was also concerned about his upcoming meeting with Stannis Baratheon. By the time Friday finally rolled around, he had worked himself up to quite a state of nervousness. He hadn't expected to feel so jittery, but now that he was just hours away from meeting Stannis Baratheon, Gendry couldn't deny that he was more affected than he'd first thought.

He had been invited to have dinner with Stannis Baratheon and his family at Stannis' personal residence, which had surprised him because he hadn't expected their first encounter to be in such a personal setting. Currently, he was on the way to pick up Arya from Chateau Maegor so that they could make the drive to Storm's End.

After school, he'd gone home to shower and change his clothes. Now he wore one of his dressier black jeans which he'd paired with a black dress shirt, a sleek navy blue urban-utility style jacket and his favorite black boots. This was as dressed up as he usually got, and he wondered if he might be under-dressed.

He was still thinking about it when he pulled up to Arya's front door. She came out onto the landing as he came to a stop, and he was glad to see that she was dressed in a smart-casual sweater-dress that appeared to be made from wool, a green leather moto-jacket, black tights and black knee-high boots. *Dressy, but not too dressy,* he thought in relief.

Without waiting for him Arya let herself into the passenger seat beside him, and only then did Gendry notice the dark, expensive looking bottle of brandy that Arya cradled on her lap.

"Is that for Stannis?" he asked, kicking himself for not having thought of it himself. Not because he particularly cared, but only to observe etiquette when being invited to someone's home.

Arya nodded. "Father said this is the brand Stannis likes to drink."

"Tell your father that I'll pay him back," he stated.

"Father said you might say that." Arya gave him a smile. "He told me to say that there's no way you're old enough to buy it yourself, and you can repay him by bringing me home safely tonight. He also says that he'd like me home by midnight, but given the distance we have to drive he said to let him know if we'll be any later."

"You Stark's are a stubborn bunch," Gendry muttered, touched by her father's thoughtfulness and generosity.

Storm's End was an hour and thirty minutes drive South on the Kingsroad Expressway, and allowing for traffic and possible wrong turns, Gendry figured they would just make it there by 7 p.m. Davos Seaworth had told him that it would be a very intimate affair that evening, with only Stannis and his immediate family present.

"And myself of course," Davos had told him. "Stannis has also advised that you are more than welcome to bring a guest."

Gendry's attitude towards the Executive Assistant had thawed slightly, and he was glad that the older man would also be in attendance as he had that reassuring, calming quality about him that put him at ease. He figured he would need whatever calming influence he could get under the circumstances.

Beside him, Arya looked calm, but something about the set of her jaw told him that she was tense.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.
"You're asking me?" Arya turned to him, and the tension lifted. "You're the one who looks like you're about to head into battle or something."

"You just looked worried, that's all."

"No, I'm okay."

Gendry kept his eyes on the road. "Does he know you're with me tonight?"

No guesses for who he was referring to.

"Yes. He knows."

Arya's tone indicated that she didn't want to talk about it, and Gendry wondered if perhaps he'd disrupted plans Arya and Jaqen might have had. Jaqen can do without her for one night, he thought. I need her with me tonight.

He changed the subject. "What do you know about Storm's End?"

Arya looked glad for the change in subject, and she began to tell him all that she knew.

"I've never been there, but father says that the Baratheons have lived there for generations. Technically, Robert should have inherited it on his father's death, but father says Robert prefers King's Landing's central location to his business and his wife's family."

"So, Stannis currently lives in the family's ancestral home?"

"That's right."

"How many generations are we talking about?"

"Many. The house is at least three hundred years old."

They reached Storm's End in good time, and with guidance from his GPS, Gendry turned his BMW into a solitary looking road that did not seem to lead anywhere.

"Are we going the right way?" Arya asked, looking at the darkened trees that lined the road.

"This must be the right way." Gendry shrugged. "The other road leads to the sea."

They continued driving for some minutes longer, until a light appeared in the distance through the trees, followed by another, then another. They turned out to be old fashioned street lamps, which guided the way to the property. As they got closer, Gendry saw that the property was surrounded by a massive carved stone wall, the edges of which had been weathered smooth by the centuries. In the distance, the feature that caught their eyes was a giant tower that seemed to shoot up into the night sky.

"Whoa…" Arya exhaled.

"You don't see that every day," Gendry agreed.

The gate, when they reached it, was at least twenty feet tall, made of wrought iron topped with spikes. There did not appear to be an intercom at the gate, and just as they were wondering how they would get in, the gates slid open with the barest of creaks. Gendry drove through and followed the gravel drive through another grove of the same trees that had lined the road.
The house, as Arya had called it, was nothing short of a castle in Gendry's eyes. He'd only ever seen structures like it on TV and in movies. It was immense, made of a gray stone that looked like they had been cut by hand. Looking up, Gendry saw lights behind many of the windows and balconies that he could see, but even more remained dark, making him wonder how many rooms the house contained.

A set of stone steps led to the grand entrance, and as they exited his car, one side of the giant wooden doors parted and two men stepped outside. One was Davos Seaworth, and the other was undoubtedly Stannis Baratheon.

"Good evening, Gendry and Arya," Davos called out to them, "glad to see you could both make it tonight."

Gendry waited until Arya had reached his side, before they climbed the steps together. Once they had joined the two men at the top, Davos made the necessary introductions.

"Good evening, Gendry," Stannis Baratheon greeted him with a stern expression, holding out his hand for him to shake. "Welcome to Storm's End."

"Good evening." Gendry shook the man's proffered. "Thank you for having us here tonight."

Gendry had told himself that all he would do that night was observe. He would watch, listen and take in everything that he could, which is precisely what he did. He regarded the tall, broad-shouldered man before him with eyes as blue as his, and a jaw line as square as his own. Stannis was balding, as Arya had told him, but what remained of the hair that crowned his head was black, like his. There were permanent drooping lines around the man's mouth, which suggested that Stannis was not a man who smiled a lot.

"There's no doubt that you are one of us," Stannis muttered, having returned the scrutiny.

Gendry released the man's hand and held out the bottle of brandy that Arya had handed to him in the car. "This is for you."

Stannis accepted it and studied the label. "This is my preferred kind. Thank you kindly."

Stannis nodded at Arya, as though he knew who had supplied the brandy, acknowledging that Eddard Stark was aware of this meeting taking place.

"A pleasure to see you again, young Miss Stark," he said to her.

"Likewise, Mr. Baratheon." Arya smiled at him politely.

"You've driven a long way. Let's get you inside and get you both something to drink."

They were led through the enormous doors into the grandest foyer Gendry had ever seen. He could barely contain himself from swiveling his head to gape at what he saw. The floors were made of a dark marble, and the four columns that supported the ceiling were made of the same marble that appeared to have flecks of gold in its striated veins. Circling the foyer were a pair of curving staircases with treads and banisters of gold-flecked marble, and balusters of intricately wrought iron and gold-leaf accents. The staircases led to a second floor landing and gallery, where Gendry glimpsed more columns and covered archways.

There was an ornate crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling, casting a golden light on the large coat of arms that had been hung at the apex of the staircases.
"That's the family sigil," Stannis said, catching the direction of Gendry's gaze. "We Baratheons are of English descent, from a line of noblemen going back centuries."

The coat of arms bore the black silhouette of a crowned stag against a yellow background. There were words inscribed below it, written in Latin. *Furia nostra est.*

"It reads; *ours is the fury,*" Stannis informed him, "the family creed, from back when our ancestors wielded swords and fought in wars for kings. No one is entirely sure what those words mean now, but I like to believe that it stood for the strength, fervor and resilience inherent in those of our blood."

Stannis then indicated that they follow him, and they continued through the doorway beyond the twin staircases into a circular atrium that was even grander than the foyer, boasting even more marble, crystal and gold. The atrium, Gendry realized, formed the base of the tower they had seen from the outside.

Several doors and corridors led from the atrium, some of which were lit, while others remained shadowed. The ceiling, when Gendry looked up, soared high above them, with stained glass windows and a domed roof. The entire expanse was also covered in a mural depicting stormy skies, windswept cliffs and magnificent stags. It was incredible, and Gendry was at a loss for words.

"Shall I call your wife and daughter to join us?" Davos asked Stannis.

"Yes, thank you."

Davos excused himself, and Stannis continued down another corridor with Gendry and Arya behind him.

"This is a beautiful hall, Mr. Baratheon," Arya said from beside Gendry.

"It is grand," Stannis acknowledged, "though I hear that the Great Hall in Winterfell Manor is much the same."

"Oh no," Arya denied, "the Great Hall doesn't have a domed roof."

Gendry raised a brow at her response, wondering at the kind of upbringing she'd had, and how big a castle Winterfell Manor was.

They found themselves in a sitting room with leather armchairs, a stuffed settee and floor to ceiling windows dressed in gold brocade curtains. Gendry sat next to Arya on a leather sofa and watched as a woman, who Stannis introduced as his housekeeper, placed a tray of chilled juice and white wine onto the coffee table before them.

"When should I serve dinner, Mr. Baratheon?"

"Give us fifteen minutes please, Mrs. Jones."

The housekeeper left, and shortly Davos re-joined them, followed by a tall, thin woman with brown hair and a little girl with long black hair worn in two braids down her back.

"Gendry, meet my wife Selyse, and our daughter Shireen…Selyse, this is Gendry Waters. Of course, you remember Arya? Ned Stark's youngest daughter."

Selyse Baratheon did not make the warmest of impressions on Gendry, yet she acknowledged him politely and greeted Arya in turn. The little girl regarded him curiously, and Gendry offered her a smile, bending down on one knee so that he was eye-level with her. He saw the scarring on the side
of her face and neck, seeing how she was an easy target for school bullies.

"Hello Shireen," he held his hand out for her to shake. "My name's Gendry."

Shireen paused a moment longer, but with a nod from her father she returned Gendry's smile and shook his hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Gendry," Shireen said.

"And how old are you?"

"I'm nine and a half."

"So that would make you in third grade?"

"I'm in fourth grade now," she corrected him.

"Oops. My mistake." Gendry pulled a face and Shireen giggled. "What's your favorite thing about school? Mine was recess."

"I like reading," Shireen replied, still giggling.

"Really? Do you have a favorite book?"

"I do."

"Then maybe you can tell me about it later, all right?"

Shireen nodded, looking considerably charmed. Gendry stood back up to see amused looks on the faces of his present company.

"You are a natural with children," Davos stated.

"I have a seven-year old foster-sister." Gendry offered by way of explanation. He had just slipped into big-brother mode without realizing it.

Selyse then handed them glasses of the juice that the housekeeper had brought in and they spent some minutes exchanging pleasantries. Arya fielded questions about her parents and about people named Tully, while Gendry observed, seeing how Arya's mannerisms and speech had changed. She was attentive, articulate, and entirely lady-like, he thought.

Dinner was served in a rectangular dining room that was large enough to have fit the apartment Gendry had lived in back in Flea Bottom. One long wall boasted three large windows that looked out onto a topiary garden, while the opposite wall was clad in oak wainscoting along its bottom half, with the upper half painted a rich forest green in a velvet finish. There was a stone fireplace behind the head of the long table, above which was a painting of a stag locked in battle with a dragon. The stag, Gendry noted, looked like it was winning.

Gendry watched as Stannis pulled out a chair for his wife and as Davos showed the same courtesy to Shireen. Gendry did the same for Arya – he knew to do that much – but he did so without the finesse of the two older men. Once he was seated on an antique high-backed and upholstered dining chair he took note of the elaborately dressed table in front of him. *Fuck me,* he thought, *they really do use this much cutlery.* He'd seen on a TV show once that you were supposed to work from the outside in, yet he still chose to watch how the others ate before even touching his own utensils. He knew he was being watched in return.
Davos Seaworth was a natural conversationalist, where Stannis was not, and it was due to the Executive Assistant's efforts that conversation flowed with any smoothness throughout the seemingly endless courses throughout dinner. Selyse was a reserved woman, somber like her husband, but she displayed the same lady-like demeanor that Gendry saw in Arya, and in Shireen. Stannis carried himself upright, with a quiet elegance, he had observed. I can learn this, Gendry thought. He could learn this genteel behavior, and learn it so well that it would look as natural on him as it did to the people around him.

When the savory courses had been eaten and cleared away, a dessert of raspberry soufflé was served, after which they all moved to another sitting room for coffee and tea. It was during this time that Stannis asked Gendry to take a walk with him. That's when Gendry knew that the real conversation was about to take place. Arya gave him an encouraging look over the top of Shireen's head as Gendry followed Stannis out of the room.

"Did you enjoy your dinner?" Stannis asked as they headed back towards the atrium, "I hope everything was to your liking."

"It was great, thank you," Gendry replied.

"I don't care much for these fancy meals myself, but Selyse insisted on it," Stannis claimed, "she said that if I was going to teach you about being a Baratheon, then I needed to show you how a Baratheon ate."

"Like kings?" Gendry couldn't help but ask.

"Indeed," Stannis replied dryly, "I might be in the business of importing luxury foods, but I don't indulge in them myself. Otherwise, I might end up as rotund as Robert."

Gendry had noted earlier that Stannis retained a trim waistline and lean physique, in contrast with his older brother.

"Genetically speaking, does that mean I'm more likely to get fat when I'm older?" Gendry wondered.

"Only if you over-indulge like Robert does," Stannis replied. "Our family in general, seems to have been gifted with a fast metabolism. Robert however, has an even faster mouth that consumes far more than his metabolism can keep up with."

Gendry snickered, despite himself, though he sensed that Stannis had not meant for that to be a joke at his brother's expense, but a statement of fact.

Stannis gave him a tour of the rooms that they passed, briefly explaining the history of when the rooms were built and what purpose they served, but they didn't linger in any one place long. It seemed Stannis had another destination in mind. Eventually, they reached a set of doors that led to a carpeted hallway and into a room that felt distinctly older than the rest of the house.

The walls were of the same gray stone he had seen outside, and worn smooth in places. There were no windows in this room, and the air felt cooler somehow.

"This room forms part of the original house that was built in the early 1700's. The rest of what you saw out there was added to and expanded on bit by bit in the centuries that came after."

Stannis flicked on a switch, and the portraits that hung on the wall now became bathed in light. Gendry's eyes widened and he took a wary step forward, closer to the portraits.

"These are the former patriarchs of House Baratheon. These are the men who have come before
you." Stannis then pointed to the other side of the room. "Over there are their wives, their daughters and sons. *This,* Gendry —" Stannis held his palms up between the wall of portraits, "— this is your heritage. This is where you came from."

Gendry came close to being overwhelmed then. His heart was beating hard in his chest. It felt as though a lock had been opened to a part of him that he had not known existed, until that moment. He stepped towards the last of the portraits – of a man with thick black hair and piercing blue eyes – bearing the name Steffon.

"That's my father," Stannis informed him, "your grandfather."

"My…grandfather," Gendry repeated.

"Yes…and that is his father before him, and his before him."

Gendry went down the line, reading their names and saying them in his mind. *Steffon, son of Ormund, son of Lyonel…*and on it went. In all of these men, Gendry recognized pieces of himself. He had Steffon's eyebrows, Ormund's nose and even Lyonel's ears. He crossed to the other side of the room and studied the portraits of the black-haired sons and daughters, all the while struggling to contain his emotions.

For many years he had wondered who he was and where he had come from, never daring to imagine that he'd ever see the faces of so many men and women who looked like him…and now he knew their names.

"Why?" Gendry found himself asking, turning to face Stannis. "Why did you bring me here? What are you hoping to achieve? And, *how* did you find me? Davos told me that you were the one who first learned about my existence."

"I expected that you would have many questions," Stannis began, "and I shall start by answering your last question first. How did I come to find you? By chance, if you must know. I was in the family archives one day, and I came across an old letter addressed to my brother from a woman named Andrea Waters."

"That's my mom's name," Gendry murmured.

"It is," Stannis nodded. "She had written to my brother to let him know that his son, you, had been born. She said that she expected nothing from him, but only asked that one day you be given the chance to know your father."

"She wrote that, and Robert ignored her?"

"It seemed that way. The envelope seal had been torn open so I assumed that the contents had been read."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Gendry muttered darkly.

"In any case," Stannis continued, "I couldn't just ignore it, so I began looking into it. I had difficulty at the start, because your public records made no mention of your birth father in the first place."

"You mean my birth certificate?" Gendry asked.

"Correct." Stannis nodded. "I then sought assistance from a man named Jon Arryn, and together with a private investigator we were able to track down the last known address of where you and your mother had lived before she passed away."
"The boarding house?"

Gendry had a flashback of the single room apartment that he and his mother had called home. It hadn't been much, but he remembered being happy there.

"The boarding house on Ale Street, yes." Stannis nodded again. "The landlord turned out to be quite a hoarder who collected belongings left behind by previous tenants. For a couple of hundred dollars, he let us take the box of belongings that had been left in your apartment after you became a ward of the State. Inside this box, amongst old utilities bills, was the original copy of your birth certificate."

"It was there all along?" Gendry's eyes widened in surprise. "Then, why was my record at the registry office different? The certificate I've seen has always been incomplete."

Stannis' expression became shrouded then, his eyes darting away for a millisecond. "All Jon and I were able to find out was that sometime after your birth, someone had gone to the trouble of changing your birth certificate. We can only assume that it was your mother who made the changes, and her reasons for doing so will never be known."

"Do you still have the original copy?"

Stannis shook his head. "No, I do not. Jon handed it over to Robert when he went to confront him about you. It took Jon's influence, and a heart attack scare, before Robert decided he couldn't deny your existence any longer."

"Who is Jon Arryn?"

"He was Robert's most trusted mentor and former CEO of Vale Corporations. A father figure to him, you could say. He was going to become Robert's business partner, before his untimely passing a few months ago. Jon Arryn was also Arya's uncle by marriage, if you must know. It was because of his death that Eddard Stark became Robert's business partner instead, and why his entire family moved to King's Landing."

"She never mentioned anything about an uncle's death."

"She wouldn't have." Stannis shrugged. "The Stark children will have been taught not to discuss private matters outside of the family."

Gendry sighed. He had been involved with Arya's family without even knowing it.

"Do you know who sold my story to the newspaper?"

"No," Stannis replied, "Robert has the only copy of your real birth certificate, but whether he keeps it locked up in a vault is another issue. Any number of people could have laid eyes on it since."

_It doesn't matter anyway_, Gendry decided, _knowing isn't going to change anything._

"So, why did you bother looking for me?" he finally asked.

"I saw it as my duty. If there was a child out there with our blood in his veins then I had to find him. We take care of our own, Gendry," Stannis stated. "You are Baratheon by blood, and I will not stand for anyone daring to look down on anyone with our blood, bastard or otherwise. My brother…_your father_, is not doing his job, so I must step in where he has failed."

"Is that what you care about?" Gendry frowned. "You care about your family's reputation that much?"
"We are one of the oldest and amongst the most well known families in the country. From now on your name will always be synonymous with ours. You will always be on stage, always be in the spotlight, and you would be well advised to learn your lines and cues, and learn them well." Stannis gave him a measuring stare. "Unless you would risk making a fool of yourself and of those good people who’ve raised you – the Mott family, were they called? Because you need to know that the show must go on. Whether you will it or not, the show will go on. You have a choice to make, Gendry Waters. What will it be?"

Gendry ran a hand over his face, needing a moment to calm himself. He saw the truth in the words Stannis had said, which uncannily mirrored Ellen's concerns. However, he couldn't help but feel that there was something that Stannis was keeping to himself. He had sensed that the man was deliberately hiding something from him. He had even seen it on Stannis' face when the shroud had come over his features, though Gendry couldn't put his finger on what it could be. For now, he had to accept that he was only hearing half of the story.

"If you care so much about your family's reputation, why aren't you fixing up Joffrey's attitude problem?" Gendry asked rudely, knowing he was insulting the man's nephew.

Stannis merely shook his head. "That boy is beyond my reach. His mother keeps him too close to her bosom. He has far too much Lannister blood in him, if you ask me. He's far too arrogant, far too self-entitled and far too…blonde." Stannis then pierced Gendry with a gaze that delved far too deep for comfort. "You are more Baratheon than any of Robert's children."

Gendry's eyes widened a fraction, wondering at the intent behind the man's words, but he already had too many things on his mind to dwell on it.

"The show goes on, huh?" Gendry muttered.

Stannis took in the note of acceptance in Gendry's tone. "You agree then?"

Taking a deep breath, Gendry nodded. "Yeah."

"Good lad." Stannis clapped him on the shoulder, wearing the closest thing to a smile Gendry had yet seen on the man's face.

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Arya

Gendry had delivered her to her front door at ten minutes to midnight after spending the last hour of the drive back to King's Landing in complete silence. She had sensed that there was a lot going on in Gendry's mind. The tension rolling off his body had been palpable, and it had been impossible for her to remain unaffected.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she had asked him at one point, "when you're ready, I mean."

"Yeah," Gendry had nodded distractedly. "I just need to get my head around everything, you know? Meeting Stannis…meeting Shireen. Storm's End was just a lot more than I was expecting."

She had wanted to do something to offer him some kind of comfort, and all she could think to do was to reach over and pat his shoulder. He had seemed startled by her touch, but he'd given her a glance from the side of his eye, before he'd taken one hands off the steering wheel and covered hers with it. His hand had been cool against hers, and for a brief moment his fingers had tangled with hers. Gendry had let go abruptly, and Arya had placed her hands on her lap. Silence had taken over the car, but some of the tension had left him. Her father had been waiting at the door, and he had
spent a few minutes talking with Gendry after he had told her to get to bed.

It was close to 9 AM by the time she woke up the following morning, and even after having a light breakfast and telling her father about how the evening had went, her father had not offered to discuss the details of his conversation with Gendry with her. It was fine, she figured. She trusted her father to let her know if there was a real issue. It was also reassuring to know that Gendry now had her father in his corner.

Finishing her breakfast she’d gone upstairs to shower and wash her hair, noting that she would soon need a trim and do something about her purple tips because the color had now faded. She shaved her legs, and after her shower she even went the extra step and moisturized. Granted, her grooming routine was nowhere near as involved as Sansa’s, but the little that she did made her feel refreshed and just that little bit more polished.

There were two text messages on her phone when she wandered back into her room. Both messages had been received in the last ten minutes. The first one was from Gendry.

"Thank you. Really, I appreciate you being there for me. If you're going to the recital tonight, maybe I'll see you there." Gendry had written.

"I'm glad I could be there for you. Sansa is performing and the whole family will be going tonight. See ya later." Arya had replied.

The second message was from Jaqen, which was decidedly more demanding. "I want to see you today. Call me when you read this."

Arya wanted to see him too, but she wasn’t sure what mood he would be in. She had not spoken to him since Thursday night, and that conversation had not gone down well. Jaqen had hung up on her abruptly, which had stung, and she had received no messages or phone calls for the rest of the night or throughout Friday. They’d had disagreements before, but she’d never heard Jaqen as angry as he’d been that night. They had to make up, she knew that. Arya only hoped that he had cooled down over the last two days so that they could have a proper conversation.

She now called him back with a cautious hopefulness.

"You called me back, lovely girl," Jaqen said by way of greeting, "I was starting to worry that you would not."

"Why wouldn't I?" she returned, "I want to see you too."

"I will pick you up in fifteen minutes. Be ready."

"Fifteen minutes? Where are you?" Braavos was forty-five minutes away.

"I have been sitting in a café near your house all morning," he replied.

"What? You've been waiting all morning?"

"That is correct," Jaqen's tone suggested that he was smiling. "Fifteen minutes."

He hung up, and Arya quickly got dressed, pulling on jeans and an oversized sweater before clipping her hair behind one ear. As she fixed her face, she wondered how Jaqen's mood could have shifted so swiftly.

She bounded down the stairs the moment she heard Jaqen's Jeep in the driveway. The exertion had
caused her cheeks to flush, and she was puffing when she greeted him.

"Hi." She smiled at him, strapping her seatbelt on. "You were quick. It hasn't been fifteen minutes yet."

Jaqen glanced at the clock on the dashboard. "Ten minutes? I thought I was much faster than that."

Arya laughed, glad to see that his mood really had improved. "I hope you weren't speeding."

"A man wanted to see his lovely girl very much," Jaqen said, throwing her a meaningful glance before he kicked the jeep into gear and exited the gates.

"Where are we going?" she asked when it appeared he was heading to the Expressway.

"Back to my place," he said, "I am free until 5 PM today, and I would like to spend every moment between now and then alone with you. I will also make certain that we will not be interrupted."

"Okay," Arya replied, feeling instantly warmer at the way he had said alone.

The roads to Braavos were clear of the usual traffic, and once they had taken the exit that would lead them directly to Jaqen's neighborhood, Jaqen reached over the gears to pull her hand to his lips.

"I want to apologize for how I spoke to you the other night," he began, placing a kiss on the back of her hand. "I think you know by now that I am the jealous type, but that does not excuse the fact that I hung up on you quite rudely. I am sorry."

"I'm sorry, too." Arya squeezed his hand. "I broke our date, and I disappointed you. For those things, I am sorry."

"There is more that you wish to say. I can feel it." Jaqen prompted.

"But, I can't apologize for wanting to help my friend. Please understand that, Jaqen."

"I know," Jaqen said, kissing her knuckles once more.

As he let go of her hand, she wondered why their exchange of apologies, instead of making her feel better, seemed to have the opposite effect. It wasn't guilt, exactly, but there was an uneasiness in her gut that she couldn't ignore.

"Did the meeting with his uncle go well?" Jaqen asked.

Startled that he would bring up the topic of Gendry voluntarily, Arya looked at him. His face was impassive.

"Yes, I think so. It hit him hard…seeing the Baratheon ancestral home, and meeting his cousin."

"What kind of help did his uncle offer him?"

"I don't know." Arya shook her head. "They disappeared and spoke in private. All I know is that Gendry was really quiet when they came back, and he stayed quiet on the way home. He did speak with my father, though I don't know what was said."

"I feel that you are getting too involved in his personal matters, Arya. I don't know that this is a good thing."

"I can't ignore him when he asks me for help."
"I know." Jaqen sighed. "You have a good heart, and that is one of the things I like about you. You want to help people, like you wanted to help your sister and Sandor Clegane. I only hope that you do not forget what happened when the help you sought to give, became a hindrance to those you were trying to help."

"You want me to stop helping Gendry, is that what you're trying to say?"

"I only want you to consider whether the help he seeks is absolutely necessary. If you are all too ready to jump in and give him the answers he wants immediately, you may be stopping him from learning how to deal with his own problems. Do not forget that it is his life that he has to live and not yours, Arya. If he is to learn to adapt to his new life, then he must be the one to find his own answers."

She was taken aback by his words. She had never thought that she could actually be doing Gendry a disservice by wanting to do everything she could to help him. Had she been about to make the same stupid mistake that she had made when she had attempted to help Sansa and Sandor? It horrified her to think that she could again be meddling, without even realizing it.

"You're right…Of course you're right," Arya murmured.

"Just be careful. Can you do that?" Jaqen asked in softer tones, "I also do not want to see you hurt. There may come a time when he decides he no longer wants your help."

"I will," she said, eyes opened to a very real possibility she had failed to see.

"Good. Now, I no longer wish to discuss him." Jaqen pulled up in front of his house. "He has occupied enough of my time with you."

His aunt and uncle were not at home, and the first thing that Jaqen did as soon as he had closed the front door behind them was to sweep her up in his hug, pulling her tight against his chest and burying his face into her neck.

"This past week, not seeing you, has been unbearably long," he said against her neck, making her shiver from the feel of his lips on her skin. "All I want is to keep you in my arms like this for the next five hours."

"Hmm," Arya purred, "it's gonna be difficult to climb the stairs to get to your room if you don't let me go for at least thirty seconds."

Jaqen laughed, and then he was hoisting her up over his shoulder. Arya shrieked in surprise, and still laughing, he carried her up the stairs.

"Put me down! Oh, gods! Jaqen, put me down!" Arya cried, clinging to his back tightly.

"As a girl commands."

Jaqen placed a hand on her backside and deposited her on top of his bed. He joined her, pulling her back into his embrace, and then he was kissing her. The scent of him filled her nose, spicy and warm, and when combined with the feel of his mouth on hers and his hands on her body, the sensations became…intense. The word was appropriate, she decided, because Jaqen exuded an aura that demanded attention and – dare she say it – a kind of reverence.

Jaqen was the kind of guy that you wanted to look your way, and when he should deem to acknowledge your existence, instead of feeling gratified, he only left you wanting more. Everything he did, from composing and playing music, performing and recording, he did them all with such
focus and intensity that he could only be called a perfectionist.

It was, Arya realized, to be expected that he would display that same intensity when making out with a girl.

"You're too much," she murmured when she managed to pull her mouth free.

"I missed you," he grinned at her, though he relented and instead lay on the pillow behind him, inviting her to curl against his side.

Arya did, resting her head on his shoulder. They talked then, and had their first proper conversation all week. Their conversation was punctuated with frequent kissing, flirting, and Jaqen's cheesy jokes. It was nice to talk on the phone and all, but hearing each other's voices and seeing each other on video chats could not replace being able to feel the warmth of his chest under her hands, feeling his body shake with laughter, and seeing the flecks of gold in his hazel eyes from having his face so close to her own.

Sometime later when they felt hungry, they went to the kitchen where Jaqen showed her how he made his version of the perfect Monte Cristo sandwich.

"You're showing off, aren't you?" Arya grinned at him.

"I am," he wiggled an eyebrow at her. "Are you impressed?"

Arya, who could barely fry an egg without burning it to a crisp, told him that she was indeed suitably impressed.

Once they had returned to his room, Jaqen spent a minute to put some music on – a European DJ chillout mix of some kind – and that's when she realized Jaqen was ready to do more than just kiss and talk. His expression when he turned around to face her confirmed it. She must have made a noise, because he smiled at her reassuringly.

"We stop when you say that you want to stop, I promise you."

Arya hesitated a fraction, but it was not because of her obvious inexperience. She wanted to know how make him feel good as well.

"Show me how," she blurted out, "I want to be able to do it too."

He tilted his head, understanding what she was asking of him, and Jaqen held his hand out to her. "If you would learn, you must come with me."

She took his hand, and allowed him to guide her back onto his bed. When he kissed her this time, Arya knew that he had been holding back, and she tried not to think about how much more experienced he was. He was older by four years, and he was sexy as sin. She had no illusions about how many girls he might have had before her. She was now benefitting from his experience, and she moaned when he caught her earlobe between his teeth. He guided her hands, showing her where he liked to be touched, and he whispered to her, telling her that she didn't need to be so gentle. She decided that she was ready to let him try anything with her, because she knew that he would stop the moment she told him to. She trusted him.

That's how she found herself lying there with her sweater on the floor, and the fly on her jeans undone some moments later. She stared at her sweater. How did that get there? She wondered, seconds before Jaqen's shirt joined it. It was the first time she was seeing him shirtless in person, and she stared at the broad shoulders and muscular chest she'd only touched beneath his clothes. She then
took in his firm abdominals, narrow waist and tapered hips that formed a V, which disappeared into his waistband. Jaqen worked out, and it showed.

"A girl stares too much," he suddenly said, "does she like what she sees?"

"Don't ask me that." Arya glanced at him again. "What do you think?"

Jaqen laughed. "A man also likes what he sees. Very much so."

She was more naked than she had ever been in front of anyone. Even her own family had not seen her this undressed in years, and she now felt a distinct moment of shyness as Jaqen's eyes studied her bra-covered torso. Her breasts were small, high on her chest, and still growing, she thought hopefully.

Jaqen reached up and slipped a finger under each of her bra straps, his thumbs stroking the skin of her shoulders as he watched her reactions. When no objection was forthcoming, he slipped the straps down her arms completely so that the soft triangular cups fell away, allowing him to see her breasts uncovered.

His eyes locked with hers and she saw his hunger evident on his features. He cupped her breasts, one in each hand, lifting them and massaging them, rolling her nipples between his fingers, and all the while his eyes never left her face.

"Don't watch me," she said, echoing a sentiment she'd once told him before.

"As a girl wishes," he acquiesced, and dropped his mouth to her breast so that he could no longer watch her face.

She gasped, eyes fluttering shut, her hand automatically going to the back of his neck to hold him closer. She wanted to swear, but the swear words were lost in her gasps as Jaqen continued to suck and nip at her breasts. She felt his hands on the waistband of her jeans, and with more strength than she was expecting, he lifted her hips off the mattress so that he could tug her jeans down her thighs.

A moment later, the denim joined her sweater and Jaqen's shirt on the floor. She was glad she'd worn a matching set of undergarments that morning. Even if they were not made of lace, at least the black jersey was sleek and flattering on her frame. Arya felt his fingers on her then, stroking the scrap of fabric between her legs, and for a moment she froze.

"Jaqen," she said his name sharply, her fingers tightening in the hair on the nape of his neck.

He looked up to look at her face, and he saw the uncertainty in her eyes. She wasn't ready to have sex with him. The panties were staying on.

"I will stop, when you say stop." Jaqen reassured her again.

"Okay." She nodded. "Okay."

"Just relax lovely girl," he whispered in her ear, "trust me."

His mouth came down on hers again, and when his tongue passed her lips she let him dictate the pressure and pace of their kiss. His hand between her legs began to move again, gently, experimentally, tentatively, learning what she would allow and what she liked. Soon, she felt an embarrassing amount of wetness there, and Jaqen's touch became bolder, his hand slipping into her panties making her jump at the sudden firmness of his fingers against her skin. She felt incredibly vulnerable then, and she fully understood the power over her body that she was giving him.
"I trust you," she said against his lips.

Jaqen smiled, and pushed his tongue into her mouth once more, stroking the inside of her mouth as his fingers between her legs began to stroke her most secret of places, seeking out every fold, every crease, teaching her body its first lessons in sexual intimacy and pleasure. Arya sighed deeply when he found the sensitive bud of her clit, and her body arched instinctively, her hips rocking against his hand, wanting more.

Jaqen shifted so that Arya lay higher in the cradle of his arm, allowing him better reach. He broke their kiss so that he could look at her face, much to her dismay, but she knew it was pointless to argue with him. He used his longest finger to find the valley between the folds of her sex, finding her opening…but he did not penetrate her. Still, she was incredibly sensitive there, and Arya gasped loudly and clutched at his forearms, her instincts to close her legs proving too strong, resulting in her trapping his hand there between her thighs.

"Oh gods!" Arya's eyes were wide as she looked up at him. "Jaqen…"

"Shhh," he cooed, "relax."

He really knew what he was doing, she thought, before she stopped thinking altogether, thoroughly distracted by the sensations he was eliciting in her body. He stroked her there at her entrance, flicking and swirling his fingers repeatedly until she was gripping his arm so tight that she left a mark that would remain there for days as testament to her gratification.

Just when she thought that she could no longer withstand this torture any longer, Jaqen changed the angle of his hand and used the pad of his thumb to apply a gentle pressure on her clit. It was the combination of this focused attention that finally sent her over the edge. Arya bit her lip as the sensation caught her off-guard. She tried to hide her face in his chest, but he denied her.

"A man must see this face," he whispered above her, "this face that no one else has seen."

It was wondrous, startling even, and Arya learnt what her body was capable of…and it was beautiful. Jaqen's hand stilled, and only when he was satisfied with watching her face did he remove his fingers from her panties. He then drew her to his bare chest and hugged her tight.

When she had caught her breath, as was the natural progression of such things, she boldly inched a hand over his abdomen, down to the snap on his jeans. Jaqen guided her as her slim hand drew him from the confines of his briefs, and he endured her curiously fascinated gaze when she saw his erection for the first time. Arya had brothers, and she'd seen naked boys before. But this was different. Jaqen was an entirely different matter.

He whispered to her again, showing her a different kind of touch, and she marveled at the contradiction of hardness and softness beneath her fingers. Nervously, and eagerly, she imitated the up and down motion he had shown her. And now it was her turn to watch as his face bore expressions she had never seen before. He held her to him. Sometimes he reached up to play with her breasts, and sometimes he would turn her face so that he could kiss her. Soon, a sheen of sweat had formed on his forehead. His eyes drifted shut, and he whispered for her to go faster.

"A girl must see this face," she whispered to him.

His eyes fluttered open a fraction to watch her, and a smile curved his lips. Moments later, he was spilling into her hand. Arya watched it all with a level of satisfaction and wonder.

"A girl learns quickly," Jaqen said in a husky voice, reaching for the box of Kleenex on his
Arya wiped her hands and smiled at him. "I could learn more."

"That makes me incredibly happy to hear that, lovely girl," Jaqen kissed the tip of her nose. "But, my self-control can only be tested so much today."

She laughed at the pained expression on his face, but her laughter turned into a horrified gasp when she caught sight of the clock on his nightstand.

"It's four-thirty?" she screeched.

"Time really does fly when one is having fun, no?"

"Oh my god! I'm going to be late! I have to go!"

Wriggling out of his arms, Arya jumped off the bed and picked up her discarded clothing, clutching them to her chest as she dashed to Jaqen's bathroom, hearing his laughter following her.

"It's not funny!" she yelled through the door as she freshened up as best as she could, "my sister has this recital tonight, and I'm supposed to be home in an hour!"

"I will get you a ride home, so don't panic." Jaqen called back to her, which he shortly followed up with more specific details. "Five minutes, Arya. Your ride will be here shortly."

She returned to his room and began gathering her belongings as Jaqen now entered the vacated bathroom. Arya's phone rang suddenly, and she hurried to answer it.

"Hey, Sansa. What's up?" she said in what she hoped was a casual tone.

"Can I have Gendry's phone number?" Sansa demanded without greetings.

"Huh? Why?"

"The sophomore representative was rushed to hospital with appendicitis just a moment ago, and now Mr. Bard's asked me to do the showcase in her place, but I'm supposed to go on at 8 PM and that's just over three hours away and I have to prepare something by then, because the show must go on!"

"Calm down, Sansa. You're babbling."

"I can't calm down! I have nothing prepared! Are you going to give me Gendry's number or not? I need his help!"

"Okay, okay! I'll text you when you hang up."

"Thanks! See you later! Bye!"

Sansa hung up, and Arya texted her Gendry's number as promised, hoping someone was around to calm her down because she was sounding hysterical. Jaqen came out of the bathroom dressed in a new shirt and with his hair neatly combed once more.

"Your sister?" he asked, having heard Arya's side of the conversation.

"Yep, and she's in a panic about a showcase tonight."

"She is a singer, huh? I shall have to hear her one day."
"I'm sure there will be videos up on the net later tonight,"

Jaqen tilted his head. "You have this unusual expression on your face. What is going through your mind, lovely girl?"

She crinkled her nose. "I'm thinking… after we did all of that… how is it possible that I'm going to walk out of here with my virginity still intact?"

Jaqen roared with laughter. "Only you could possibly think of such a question at this time!" He pulled her back into his arms, and she wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing her cheek to his chest. "When do you think I may see you again?"

"How about the twenty-seventh?" she suggested, "I don't think my family is doing anything major on that day. I might be able to get out."

"I am looking forward to it already."

Arya got back to Chateau Maegor with bare minutes to spare, though her mother did glance at her disapprovingly for cutting it so close.

"You need to be dressed and ready to leave in twenty minutes, Arya."

"Yes, mother."

Arya showered and changed in record time, and as she sat in front of her dressing table mirror fixing her hair, she remembered observing herself like this one night not too long ago, lamenting how the wide-eyed girl staring back at her still seemed so naive despite the stylish clothes she wore.

Regarding her reflection again, Arya saw that the girl staring back at her now had a different expression in her eyes. The girl in the mirror, she realized, no longer had such innocent eyes.

Chapter End Notes

A Game of Thrones – Chapter 27 Eddard VI
(Visiting the Street of Steel.)

Ned smiled. “Did you make a falcon helm for Lord Arryn?”
Tobho Mott paused a long moment and set aside his wine. “The Hand did call upon me, with Lord Stannis, the king’s brother. I regret to say, they did not honor me with their patronage.”
Ned looked at the man evenly, saying nothing, waiting. He had found over the years that silence sometimes yielded more than questions. And so it was this time.
“They asked to see the boy,” the armorer said, “so I took them back to the forge.”
“The boy.” Ned echoed. He had no notion who the boy might be. “I should like to see the boy as well.”

A Clash of Kings – Chapter 31 Catelyn III
(Stannis accuses Cersei of incest, and that her children were abominations resulting of this incest.)

“Can you prove any word of this fable?”
Stannis ground his teeth.
Robert could never have known, Catelyn thought, or Cersei would have lost her head in an instant. “Lord Stannis,” she asked, “if you knew the queen to be guilty of such monstrous crimes, why did you keep silent?”

“I did not keep silent,” Stannis declared, “I brought my suspicion to Jon Arryn.”

“Rather than your own brother?”

“My brother’s regard for me was never more than dutiful,” said Stannis. “From me, such accusations would have seemed peevish and self-serving, a means of placing myself first in the line of succession. I believed Robert would be more disposed to listen if the charges came from Lord Arryn, whom he loved.”
Episode 28 "The Recital"

Chapter Notes

Part of this chapter is purely for fun because I have had a few people ask if Sansa and Gendry would ever perform together, so I had to write this because I also wanted to see it happen. Enjoy it for what it is :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gossip Spyder

Good afternoon folks!

Everyone, please don't forget that the King's Landing Prep Annual Recital is on tonight! This is the event where KL Prep's talented performing arts students get the opportunity to showcase their musical, vocal, dance and dramatic prowess in front of fellow students, parents and friends.

In addition to choral pieces performed by our Award Winning choir – this year including Sansa Stark – I have heard little whispers saying that the Brotherhood Without Banners will be making an appearance tonight, following their sellout show in Braavos last weekend. Three of the band's five members, being Beric Dondarrion, Edric Dayne and Gendry Waters, currently attend KL Prep. Thoros Myr and Tom Sevenstreams are both KL Prep Old Boys and are members of the Performing Arts Alumni.

There will be dance numbers, performances from the Glee Club, as well as individual and group showcases by reps from each grade. So, everyone please show your support and Christmas Spirit by coming along to watch! Auditorium doors open at 5:30 PM for a 6:30 PM start.

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Sansa

"The show must go on, Gendry," Sansa had said into the phone.

"What did you just say?" Gendry had asked, his voice sounding deeper over the phone.

"I said, the show must go on," she'd repeated, "Mr. Bard is insisting that I take over for the sophomore rep and you're the only one who can help me...please."

"Do I even have a choice?" had been his response.

"You do," she'd replied, "and...I know that you'll make the right choice." Gendry's sigh had made the phone crackle in her ear. "All right, I'll do it."

Sansa was ecstatic that he had agreed, because she didn't have a Plan B and Mr. Bard had already given her special permission to include Gendry in her plans even though he was not in her grade.
"Due to extenuating circumstances, Ms. Stark, you have my permission." The musical director had been lenient towards her, and now Sansa had to deliver.

She had been in the auditorium since noon that day. The final dress rehearsal had been underway, with each group of performers taking it in turns to utilize the stage, remembering positions and making last minute adjustments to their performances. The sophomore girl who'd been chosen to represent their grade, a contemporary dancer, had been on the stage going through her number when she had collapsed in a heap after performing a set of leaps and pirouettes. The teachers had initially thought she had injured her leg, but she had been clutching her lower abdomen instead. She'd been rushed to hospital, and within the hour the school had been notified that it was appendicitis and the girl was having surgery that very night.

The showcase was intended to spotlight the talents in each grade that were being nurtured within the Performing Arts programs. The teachers had debated omitting the sophomore showcase altogether given that it was a lot of pressure to hand over to another student on such short notice – but then Sansa had walked past the corner where the teachers had been huddled, and Mr. Bard had volunteered her as a substitute. With all the teachers gazing at her expectantly and with Mr. Bard singing her praises, Sansa had found it impossible to refuse.

Mr. Bard had excused her from the rest of the dress rehearsal so that she could prepare, giving her permission to use an empty music room. And that's when she'd had a minor meltdown because she couldn't just sing any old song. This was her debut performance and her entire family was going to be in the audience, not to mention Sandor. Then, there was also her own sense of pride to consider. Her performance had to make an impact, one way or another.

Gendry had arrived with the rest of the Brotherhood Without Banners shortly after she had called him, all of whom were dressed entirely in black. Gendry had introduced her to the guys she hadn't officially met, and then she got right down and explained what she had in mind, giving him printed lyrics and tablature and handing him her phone so that he could listen to her chosen song.

"Why this song?" Gendry had wondered. "If you want me to sing with you, why did you choose Tristan Prettyman and Jason Mraz? I sound nothing like Jason Mraz."

Sansa had sighed. "Mr. Bard had some pretty strict limitations about my song options. He reminded me that this is a family event, I have to keep it upbeat, and because there are parents and kids in the audience I couldn't choose anything remotely profane or explicit. So, this is our song."

"Come on, Gendry. You can do this." Beric had taken the tablature from his hands and glanced at the chords. "If you just change the arrangement and delivery a little bit, you two could really make it your own."

"Will you help us, Beric?" Sansa's expression had brightened with hope.

"Sure, but we'd better get onto it right now. We have less than three hours left, so let's get this done!"

Between Beric and Gendry, they had soon worked out an arrangement that stayed near faithful to the original, but also suited Gendry's personal playing style. Sansa had known that Beric's compositional talents were on another level and she couldn't believe how lucky she was to have him there to help, right when she needed it most. She had been worried before, but with each passing minute she had grown more and more confident that they could pull it off. By the time Jeyne came to fetch her for the choir's opening performance, she was feeling entirely positive.

"Let's go, Sansa," Jeyne had said, dragging her by the arm towards the auditorium.
"Break a leg," Beric had told her, "and get back here as soon as you can."

Sansa and Jeyne had quietly slipped backstage and taken their places amongst the other choir members who were all smoothing down skirts and straightening ties in a last minute bid to ensure they were all presentable. Having been banned from carrying mobile phones backstage, Sansa had to trust that her family and Sandor were now sitting somewhere in the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen, to open tonight's recital and to get us all into the spirit of Christmas, please welcome the King's Landing Preparatory Harmonic Choir!"

There was warm applause from the audience and in orderly rows, the choir filed onto the stage to their designated places. Mr. Bard stood before them holding his conductor's baton in the air for attention, then with an upward flick of his wrist they inhaled as one, before they began to fill the auditorium with the distinctive four-note *ostinato* of *The Carol of the Bells*.

Looking out into the audience and past the harsh stage lights, Sansa spotted her parents and siblings in the front row of the second tier. Rickon waved to her while her parents smiled in encouragement. Arya and Bran pulled stupid faces at her. Sansa made a mental note to strangle them when they got home as she fought the urge to laugh. She couldn't spot Sandor, but she trusted that he would be there. He had promised to come, despite being strongly opposed to the idea of watching two whole hours of song and dance numbers. At school. On a Saturday night.

When the choir finished their song, as soon as Sansa was clear of the stage she bolted back to the music room. However, before she could reach her destination she was pulled into another empty room by a figure who should have been too large to move that fast, or that silently.

"Sandor!" Sansa grinned at him moments before he dropped a kiss on her lips. "You made it!"

"You wouldn't have forgiven me if I didn't," he rasped.

She hugged him quickly before firmly pushing him away from her. She had business to attend to.

"You got my message, right?"

"You mean that rambling, disjointed voicemail about how the show must go on?" Sandor's mouth twitched with humor. "Yeah, I got it."

She shoved him out of the door playfully. "Anyway, I got Gendry to agree to my plan. I'm going to rehearse with him now."

"That's why you're in a rush, huh?" he mumbled, following after her. "You were good, by the way. I mean, the choir was good."

She gave him a smile. "Thanks for coming."

They entered the music room to find Gendry belting out his verse of their song, though he stopped when he saw her walking in with Sandor.

"Come on, we don't have time to waste." Gendry motioned her over, standing up to take Beric's acoustic guitar from him. "You ready? We need to go through this again and again in the time we have."

Sansa nodded, and while Sandor acknowledged the other people in the room – who all looked mildly alarmed at his presence – she took a seat next to Gendry and began singing. Beric stopped them every so often, telling them to watch their timing and to keep watching each other for visual..."
"Something's isn't right," Edric said after their fourth run through.

"You're right," Beric agreed, "their sound is good, but it's lacking something."

"I thought we sounded great," Gendry said.

"You do," Tom insisted, "but, visually...you guys look kind of wooden."

"I agree." Thoros nodded. "You guys need to look as though you're enjoying singing together. We can't believe what you're singing about if you both look like strangers sitting next to each other on the bus. Try looking more...flirtatious?"

Gendry sighed. "Flirtatious?"

"Don't worry." Sansa put her hand on Gendry's arm, hating for him to be put off by the criticism. "We've got this, okay? We'll flirt our asses of when we get on stage. It'll be okay."

Gendry glanced in Sandor's direction. "Tell him to knock it off, will you? He's been glaring at me since he walked in."

Sansa turned to give Sandor a look, who shrugged, but stopped scowling nonetheless.

Mr. Bard came to check on them some minutes before they were due onstage to confirm their readiness, more than pleased when Sansa informed him that they were ready.

"Wonderful! I knew I could rely on the two of you. Now, I need you both to be backstage in five minutes, okay?" Mr. Bard instructed.

Shortly, they all made their way to the auditorium and while Sandor and the other guys found a spot where they could watch from backstage, Gendry and Sansa waited in the wings for their turn. The freshman performing before them was a violin prodigy, and after them would be a group of juniors who were members of a jazz combo. The jazz combo's instruments were already on stage, hidden behind the mid-curtain, while the violinist, an unassuming boy with glasses and mousy brown hair carrying a bright green electric violin, stood in the wings nervously waiting to be called to the stage at any moment.

Once on stage, the unassuming boy transformed into a rock-star, performing Coldplay's *Viva La Vida* on his electric violin and utilizing loop pedals to create layer upon layer of rhythm, harmony and lyrical sound. After his performance, and while the audience clapped and cheered the stage crew quickly and quietly dashed across the stage behind the now closed front of house curtains, arranging the stools and microphones that Sansa and Gendry required. With one last glance at one another, they took their spots behind the closed curtains. The compere briefly explained the reason for the change to the expected line-up, before finally introducing them.

"Without further ado, please put your hands together for Sansa Stark and Gendry Waters, performing 'Shy That Way'!"

The audience applauded. The curtains parted and the spotlight shone warmly above them. Remembering everything Beric and the guys had coached them on, Sansa pushed everything else from her mind and focused solely on the tall, handsome guy in the seat next to her. A crush, she thought. *I have a crush on this guy, and I keep staring at him because he's really hot, but I'm shy and can't approach him, and all I can do is hope that he'll make the first move.*
Sansa flashed Gendry a shy, sweet smile from beneath her lashes. Gendry tilted his head a fraction and returned her smile just as sweetly. Then he began to play and Sansa waited for her moment to start singing.

*You know you're stunning, you're absolutely stunning*

*And I'm running, always running*

*And now I'm crying, it's only 'cause I'm caring*

*And if you were more daring, maybe you'd stop staring*

*And come over and talk to me…*

While she sang, Sansa kept glancing at Gendry shyly while her lips maintained a hopeful kind of smile.

*…Tell me about how you've been waiting so patiently*

*And how you tried but I just turned away*

*And I'll say yeah, well you know*

*I'm shy that way…*

Gendry's vocal solo was upon them, but as Sansa completed the final lines of her verse she was surprised to hear the sudden beat of a drum and the accompanying chords of a piano. She sensed the movement of the mid-curtain behind them as they parted, revealing the other members of the *Brotherhood Without Banners* playing the instruments belonging to the jazz combo. The audience erupted into cheers at their appearance, but neither Sansa nor Gendry missed a beat.

*Ooh you know you're stunning, no you're absolutely stunning*

*But you're always running…but I'll catch up to you*

*The way you keep your distance is keeping my interest*

*So I'll keep it persistent, ooh…*

Gendry sang, his husky voice proving his versatility as he made the pop song his own. His guitar solo when it came, was made more epic by the fact his friends were backing him up, with Edric on drums, Tom on the baby grand, Thoros proving surprisingly talented on the double-bass, and Beric on a second guitar playing complimentary chords to Gendry's tune.

Gendry was grinning, broadly, infectiously, bringing out the brightness in Sansa's own smile so that by the time they reached the final stanzas of the song – a call and response style duet – it really did look as though they were flirting with each other. There was something about the vision of Sansa in her white dress with her fiery tresses flowing down her back surrounded by five tough-looking guys clad in black that appealed to the crowd.

"**Do you like, do you like it when I'm shy that way?**" Sansa sang.

"**Yes I like it, yes I like it when you're shy...**" Gendry responded.

Finally, they brought it home, ending the song with a final chord played by Gendry, after which the crowd erupted into wild applause and wolf-whistles. Sansa, Gendry and the guys of the *Brotherhood*
bowed graciously.

"Ladies and gents, that was Sansa Stark and Gendry Waters, with a surprise appearance from the *Brotherhood Without Banners!*"

The curtains closed as they left the stage, and Sandor greeted her in the wings, wearing a rare smile.

"You were great," he said, which she knew was high praise coming from him.

"Thank you!" she gushed, before they rushed to clear the area for the next performers.

"What the hell, guys?" Gendry asked his friends. "That stunt nearly threw me off."

"I know the guys on the Jazz combo," Edric replied, "I asked if we could use their instruments, and Beric pulled strings with the stage crew."

"I didn't know you played the double-bass, Thoros."

"I'm full of surprises." Thoros wiggled his brows at them.

Sansa followed behind Sandor and the rest of the guys as they navigated the narrow passages behind the stage, and as they entered the corridor leading away from the auditorium she saw Sandor lean in towards Gendry and mutter something into his ear. Gendry's head snapped up and he stared at Sandor in shock for a second, a horrified expression on his face, before he burst out laughing.

"Fuck! Man, don't mess with me like that!"

Sandor began laughing with him, but before Sansa could ask what was so funny, Sandor had grabbed her hand and pulled her away from the crowded auditorium to find a private, shadowy corner.

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**Sandor**

He led her to a covered walkway some distance from the auditorium and performing arts building. In daylight the walkway was covered in vines that climbed the aged stone archways overhead, a quiet and pretty place to sit and contemplate. In the dark of night, the walkway was covered in nothing but shadow, perfect for what Sandor had in mind.

"Where are we going, Sandor?" Sansa asked.

She was clutching at his leather jacket that he'd thrown over her shoulders when they'd left the auditorium.

"Just up ahead," he replied.

"Okay, but I need to be back on stage by the finale."

"I only need a moment," he said, taking a seat on a stone bench that was tucked into the darkest shadows along the walkway.

He pulled her into his lap, enjoyed the feel of her curved ass against his thighs, then drew her head to his with a hand cupped behind her neck. He kissed her lips, and he felt rather than saw her smile at him in response.

"Are you going to make a habit of dragging me off to secluded places around school to make out
"Are you going to make a complaint?" he returned.

Sansa giggled into his ear. "I think I'll be okay with that."

He kissed her again, deeper this time, pushing his tongue into her mouth. Sansa raised a hand to rest against his face, holding him closer to she could return the pressure of his kiss. He realized that she was touching the burned side of his face, caressing him and stroking him with a tenderness that only she was capable of.

This, he thought fiercely, this makes it real. He needed to touch her, and to have her touch him back. He needed to breathe in her scent and taste her essence, because this was tangible proof that Sansa was his.

Watching her flirt with Gendry on stage, even if it had been an act, had been uncomfortable for him. The smiles that Sansa had given the pretty-faced Gendry were sweet, even coy. The kind of smiles she had never shown to Sandor. They never went through the flirtatious period other couples go through in the early stages of their relationship. He and Sansa had gone from an awkward acquaintance that barely qualified them as friends, to being a couple literally overnight. For them, the path that had led them to each other had been paved with anguished tears and unfortunate misunderstandings. Certainly, not the shy glances and playful game of cat and mouse that Sansa had just sung about.

Sansa's hands now crept down to his shoulders, smoothing the fabric of his hoodie over his chest. He had learned that she had a fascination with the broadness of his torso, and her hands never stopped exploring him when they were close like this. Sandor's hand travelled from her neck, down her arms and onto her thigh. It was hard to see in the darkness of their corner, but his sense of touch and his imagination more than made up for the lack of sight. Quietly, he inched the fabric of her skirt up above her knees and slid his hand beneath, sliding his fingers up and along her stocking covered thigh, stopping once he had curved his palm over one firm buttock.

Sansa sighed when he squeezed her ass, letting out a quiet moan as he dropped little kisses on the side of her neck.

"Sandor, I have to get back…" she said reluctantly, even as she arched her back and tilted her head to give him better access to her neck.

"One minute," he rasped, nipping her collarbone.

She gave him two. After which, Sansa firmly put some distance between them and stood up to straighten her skirt.

"Come on." She smiled. "I need to find a bathroom and fix my hair before I get back on stage."

"If you must," he said, standing up and reaching for her hand, "but, it looks fine to me."

Luckily she didn't believe him, because the back of her head was all mussed up from having his fingers tangled in it. Sansa found the closest bathroom in the performing arts building and came back out looking as polished as ever, though there was a rosy flush on her cheeks that had not been there before.

"Where were you sitting?" she asked as they hurried towards the auditorium, "I didn't see you in the audience."
"I was around," he replied, "I promised you I'd come to watch you."

"Will you wait for me after the finale?"

He made a face, watched as hers fell, and shook his head regardless. "I'll watch the finale, but I can't stay."

Sansa looked as though she was trying to understand why he couldn't stay, but Sandor had made up his mind and she knew it. "Then, I'll call you later, okay?"

He shook his head again. "I'll talk to you tomorrow. You should spend time with your family tonight."

She gave him another look, pleading. "Sure you won't stay?"

"Sansa your family came tonight to see you, and…this, isn't really my thing."

She gave up with a sigh, before shrugging his jacket from her shoulders and returning it to him. "Thanks for letting me borrow your jacket. At least text me before you leave, please?"

"Okay," he said with a nod.

Sansa drew him in for one more kiss, before flashing him a smile as she hurried down the hall towards the auditorium. Sandor didn't follow her immediately, instead taking a moment to process the disappointment he'd caused her, before making his way to stand at the rear of the top tier balcony.

There was currently a troupe of girls on the stage wearing gold colored gowns in some flowing fabric that swirled and billowed around them as they performed a contemporary dance piece. Beric's girlfriend, Allyria Dayne, was on the stage among the dancers, as were the pretty blonde and the Asian girl who had been all over Gendry the other night.

In the audience, Sandor saw not only the Stark family, but also the Tyrells who had made themselves patrons of the school's artistic endeavors by sponsoring all of the clubs participating in regional and state competitions in the coming year – or so the murmurs in the crowd seemed to say. Margaery was there sitting next to her parents and her formidable looking grandmother. The person sitting on Margaery's other side moved into view then, and Sandor felt a stab of irritation when he recognized Willas Tyrell. Sandor was certain that the guy had more than a passing interest in Sansa Stark. The Baratheons, who had been regular attendees of school functions in the past, were noticeably absent. Despite their absence, there were plenty of other prominent families in attendance, reminding Sandor just what kind of school King's Landing Prep was.

He looked again to where Sansa's parents sat, and released a sigh. The reason he did not want to stick around after the recital was because Sansa would have wanted to introduce him to her parents, and Sandor was not ready to face the scrutiny of Eddard and Catelyn Stark. Not because he was afraid of facing their scrutiny, but because of his own self-doubt. He didn't know if he could look Sansa's parents in the eyes and be confident about his place beside her.

On the stage below, the finale was underway and the *Brotherhood Without Banners* had taken to the spotlight once again. All of the members were now wearing Santa hats on their heads, drawing chuckles from the crowd and wolf-whistles from girls.

"Ladies and gentlemen, with Christmas just days away, we thought it would be nice to end this evening with a song everyone should have heard at least once. So, if you know the words please sing along with us!" Beric Dondarrion invited the crowd to join them in his signature style.
Moments later, he was belting out the words to Mariah Carey's *All I Want For Christmas Is You*, acapella at first, before the band began to play their edgier, rock cover of the song. Somewhere towards the middle of the song, the choir began to file onto the left side the stage and started to harmonize with Beric. Shortly, all of the other vocal performers of the night came onto the stage, adding yet more harmonies. Eventually, the dancers and solo instrumentalists joined them adding a final layer of sound, color and movement to the finale number.

King's Landing Prep's Annual Recital was over for yet another year. All of the performers took their bows amid whistles and applause. Sandor slipped out of the doors before he could get caught in the crush to exit the auditorium. Once outside, he found a spot in the shadows where he could watch out for his little bird, wanting to see her once more before he left. The crowd spilled out onto the courtyard in front of the building. Some of the parents stayed to chat amongst themselves, others left in a rush. None stayed overlong as the cold of the evening air did not encourage one to linger outdoors.

The Starks came through the doors a short while later, predictably with the Tyrells at their side. Just as predictably, Willas Tyrell was standing much too close to Sansa for Sandor's peace of mind. Ever since his run-in with Joffrey earlier in the week, he hadn't been able to get the asshole's words out of his head.

"You're her rebound guy, that's all. Sooner or later, she'll snap out of it and dump your ugly ass." Joffrey had taunted him.

Sandor knew how twisted Joffrey's mind was better than anyone, and he knew that the blonde jerk was purposely aggravating him in an effort to try and seek vengeance for the humiliation he imagined that Sandor and Sansa were subjecting him to by getting together. Sandor knew that, yet he was still letting the jerk's words get to him. *Sooner or later*, as Joffrey had taunted him, Sandor feared that Sansa would leave him for someone like…like *Willas fucking Tyrell*.

Sandor stared at the handsome Tyrell heir with eyes like daggers, unable to help but compare himself to the guy, unable to count the many ways in which they were so very different. Sansa's world was right *there*, with guys like Willas Tyrell. Handsome, rich, articulate and well-bred, who would be able to stand in front of Eddard and Catelyn Stark and know that he had nothing to prove.

He believed Sansa's words when she had told him that she was absolutely certain that she wanted to be with him. However, he couldn't help feeling as if he were in a kind of limbo. There was a sense of impermanence around his relationship with Sansa, and in the back of his mind niggled a restless thought that one day Sansa would indeed snap out of it, deciding she'd changed her mind, deciding he wasn't who she wanted to be with after all.

Sandor was an interloper in their world, and always had been. He had only gained entry into their realm because he had been Joffrey's 'faithful Hound'. If Joffrey had never existed, Sandor would never have met Sansa Stark, but Sansa also would never have had to suffer pain under Joffrey's hands. It saddened him to think that he and Sansa could never have met under more pleasant circumstances, and he had been forced to accept that they were never meant to have a conventional love story. Sansa was the type to believe in fairytales and Sandor wondered if Sansa ever wished for that perfect love story, complete with shy glances and sweet smiles. *My brain has turned to mush*, Sandor thought with a shake of his head. *Love stories are for fools.*

Not far behind the Starks and Tyrells, Sandor spotted Gendry and the rest of the *Brotherhood*. Gendry had been an interloper too, he thought. *But, he's more a part of their world that I ever will be*, Sandor thought, because *Baratheon blood runs through his veins*. If Joffrey had never existed, then there was a real possibility that Sansa could very well have ended up dating Gendry in that
alternate universe. He was the son of Robert Baratheon, after all.

This thought had occurred to Sandor when he had watched Sansa and Gendry's interaction on the stage earlier that evening, and it was this thought that had made him taunt the guy afterwards.

"Should I be worried about you, Gendry?" he had asked the guy, mostly kidding.

Gendry had eventually seen the joke for what it was, but not before the funniest expression had flashed across his pretty face.

"Fuck! Man, don't mess with me like that!"

Both of them had laughed. Both of them knew where Gendry's heart resided, and it wasn't with the red-haired Stark sister.

Sandor now saw Arya in the background talking to Allyria Dayne. Gendry was presently helping the pretty Asian girl into the jacket that the guy had removed from his own back moments before. Arya was watching them and Sandor wondered at the hostile expression that had crossed the little bitch's face, before he decided it wasn't worth his effort.

It was time he left. He texted Sansa.

"Look up. Straight in front of you. I'm going now. Goodnight, little bird."

All of this was in his head, of course. Sansa displayed nothing that would indicate that she was unhappy in any way. Having aired the lies and misunderstandings that had strained their relationship, both of them were now experiencing an honesty and clarity that was previously unknown to them, and they were closer for it.

Even so, doubt was a powerful thing. Doubt made him continue to question his right to be with her. Doubt made him continue to need physical reassurance from her – on top of his own barely contained desires, that was – and doubt continued to feed his insecurities. Doubt was one of the most corrosive emotions he had ever experienced.

Sandor waited and watched as Sansa took her phone from her pocket, reading his message. Then she looked up in his direction, not seeing him, but knowing he was there. She texted him back.

"Goodnight, Sandor."

She looked up again, smiling seemingly at thin air, but he knew that she was smiling for him.

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**Gendry**

*The show must go on.* Gendry had been told the same thing by two different people in the same 24 hour period, and he was beginning to think that the universe was trying to tell him something. He had not been able to say no to Sansa Stark's plea for help, and it was not just because she was Arya's sister either. Trust, he was beginning to appreciate, was not something you could give just hand over to anyone, yet Sansa Stark had chosen to place her trust in him. They weren't close, by any means, yet of all the people she could have asked, she trusted him to come through for her.

So, he had agreed to help her, albeit reluctantly, and for once in his life he got to play a knight to a damsel in distress. Three hours notice had not fazed him as much as learning what song Sansa had picked out. Jason Mraz was not his usual style, but in the end he had to admit that they pulled it off brilliantly. The guys joining them on stage had been a nice touch, and the crowd seemed to
appreciate it too.

After the finale, Mr. Bard and the supervising teachers had called everyone involved in the recital together and congratulated them all for their efforts. Special mention had been given to a few people, including Sansa, Gendry and the rest of the Brotherhood, for going above and beyond to make the recital a success. Receiving applause on stage as part of the band was one thing, but Gendry was unused to receiving this type of recognition and he'd kept his eyes on the floor shyly while people clapped their hands and patted him on the back.

Jazmine had been watching him all evening, and at some point he had found her by his side, where she remained while they all gathered their belongings and prepared to leave.

"Let's all meet up at The Hollow," Beric suggested.

"Are you shouting food for all of us?" Edric asked him.

"I always do," Beric said flatly, "though it's more the fact you never pay your tab and I always end up taking care of it."

"Hey!" came indignant shouts from Gendry, Thoros and Tom.

"Okay, you guys pay your tabs," Beric corrected himself. "It's just him that doesn't."

Edric sputtered denials, while the rest of them laughed because it was true.

"Is that true, Edric?" Allyria asked him sternly.

"Uh…"

"Edric Dayne, you pay for all of your meals from now on. Got it?" Allyria glared at him.

"Yes, Aunt Allyria." Edric nodded obediently.

"Do not call me aunt!" she yelled at him, "I'm only two years older than you."

"You're still my aunt," he pointed out, "and, you're always going to be two years older than me… Argh!"

Gendry moved out of the way as Edric bolted out of Allyria's reach.

"Yeah, you better run!" Allyria laughed, before turning to Gendry and Jazmine. "You're welcome to join us, Jazmine. If you're free to hang out tonight?"

Jazmine hooked her arm through Gendry's and flashed him a smile. "Is that okay with you, Gendry?"

He shrugged, it didn't matter to him. "Sure."

In the auditorium lobby, Gendry saw Arya and her family gathered to one side. The Starks were chatting with other parents who had stopped to greet them. Gendry pried Jazmine's fingers from his bicep as gently as he could and excused himself.

"Give me a minute. I need to speak with someone," he said, walking away before she could reply.

Arya had already seen him, and now she watched as he approached her.
"Hey," he greeted her, offering her a smile.

"Hey," she said, returning his smile. "You guys were great. Your duet with my sister was fantastic. I hope you didn't mind that I gave her your number."

"It's okay, I was glad I could help her out."

Gendry acknowledged her two younger brothers who were standing behind her, waiting patiently for their parents.

"This is Bran, by the way." Arya indicated the older of the two boys. "And, this is Rickon."

"Hi guys." Gendry shook Bran's hand, surprised by the appraising look that the kid was giving him. "Nice to meet you, Bran."

"You, too. You were great tonight."

"Thanks, man."

Gendry felt a tug on his shirt, and he looked down to see Rickon holding his hand out for him to shake. Laughing, Gendry shook his hand too.

"Nice to meet you, little man," Gendry said, "how old are you?"

"Seven," Rickon replied.

"Seven! You're not so little then, are you?"

"No," Rickon giggled, "are you Sansa's boyfriend? You were smiling at her a lot when you were singing together."

Gendry spluttered in surprise, really glad that Sandor was not around to hear that.

"No," Gendry said firmly, noticing the barely concealed grins on Arya and Bran's faces. "Sansa is not my girlfriend, we're just good friends."

"Are you good friends with Arya, too?" the boy asked innocently, yet Gendry felt as though he'd been stabbed in the gut.

"Yeah," he replied quietly, "we're good friends."

Arya's grin faded when he turned to look at her. Tension filled the silence that followed. He hated the way the dynamics could change so rapidly between them. One moment they were smiling and having a heart-to-heart, and the next they could barely look at each other, let alone speak to one another. He didn't know if they would ever find a balance, but all he could do was hope that given enough time, the balance would find them.

The crowd in the lobby began to thin as people exited out onto the courtyard. Sansa appeared with Margaery by her side.

"There you are, Margaery," said an old woman with a stern face.

"I found Sansa, Grandma."

Arya caught the direction of Gendry's eyes. "The Tyrells. Mace Tyrell works with my father and Robert Baratheon."
She had broken the silence, but not the tension.

"So, he's the third man that came on board after the workers riot." Gendry had heard Tobho talking about the joint venture that had resulted in increased productivity at *Baratheon Incorporated*. "He's not what I was expecting."

"He's a nice man," Arya said, "but father says the one behind all the decisions is actually that old lady over there. His mother, Olenna."

Gendry had been about to make a comment, but they were interrupted by the arrival of Allyria.

"Hey, Arya!" the older girl greeted her, "how've you been?"

Arya engaged her in conversation before the rest of the *Brotherhood Without Banners* came over to say hello to her. Jazmine had also come over to join them, but Gendry noted that while Arya greeted the guys with ready smiles, she failed to do the same with Jazmine.

"We're all going to *The Hollow*," Allyria said to Arya, "come to join us?"

"Would that be okay?"

"Sure," Allyria replied, "one of us will make sure you get home by curfew."

"I'll have to ask –"

As they exited the lobby to the courtyard the sudden gust of cold evening air prompted him to pull the zip on his jacket up to his chin.

"Whoa! It's colder than I was expecting," Jazmine exclaimed from beside him, preventing him from hearing the rest of Arya's words.

He looked down and noted that while Jazmine was wearing a jacket, she was still wearing her flimsy dance costume beneath it, which was little more than a leotard and a thin skirt.

"You didn't bring another jacket?"

"It was warm when I left the house this afternoon, and I didn't think about bringing extra clothes for tonight," Jazmine replied ruefully.

"You're going to freeze in that." Gendry frowned, and without a second thought he promptly removed his jacket that he'd zipped up just moments ago, holding it out to her. "Borrow mine for now."

"Thanks, Gendry." Jazmine smiled sweetly up at him as she slipped her arms through the sleeves. "You really are a sweetheart!"

He observed, once she'd zipped the jacket around her slim frame, that it engulfed her, covering the tops of her thighs.

"Better now?" he asked.

"Much better, thank you." Jazmine grinned at him. "It still has your body heat."

Gendry turned his head back towards Allyria and Arya to see what decision Arya had come to.

"So, will you be coming with us, Arya?" Gendry now heard Allyria ask.
"Actually, I think I’d better not," Arya replied, "I've been out all day, and I don't think my parents will let me out now. It's getting pretty late."

"Yeah? What did you do all day?" Gendry wondered. *Even after we were out so late last night?*

Arya averted her gaze. "I was with Jaqen."

Of course he had known what her response was going to be. She wouldn't have averted her eyes for any other reason. He didn't need to ask anything else. *I don't need to know.* He told himself harshly. *I don't want to know.* Gendry saw his chance to leave.

"You guys go on ahead," he said, "I'm just going to greet Mr. Stark first."

"Okay, Gendry." Beric nodded. "We'll wait for you at the parking lot."

Gendry turned back to Arya. "Enjoy the rest of your night."

"Yeah," she said stiffly, "you too."

With a final glance at her, he took a breath and stepped towards Eddard Stark, who saw him approaching and acknowledged him with a nod.

"Good evening, Mr. Stark…Mrs. Stark," he greeted Arya's parents.

"Good evening, Gendry." Catelyn Stark smiled at him politely. "That was a wonderful performance tonight."

"Thank you."

"You have quite a talent, Gendry." Eddard Stark smiled at him.

Again, Gendry expressed his thanks. "Sansa was much better than me, though. I couldn't have done it without her."

"It's the other way around," Sansa insisted, "Gendry really helped me out of a tight situation tonight."

Gendry now had the attention of everyone in the group, and Eddard Stark introduced him to their present company.

"This young man is Gendry Waters," Eddard said, "Gendry, I'd like you to meet –"

"We know who he is," said the stern looking woman that Margaery had addressed as her grandmother.

The old woman's eyes were shrewd. As her gaze took in every facet of his appearance, Gendry felt as if he was being scrutinized on the inside as well, as though she could read his character and personality just by looking at him.

"Gendry, I'd like you to meet Olenna Tyrell, her son Mace, Mace's wife Alerie, their son Willas, and you may have met Margaery."

"Yes," Margaery said, "we have a class together."

Gendry shook their hands, excluding Olenna Tyrell, who only nodded at him politely.

"It's nice to meet you all," Gendry said to them.
"There's no mistaking it then," the old woman said, "it's clear that the young man is indeed Robert's son. The resemblance is even more uncanny when you see his face in person."

Gendry bristled at being referred to in the third person, and the fact that the old woman had made the statement without batting an eyelid made him edgy.

"Now, now Mother," said the woman named Alerie, "not so loud or people might hear you."

"Hush, Alerie, don't take that tone with me. And don't call me Mother. If I'd given birth to you, I'm sure I'd remember. The only one I'm to blame for is your oaf of a husband."

The man named Mace Tyrell gave Gendry an apologetic glance. "Do excuse my mother. She means no offense."

"The young man knows I'm only stating a fact," Olenna spoke over her son, before turning her attention back to Gendry. "You are the spitting image of your father, but I daresay you have far more talent than he. All he seems to have is drinking and womanizing."

"Then I'm thankful I didn't inherit those talents from him," Gendry said dryly.

Olenna responded with cackling laughter.

"I'm sure what my grandmother means to say," Margaery interjected, "is that she enjoyed your performance, Gendry."

"I'm glad she did."

"I can speak for myself," Olenna cleared her throat and pinned Gendry with another shrewd glare. "You seem like a nice enough young man. I'm looking forward to what else we may see from you in future."

He was being judged, Gendry knew that without a doubt, just as Ellen and Stannis had warned him about. He could see it not just on Olenna Tyrell's face, but on the faces of everyone in the group. Straightening himself to his full height, Gendry mustered a smile for the old woman, the kind of smile that had earned him the heartthrob hashtag, and had sent girls squealing.

"I don't know where the future will take me," he said, "but, I'll do my best to make it entertaining for you to watch me get there, Madame Tyrell."

And then, in a moment of pure theatrics and in a move even Beric would be proud of, Gendry bowed, deep from his waist and with a sweep of his arm. When he raised his head again, the looks of scrutiny had been replaced with expressions of surprise. Sansa was grinning at him. Margaery was giggling, and the corner of Eddard Stark's mouth was lifted in amusement.

"Good night to you all," he bade them, before turning on his heel and walking away.

"Good night, Gendry!" he heard Sansa call after him.

"Goodness," came the sound of Olenna Tyrell's voice, "the boy certainly has a lot of spunk! If I were fifty years younger…!"

Gendry didn't know if Arya had been watching, but he forced himself not to look back as he made his exit. At the parking lot he found his friends waiting by their cars.

"There he is," Edric said when he spotted him crossing the lawn, "let's go, man!"
"Hey." Gendry pulled him aside. "Sorry, but I've changed my mind. I'm just gonna head home."

"Seriously?" Edric asked in disbelief, before lowering the tone of his voice to a hush. "What about Jazmine?"

Gendry frowned. "What about her? She can go with you guys. Tell everyone I said bye, okay?"

He unlocked his car and placed his guitar in the back seat, intending to make a quick getaway.

"Where are you going, Gendry?"

He turned to see Jazmine and Allyria looking at him questioningly.

"Something's come up," he said, "I've gotta go."

"What about your jacket?" Jazmine tugged on the sleeve of his jacket that she was wearing.

Gendry shrugged. "Keep it if you like. Have a goodnight guys."

He didn't give anyone else the chance to slow him down again, swiftly shutting the car door behind him and driving out of the school grounds as fast as he could. He just wanted to get home, get to bed and not get up for the next 24 hours, because the previous 24 hours had been one hell of a rollercoaster ride.

Meeting Stannis and his family, visiting Storm's End and seeing the faces of his ancestors had been crazy. He hadn't gotten much sleep the night before because his mind had been working overtime. The unexpected performance with Sansa had been fun, but exhausting. The bizarre encounter with the Tyrells and experiencing the kind of scrutiny that Ellen had been afraid of had disconcerted him. Then there was the hot and cold situation with Arya. Now, he just wanted to get off the ride, if only so he could catch his breath.

Arya had spent the day with Jaqen, and by the way she had avoided his gaze, Gendry knew that there was something she didn't want him to see, as though it was something he'd be able to discern just by looking into her eyes.

"Fuck this shit!" he swore into the night.

He wasn't stupid. He knew that there was no way that the smug bastard was keeping his hands to himself. Arya wasn't a prude either. He didn't want to think about it, because it made him sick with anger and jealousy and self-pity, but he couldn't stop himself. The wounds were too new, and he had a long way to go in terms of healing.

"I can deal with this," he said to himself, "this is nothing. It's just a broken heart. No big deal."

Gendry did not remember the drive home, but suddenly he was lying in bed, getting ready to sleep when he received an email from Davos Seaworth.

_Your lessons begin in the first week of the new year. The address and details are located in the attachments. Your uncle sends his regards. Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you and yours._

It was a good distraction, and Gendry opened the aforementioned attachments to find a schedule that had been drafted for him, and a list of skills that he had to acquire.

_What the fuck?_ Gendry thought, going through the list once more. _They're sending me to deportment_
Arya

She had watched Gendry's dramatic exit. She'd watched him flash Olenna Tyrell one of his dazzling smiles and as he had charmed the old lady out of her granny panties. Where the fuck had that bow come from? Arya had wondered. She was seeing more sides to him that she'd never seen before. She was impressed, she admitted. Impressed and puzzled.

She'd also watched as he had taken off his jacket, and as he'd held it up for Jazmine to wear. Arya had snubbed the girl, having done it without even realizing it. She just had not wanted to acknowledge the girl's stunning presence. What the hell was it about this girl that she couldn't stand? Gendry seemed to like the dancer, which meant she must have a decent personality, but Arya still found herself clenching her fists together in annoyance.

She'd turned down Allyria's invitation to join them because she didn't like the idea of watching the girl flirt with Gendry all night. Even then, when she was already curled under the blankets in her own bed, she couldn't help but think about whether Gendry was flirting back, sitting with Jazmine in a booth at The Hollow at that very moment, with his arm stretched out behind her.

It irritated her.

What the fuck? What the actual fuck is wrong with me? Arya tried to tell herself that she didn't have to like the girl. All that mattered was that Gendry did. She should want him to be happy with Jazmine. He had every right to move on. Be nice, Arya. Stop being petty and fucking smile at her next time you see her.

Her phone beeped. It was a message from Jaqen.

That's right. Arya thought. I have Jaqen.

"I have Jaqen," she whispered into the night.

Memories suddenly came rushing back to her then, of everything they had done together that day. The memories made her face heat up, and her heart to speed up. However, she was aware too of a gnawing at the pit of her stomach. A gnawing that felt almost like guilt, adding to her growing feeling of puzzlement.

Chapter End Notes

The song is 'Shy That Way' by Tristan Prettyman and Jason Mraz.
Many thanks to 'yourforestlass' for the Latin translations! You are awesome!

I also want to give a shout out to 'cosa' – my wonderful translator who has patiently and painstakingly translated Gossip Spyder into Russian so that an entirely new audience can also appreciate this monstrous epic fanfiction of mine! Thank you!

Note: Chaebol definition - (in South Korea) a large family-owned business conglomerate.

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22nd December

Gossip Spyder

Last night's recital was one of the most exciting productions we have seen in the last few years! Not only did we have a surprise duet from Sansa Stark and Gendry Waters - who had everyone in the audience blushing with their on-stage chemistry - we also got to see the Brotherhood Without Banners join them on stage! Awesome show everyone! Highlights from the evening are available to view on the KL Prep website, including Sansa and Gendry's duet.

In further lessons in chemistry, Gendry was also spotted getting close to contemporary dancer Jazmine Choi, daughter of chaebol, Choi International Group. Gendry offered his jacket to his shivering damsel, and even assisted her to put it on, proving that chivalry is not dead! I have also heard whispers about Jazmine being seen in the front row at the Brotherhood's gig the previous week, and that she was later witnessed sitting on Gendry's lap in the VIP lounge after the show. Is there a hot new romance blossoming?

Let's all wait and see!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

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Gendry

What the hell was wrong with people? He thought. He had given his jacket to Jazmine because she was going to freeze in her dance costume otherwise. He was only trying to help her, like any decent human being would do, but obviously people were reading far more into his actions than it actually was. He could only hope that Jazmine didn't see it that way, too.

"She wasn't sitting in my lap!" Gendry clicked out of Gossip Spyder's blog. "Fuck this shit!"
Arya

She hadn't been the only one who'd seen it then. Jazmine and Gendry were getting close. She didn't know how Gendry felt about the girl, but if he was being attentive and caring towards her, then perhaps he was ready to move on. *If he hasn't already.*

Jaqen

*Perhaps this is a good development,* he thought. Not that Gossip Spyder's words were to be taken as gospel, but if Arya had read the post then she would know that there was a new girl at Gendry's side. He had already attempted to discourage her from getting too involved in Gendry's family problems by reminding her of the disasters she had unwittingly caused the last time she had tried to help those she cared about, however well-meaning her intentions were. He would mention to Arya that if Gendry was indeed getting involved with a new girl, then all the more reason for her to keep her distance.

Jaqen observed his left forearm, seeing the marks that Arya had left there the day before. The red welts giving evidence to how he had made her feel under his touch. Watching her come undone had been glorious. She'd gazed at him in wonder and surprise, and he suspected that she had never felt like that before.

"If you would learn, then you must come with me." Jaqen had told her.

He chuckled to himself, hearing Arya's voice accusing him of saying the cheesiest things. There were many things he wanted to show her, and he would happily bear more of her marks on his body if it meant being able to see the pleasure on her face again and again.

His lips formed an expression that was half a smile and half a smirk as he glanced at his arm, remembering the urgency in Arya's grip and the sting as her nails had scratched into his skin. His pain was her pleasure. Over the next few days, Jaqen would wear this same expression every time he caught sight of his arm.

Sansa

"What do you want to eat?" Sandor asked her the moment she stepped into his car. "We can go anywhere you like."

She kissed his cheek before buckling her seatbelt. "You know, I was hoping we could go to Serpentine Alley again. There were lots of cute little cafes and eateries there, and I've been craving those lemon cakes recently."

"Okay, but don't tell your parents I've taken you to Flea Bottom."

"I won't, don't worry."

She was feeling relaxed and happy, finally stress free after having completed all of her outstanding assignments for school and glad that the recital was over. Her relationships too were on track. All of them. After Sandor and Arya had come clean with her the week before, she had spent the next couple of days stewing over the fact they'd lied to her and about the lost time she might have had with Sandor, as well as the negative feelings she'd harbored for her only sister during that time. However, after going over the facts that she had learned, she knew that the positives of learning the truth outweighed the regrets, and this had finally lightened her heart.
Sandor and Arya never dated, so she no longer felt guilty about her feelings for him and for being with him. They had lied, but only to protect her from Joffrey. Sandor and Arya had wanted to keep her safe, and for Sansa, knowing that they cared about her moved her deeply. Her relationship with both Sandor and Arya had changed, but for the better.

"Hey, did you read that post about Gendry and the pretty dancer girl?" Sansa asked Sandor as he merged onto the Expressway.

"It's bullshit," he replied.

"What makes you say that?" Sansa looked at him. "I saw how gentle he was when he helped her into his jacket last night."

"He wasn't being gentle," Sandor corrected her, "he was trying not to touch her more than he had to."

"You saw that? Where were you hiding anyway? How could you tell?"

Sandor chuckled roughly. "Trust me. The guy has no interest in the dancer girl."

"Then why did he give her his jacket to wear?"

"Because he's a fool." Sandor continued to chuckle. "A kind, but stupid fool."

"I thought you were friends."

"I like the guy well enough, but he still acted stupidly."

"You don't think he's over Arya?"

"Not a chance." Sandor shook his head darkly. "He fucking glared daggers at me for weeks even though he knew I wasn't really with your sister."

"Gendry knew you were both faking it?"

Sandor shrugged. "Your sister told him the truth when it looked like he was ready to start a fight with me."

"So, he really likes her that much?"

"Yep."

Sansa sighed, feeling sorry for the guy. It had to be hard for Gendry. She knew just as well as Sandor did that you couldn't just switch off your feelings for someone like a light bulb, even if they were in a relationship with someone else. It was an inescapable, unrelenting kind of torture.

"I hope he'll at least give Jazmine a chance," Sansa said, "it could be exactly what he needs to get over Arya."

They reached their destination in short time, and Sandor parked his Mustang in the same undercover garage again. This time, when he led her towards the steeply winding steps in the cliffs, her hand was firmly grasped in his. Sansa hadn't been to River's Edge since her birthday when she had begged Sandor to take her wherever he was going. It was a poignant memory for her, because she had began looking at Sandor differently from that day.

Serpentine Alley had been a magical sight in the early evening, and it was no less magical now in the
bright winter sunshine. There were festive Christmas decorations everywhere, adding to the already colorful shop fronts and exotic vibe of the alley. Sansa grinned at the sight.

Choosing a little Russian cafe called Katrin's Kitchen tucked into one of the lower laneways, they sat down in the cave-like dining area that had been decorated with rugs in vibrant red and gold hues, ornate lanterns and bright cushions in embellished fabrics. Between them, they ordered piroshki filled with minced beef, chicken pelmeni in a mushroom sauce, and golubtsi in a tomato and sour cream sauce.

Food, she had come to realize, played a very important part in any of her outings with her boyfriend. Sansa studied him while they waited for their food, seeing how he fidgeted with his glass of water, how his eyes took in their surroundings, and how he watched her in turn.

"What?" he finally asked when her eyes had wandered up and down his form several times over.

"I was just wondering how often you have to eat to maintain your size? I mean, I have brothers and I know they eat like machines, but they're nowhere near as big as you."

He narrowed his eyes at the comparison. "I'm always hungry."

"You are six-six and you must burn a lot of energy," she regarded him, "I guess you would be hungry all the time."

He leaned across the table and gave her one of his mocking grins. "Not always for food, little bird."

"Huh?" she wondered. Then the penny dropped, and Sansa's jaw dropped too. "Oh."

Sandor laughed and leaned back into his seat while Sansa bit her lip and tried not to get embarrassed by the innuendo.

"What will you be doing for Christmas?" Sansa asked him when their food finally arrived.

"I haven't told you?"

"No, you kept avoiding my question."

He made a face. "My brother is coming home for the holidays."

"Oh." Sansa's smile faded.

"Yeah." Sandor frowned. "Don't come to my house. If you want to see me, I'll come to you."

"Understood."

They continued eating, and Sandor changed the subject. "You said your family were having dinner with the Tyrells on Christmas Eve?"

"That's right," Sansa replied, "with both our families having recently moved here, Margaery's father thought it would be a nice idea for us to have dinner together, given that neither of our extended families will be around."

"All of Margaery's brothers will be coming home, I suppose?"

"I think so," Sansa said with a nod, "Margaery said she hasn't seen all of her brothers together in a while, so she's excited about that."
"You and Margaery have gotten pretty close lately,"

"We have," Sansa agreed.

"How?"

"Oh, she just helped me out with a problem I had." Sansa had not told him that Margaery had been the one who had encouraged her to visit him during his self-imposed exile after bailing out of the championship match.

"Your brothers are coming down as well?"

"Yeah, they'll be here on the twenty-fourth. Christmas Day we'll all spend at Chateau Maegor, and then on the twenty-sixth we'll all be joining the Tyrells again."

"What for?"

"They've invited us to go horse riding."

"Really?"

"Willas is a champion equestrian, and when I told him that I used to ride, he couldn't wait to invite me to go riding with him. I think Margaery said this riding party was his idea."

"I'll bet," Sandor muttered.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," Sandor dismissed her question with a wave of his hand. "You're telling me I might not get to see you at all over the holidays?"

She smiled at him sweetly. "We can video chat."

He made a noise of disgust. "You know what I mean."

"Are you going to miss me?" she teased.

Sandor's grey eyes met her blue ones, before slowly scanning the lines of her face, her lips, along her neck and down to her chest with an expression of a different kind of hunger on his face. Slowly, he brought his eyes back to hers, and she saw the answer in their silvery depths. She felt as though he could have devoured her with his look.

Yeah, he'll definitely miss me.

23rd December

Gossip Spyder

Good morning peeps!

You all might want to check out the scoop that the Westeros Gazette is reporting! The local newspaper claims to have received audio that was recorded outside of the KL Prep auditorium after the recital the other night. Take a listen everyone, because this is the first piece of evidence we have that could confirm the claims made in the King's Landing Herald, proving that Gendry Waters is the
son of Robert Baratheon!

Boys and girls, the voices you will hear are alleged to be those of Mrs. Olenna Tyrell, Mace and Alerie Tyrell as well as that of Gendry Waters himself. It is alleged that this exchange occurred when Gendry was being introduced to Margaery's family. You should all know by now that Margaery's father Mace Tyrell, is one third of the joint-venture business partnership including Eddard Stark and Robert Baratheon, so it is fair to say that the Tyrell's are perfectly credible sources of information. A transcript of the conversation is below.

**OT:** There's no mistaking it then...it's clear that the young man is indeed Robert's son. The resemblance is even more uncanny when you see his face in person.

**AT:** Now, now Mother. Not so loud or people might hear you.

**OT:** Hush, Alerie, don't take that tone with me. And don't call me Mother. If I'd given birth to you, I'm sure I'd remember. The only one I'm to blame for is your oaf of a husband.

**MT:** Do excuse my mother. She means no offense.

**OT:** The young man knows I'm only stating a fact. You are the spitting image of your father, but I daresay you have far more talent than he. All he seems to have an aptitude for is drinking and womanizing.

**GW:** Then I'm thankful I didn't inherit those talents from him.

I was already convinced when I saw those pictures of Gendry next to Robert and Renly, but now I'm 200% convinced! What is everyone's opinion on this? Let me know!

It's only a half-day of school today, woohoo! I know many of you have exciting plans for the holidays, but I will be staying in King's Landing (booo!). However, don't forget that my eyes and ears are everywhere so you can be sure I'll keep bringing you the most up-to-the-minute news and gossip!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

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**Eddard**

He was first made aware that something was amiss when he received a phone call from Mace Tyrell just after he reached the office that morning, sounding very irate.

"Slow down, Mace," Ned said, "you're speaking too fast and I cannot understand a word you're saying."

"It's my mother!" Mace all but shouted down the line. "That mouth of hers has landed us in the tabloids."

"Tabloids? What's happened?"

"That comment when we met Gendry Waters," the man managed to say, "someone recorded it, and somehow it's gotten into the hands of a tabloid newspaper."

"Which paper?"
"The Westeros Gazette."

"That local rag? Mace, you can't –"

"It's on their website, Ned!" Mace spat. "Go and listen for yourself. I'll call you back in a moment, my other line is ringing...I'm sure that'll be Robert calling."

The man hung up with an irritated sigh, and Ned promptly visited the Gazette's website as Mace had suggested. The headline jumped out at him immediately. **Olenna Tyrell reveals shocking truth on Gendry Waters!**

He scanned the article which confirmed what Mace had just told him. Olenna had been recorded confirming that Gendry was Robert's son, and Gendry himself had concurred. Ned listened to the recording in its entirety and shook his head. He had been present when the original conversation had taken place and the only positive he could see in the situation was that there was no visual to accompany the audio.

With no visual to confirm the identity of the voices on the recording, the Baratheons and Tyrells still had the option to deny it all. Personally, his only concern was how this latest scandal was going to affect Gendry and his foster-family. Stannis Baratheon's presence in the boy's life now had to be considered, too. Ned was worried about this development, but he couldn't say what was causing his feeling of unease.

They still had no tangible leads on who had leaked Gendry's birth certificate to the Herald in the first place, and it appeared Robert's legal people had not been able to dig up anything useful. Whoever had been behind the leak had covered their tracks, both physical and digital, extremely well.

His phone rang once again and Robert's name appeared on the display. Ned seldom uttered profanities, but he felt compelled to use one then.

"Fucking hell," he muttered.

Then he picked up the phone.

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**Gendry**

School had only been a half-day, and he was glad that it was finally over. It was the official start of the holidays and he had never looked forward to the holidays more in his life. The Gazette's exposé had been a hassle he really could have done without. Of course everyone at school had read about it on Gossip Spyder's blog, and it really wasn't the start to the festive season that he had planned. He really needed a break, and the holidays would give him the chance to step away from prying eyes and all the gossipping for a few days.

Margaery Tyrell had chosen to stay away from school, understandably, but Sansa had approached him on her behalf.

"Margaery sends her apologies. Her grandmother would like to speak with you, if you'll agree to meeting with her." Sansa had given him a look of understanding.

"Give me Margaery's number," Gendry had replied, "I'll call her if I feel like talking."

His contact list was growing, and by now he could safely say most of the names on his phone belonged to girls from King's Landing's prominent families. He didn't harbor any ill feeling towards Margaery as she hadn't been the one that made those comments, but he wasn't ready to be so
generous towards her grandmother.

His phone had rung almost as soon as he reached home, with the first caller being the fancy-pants lawyer, wanting to confirm the authenticity of the Gazette's story.

"It's true," Gendry said to the man, "that's my voice on the recording. But, don't worry. I've learned my lesson, so save your lecturing."

"Olenna Tyrell may have goaded you into making the admittance, but you're forgetting what we talked about, Gendry. Deny, deny, deny." The lawyer hammered into him.

"Why?" he demanded, "why do I have to keep denying it when it's true? If I have to keep denying it because that's what the Baratheons want me to do, then you can go and tell them to kiss my ass. It's not my fault Robert couldn't keep his dick in his pants. Let him deal with this shit!"

Gendry had hung up on the lawyer angrily, before he had gone to face Ellen and Tobho. Ellen was already on leave for the holidays, and Tobho had come home from work early, alerted by the lawyer to the newest scandal afflicting them.

"I should have known better than to make any kind of comment in public," he told them, "even to the Tyrells. I never wanted to bring more attention to us, but it happened and I'm sorry."

"There's nothing you need to apologise for," Tobho said, "there's nothing to forgive."

"It was a private discussion that was recorded without your knowledge. We know you never meant for this to happen. Don't be too hard on yourself, okay?" Ellen squeezed his hand.

Gendry looked at them with eyes brimming with emotion. "Do you think it's right that I have to keep denying the truth? I mean, it's as though I'm being forced to keep denying who I am, you know? I don't like that I share DNA with those people, but this is who I am. All we've been doing is what the lawyer has told us to do. The lawyer that Robert Baratheon is paying for, and that really makes me wonder whose best interest he's really looking out for. Do you see what I mean?"

Ellen and Tobho considered his words as though the thought had never crossed their minds.

"What do you want to do, Gendry?" Ellen asked him, eyes wide.

"I think it's time we got our own lawyer." Gendry stated.

"Who would we even ask about finding a new lawyer?" Tobho wondered.

"There is someone I could ask," Gendry replied, "I think this man will be able to help us."

"Who would that be?"

"Arya's father. Eddard Stark."

"Do you trust him, Gendry?" Ellen looked at him solemnly.

"Yeah, I trust him." Gendry nodded reassuringly. "I haven't told you, but he's offered us his assistance before, and honestly I never thought we'd ever need his help."

Tobho cleared his throat. "I think that this is a conversation you should let me handle, Gendry. If you have his contact number, I'll call him and I'll take care of dealing with the lawyers."

Gendry sighed gratefully. "Okay. Thank you."
Later that afternoon, Tobho disappeared into Ellen's home office and made a number of phone calls. He returned to the living wearing a hopeful smile on his face some time later.

"Eddard Stark has kindly referred us to an old friend of his, a man named Donald Luwin, of Luwin Lawyers."

"He sounds expensive," Ellen said with a small look of worry on her face.

"I have money," Gendry said, "I can afford it."

Tobho's smile grew broader. "Attorney Luwin has apparently partially retired, and he's agreed to represent Gendry as a favor to Eddard Stark."

"And?" Ellen prompted him, seeing that this was not the end of the story.

"Pro bono."

Ellen and Gendry stared at him in shock for a moment, before Gendry shook his head to clear it.

"He doesn't need to do that. We can pay."

"He's been following your story in the media Gendry, or so he's said, and he has not been impressed with how Pycelle & Associates have handled your representation. Attorney Luwin has said that he has a personal as well as professional interest in your case, and for those reasons, he will represent you without charge. Starting immediately."

"Seriously?"

"He asked if he could begin with the process of severing ties with Pycelle & Associates as well as drawing up the terms of your engagement. I said yes, and we have a meeting with him immediately after the new year when his office re-opens."

"That's great." Gendry smiled, glad to feel like he was finally taking control of one aspect of his life.

Davos Seaworth contacted him early in the evening on behalf of Stannis.

"Your uncle doesn't see this as a negative development," Davos said, "as far as Stannis is aware, neither you nor your family have been made to sign anything that prevents you from speaking the truth. Is that correct?"

"We haven't signed anything like that," Gendry replied, "the only papers I recall signing were about the money I received, before all this shit became public and I found out who my father was by reading about it in a newspaper."

"It's one messy business," Davos sympathized, "but, be assured that you've done nothing wrong."

"That's exactly what I was thinking."

"Then worry yourself no further. Have a merry Christmas, and we'll see you in the new year."

He'd been receiving a lot of text messages throughout the day, too. A lot of his close friends had readily recognized his voice at the end of the recording, while others had not been so sure. All of them had asked if he was okay. Gendry had replied to the ones he cared about, and deemed that the others could wait.

It wasn't until much later that night when he was about to go to sleep that the phone call from Arya
came through. It surprised him, because he'd waited all day for a text message, and had been convinced that she wasn't going to contact him at all.

"Arya," he said, his voice raspy due to the lateness of the hour.

"Hi, Gendry," she paused for a second, "how are you? How are you holding up?"

"I'm doin' fine," he replied, "my foster-parents were worried, but we'll be okay. Thanks for asking."

"I'm glad you're okay." Gendry heard the relief in her voice. "I didn't see you at school today, but Sansa said she managed to catch you before you left school."

"She did. She told me that Margaery feels bad about her family's involvement in all of it."

"I know. My father's been trying to mediate between the Tyrells and Baratheons all day."

"I don't envy him." Gendry grimaced.

"Mother made him turn off his phone a while ago. She said there's nothing he can do and that the Tyrells could handle Robert."

"That's fair," Gendry agreed, "it's not your father's problem."

"I'm kind of dreading going to dinner at the Tyrells' tomorrow night."

"You're spending Christmas Eve with them?"

"Yeah. We'll be going to La Maison des Fleurs."

"The House of Flowers?" Gendry had studied basic French.

"That's the name of their mansion."

"And I thought Chateau Maegor was pretentious," Gendry muttered, "why do rich folks like to give their houses names, anyway?"

Arya laughed. "I don't know, that's a good question."

"Have fun," he said, unconvincingly.

"I'll try," she snorted, "but at least there's no dress code so I don't have to worry about my mother trying to make me wear something of her choosing again."

"You look pretty in anything you wear," Gendry said before he could stop himself.

There was an awkward moment of silence on the other end of the line, and Gendry wished for lightning to strike him down as he sat there shaking his head, mentally cursing himself.

"Thank you," Arya finally said. "Listen, I better let you go. It's late and you were probably about to sleep."

"You should get some sleep, too."

"I'm already in bed," she told him.

"Okay," he cleared his throat, a vision of her in bed popping into his mind. "Thanks for calling."

"Oh, um...sorry about calling so late. I didn't know...I mean, I wasn't sure you'd be picking up your
calls. I'm sure you must have had a lot of your friends...and girls calling you today."

"You're the only one who called, Arya," he said, "I'm really glad that you did."

It was the first time Arya had ever called him at night, and the first time he'd ever spoken to any girl while lying in bed. It was a bittersweet realisation, because it wasn't the kind of conversation he wanted to be having with her.

"I'll let you go to sleep now," she said again.

"Okay." Gendry sighed tiredly. "Goodnight, Arya."

"Goodnight, Gendry," she all but whispered, "sweet dreams."

The call ended and Gendry placed his phone back onto the table beside his bed. He settled into his pillow, and his last lucid thought before falling asleep was that Arya's voice wishing him sweet dreams sounded quite beautiful to his ears.

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24th December

Gossip Spyder

One more sleep before Santa comes to visit! yay

I hope all you boys and girls have been good this year! What does everyone have planned for this evening? I know I'll be keeping warm and drinking hot chocolate, while wishing that I could be at the La Maison des Fleurs, where the Starks are rumored to be having dinner with the Tyrells. I heard on the grapevine that all the Tyrell and Stark brothers will be in town for Christmas and New Year. I really wish I could be there to bask in all that wondrous male sexiness! LOL!

Tata for now

Gossip Spyder

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Sansa

Her brothers were arriving at Chateau Maegor later in the morning and she was excited to be seeing them again. A lot had happened since Robb and Jon had last been there, and she already had a script prepared for the interrogation she knew Robb would subject her to. She had a feeling that her brothers would have been keeping a close watch on Gossip Spyder's posts.

Her excitement waned a fraction when she recalled how vastly different her experience would be to Sandor, whose own brother was arriving home that day too.

"With any luck, Gregor will just stay in his room and not bother me," Sandor had grumbled.

"Why is he coming home if he hates being there?" Sansa had asked.

Sandor had shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe he'll be all alone in the dorms when everyone else goes home and he'll have no one to bother."

"What about your father?"
"I haven't seen him in two years," he had replied, "and I can go another two more without problem. He sent more money though, so that's something."

Sansa had invited him to spend Christmas Day with her family, but he had refused, and she had seen how uncomfortable the thought had made him, even as he'd gruffly denied wanting to intrude on her family.

She had given him a Christmas present, which he'd sworn not to open until the actual day, but she still wondered if there was anything more she could do for him. She had a feeling that Sandor probably hadn't celebrated Christmas for a long time, and the thought had made her sad. *What more can I do?*

Robb and Jon arrived just before lunch time, without Theon Greyjoy who, at the last minute had accepted an invitation from his older sister to spend the holidays onboard her yacht sailing around the Summer Isles. Robb, as Sansa had predicted, had cornered her during a quiet moment after the family had taken lunch, and asked her to fill him in on her latest news.

Her brother had smiled after hearing her abridged version of events. "See? Didn't I tell you that Sandor had a thing for you?"

"You were right," Sansa acknowledged.

"You look happy," Robb observed.

"I am." Sansa smiled back at him.

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**Jon**


"Does it really say that?"

"See for yourself." Arya showed him her phone.

Jon shook his head. "Robb will get such a kick out of that."

Their entire family was currently preparing to go to the Tyrell mansion and Arya had come into his room to watch him get ready.

"Are you really going to wear that?" she asked him, "it looks identical to the blue shirt you were wearing earlier."

"It does not." Jon pointed to his collar. "Narrower collar, see? Besides, when did you care about what I wore?"

"Don't get me wrong." Arya blinked innocently. "It wasn't a question of fashion, it was a question of hygiene and whether you even bothered to change your clothes because no amount of wondrous male sexiness will cover up sweaty, stinky pits!"

"Cheeky."

Jon balled up a shirt and threw it at her, the sweaty used one that she had accused him of still wearing. Arya laughed as she dodged it, screwing up her nose when she realised which shirt it was.
"Gross!"
Arya was also wearing jeans, paired with a cream colored sweater and black boots. She looked like his little sister, and at the same time she was not as he last remembered her, though he'd only seen her a month before. He knew about her boyfriend, Jaqen H'ghar, and while he had about a hundred different thoughts on the matter, both positive and negative, he chose to say nothing.

He was about fourteen when he had first started dating, the same age as Arya, and he was not about to become a hypocrite on this issue. She was growing up, and it wasn't up to him to say how she should go about doing so.

"I heard the news about Gendry," he said as he attempted to drag a comb through his tangle of black hair, "what's happening with the two of you? Are you friends again? Do you know how he's been handling the attention?"

The smile slipped from his sister's face, and immediately Jon knew that something was troubling her.

"It's complicated."
Jon turned to face her. "We can talk about it later, if you want."

"Yeah," Arya said, "I'd like that."

Arya

It had taken her along time to decide whether or not she would call Gendry. Even after she had gotten off the phone with Jaqen, she had still debated her decision, especially after Jaqen had once again told her to give Gendry some space.

"It appears there is another girl Gendry is getting close to. This is a good sign, yes? I believe you should allow that girl the chance to become the support he needs, don't you think so?"

"I'm not sure," Arya had said, "he doesn't really know her."

"He didn't know you at the beginning either," Jaqen had countered, "leave him be, Arya. Let him open his heart to someone else."

However, at fifteen minutes to midnight, her willpower had broken and she'd given in to the urge to call him. Learning that he was okay and listening to the calmness of his voice had settled the concern she'd been feeling all day. Having his voice be the last she heard for the night had made her dream of him again, and even though she had woken up that morning feeling flustered, she had not regretted making that call.

The entire Stark clan had arrived at La Maison des Fleurs at six-thirty that evening, and apart from a meaningful glance shared between the adults, there had been no talk of the recorded audio or of Gendry Waters.

La Maison des Fleurs was an opulent French, belle epoch style mansion that boasted wrought iron artistry, white marble and gold-leaf accents in abundance. There was a strong flower theme carried throughout the house, from the delicate rose and vine patterns in the wrought iron stair and balcony railings, to the roses moulded into the ceilings and even in the pale green and gold carpeting in the dining room, where a decadent seven course meal had been served.

After dinner, everyone retreated to a grand salon, where a twelve feet tall Christmas tree dripping with crystal ornaments and lights took pride of place in the centre of the room. The adults gathered
around discussing politics, business and mutual acquaintances, while Bran discussed the meaning of existentialism with Willas and Jon. Robb spoke about girls with Garlan, while Loras entertained Rickon by playing games with him on his tablet. Arya sat there watching it all in bored silence, until she noticed that Sansa and Margaery were watching her.

"Grandma, I'm just going to show Sansa and Arya my closet. Please excuse us for a little while."
Margaery stood up from her seat and indicated that the sisters follow her.

Olenna merely waved a wrinkled hand carelessly in response. Without little choice, Arya followed her sister and Margaery out of the salon, up the ornate marble staircase and headed towards the eastern wing of the mansion. It appeared that Margaery had commandeered a suite of rooms that included not only a lavish bedroom, but also a sitting room, a study, en-suite bathroom and a walk-in closet that was nearly as large as her bedroom, filled to the brim with designer clothes and accessories.

"Oh, gosh..." Sansa gushed in awe.

Arya, who was not easily impressed by such things, had to agree. There was a mirror covering an entire wall, surrounded by flattering lighting and a circular ottoman in the centre of the room. Margaery had a library of designer shoes, with floor to ceiling shelves filled with shoes arranged by color and heel height. There was even a ladder on a rail that allowed Margaery to access the shoes on the highest shelves. There were rows and rows of designer gowns and casual outfits, and display cabinets full of handbags and jewellery. In a dressing room adjacent to the closet, there was a dressing table surrounded by professional looking cases of exclusive makeup and skincare products. Arya could see Sansa practically drooling, and while her sister's closet was nothing to scoff at, Margaery's was on a whole other level.

"I am quite proud of my collection," Margaery said, "but, I didn't bring you here to look at my clothes, Arya."

Arya's eyes narrowed. "Then, why did you bring me here?"

Margaery's expression softened, and took on an almost pleading look. "Sansa tells me that you're pretty close to Gendry Waters."

Arya shot her sister a glare. "What about him?"

"Look, Arya," Margaery began, "my grandmother would like to meet with him, in private, so that she can speak to him directly about what has happened."

Arya's protective instincts kicked into gear. "What are you asking me to do exactly?"

"If you could convince him to meet my grandmother, we would greatly appreciate your help, and I would be in your debt."

"How come you're the one asking me?"

"Grandma doesn't know I'm asking for your help. She plans on seeking him out after the holidays, but you've seen how straightforward she can be. I'm afraid Gendry won't agree without some encouragement."

"And why would I encourage him? What benefit is there for him?"

"He needs to know that we had no part in this. It truly was just an accident. He needs to hear it from my grandmother's own mouth." Margaery explained.
"Please, Arya." Sansa came to stand next to her. "I tried talking to him, but I didn't get far. He just asked me to give him Margaery's number and pretty much said 'don't call me, I'll call you'."

"Then why push him?" Arya wondered, "I spoke to him last night and he said that he and his family were fine. Why rock the boat?"

"We don't want to cause further problems," Margaery quickly pointed out, "we want him to know that as Robert Baratheon's son, he has the support of the Tyrell family. We want him and his foster-family to know that my grandmother's comments were not intended to harm him or cause him any offense in the slightest."

"You know, you're really good at twisting people's arms." Arya regarded Margaery shrewdly.

Margaery smiled. "I prefer to call it diplomacy."

Arya sighed. "Look, I can't make him do anything he doesn't want to, so don't get your hopes up. I can try, that's all."

"That's all I'm asking," Margaery said, "thanks, Arya."

25th December

Gossip Spyder

Merry Christmas Everyone!

May you all have a wonderful day filled with love, laughter and festive cheer!

However, please do not forget about the many people out there who may not be celebrating Christmas like the rest of us. If you only do one kind deed this year, please make today be the day you carry it out – Donate food and warm clothing to shelters throughout the city, extend a hand to the lonely neighbor next door, or even pick up the phone and call someone you haven’t spoken to in a long time and wish them a Merry Christmas. Today, of all days, every little act of kindness counts!

Ho! Ho! Ho!

Gossip Spyder

Sandor

Fuck you, Gregor! Sandor wanted to shout. His monstrous brother had been home less than twenty-four hours and he had already consumed all the food that their housekeeper had prepared for them. 

Damn you to hell! I hope you die and may the maggots feast on your overfed corpse!

Except he said none of those things. Instead, he grabbed his keys and his jacket and left the house, hoping that he could find any place that was open so he could get something decent to eat.

Merry fucking Christmas.

Arya

There was one more gift that remained on her desk. The rest had been distributed among her family
that morning along with the other presents that had sat beneath the Christmas tree in the living room. Jaqen’s present, a special order she’d requested from an artisan she’d come across online, had been couriered to him the day before.

The gift contained in the small blue box that sat on her desk had been an impulse purchase, and she didn’t know if the intended recipient would accept it. She’d made sure not to pick anything expensive either, so that there was one less reason to turn it down. In any case, it wasn’t going to be delivered that day.

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**Gendry**

Tobho had a surprise for them that day. It was something Gendry had not been expecting at all.

"I'm going to resign from *Baratheon Inc.*" Tobho had declared. "I'm going to start my own metal craft and fabrication company. Or rather, I'm going to buy an existing business from this old fellow who was hoping to retire soon, and I'm finally going to do something I've wanted to do for a long time."

"Seriously?" Gendry was pleased to see Tobho looking so happy.

"That's awesome, Dad!" Toby had exclaimed, "You're like, gonna be CEO of your own company?"

"Something like that," Tobho had laughed. "Your mother and I have spoken to our bank manager, and everything is in order. As soon as the paperwork goes through, and we hope that will happen before February, we'll be the new proprietors of *Steel Street Fabricators Pty Ltd.*"

Gendry shook his foster-father's hand enthusiastically. "Congratulations! That's fantastic news! If you need an extra hand with anything, I'm happy to volunteer."

"That's a kind offer, Gendry. I might just put you to work."

"Nonsense, Tobho," Ellen scolded him, "he has school and his band, he won't have time to go playing with hammers and anvils."

"He could be good at it," Tobho said, "look at those arms of his."

"Yeah." Gendry lifted his arms and flexed his muscles. "I got good grades in Metalworks class."

"Fine," Ellen said with a resigned sigh, "do what you want, just make sure your grades don't slip."

Ellen poured fresh glasses of juice for the kids and set out champagne glasses for herself, Tobho and Gendry. Gendry raised a brow when Ellen actually poured champagne into his glass and not juice like Toby and Tabitha.

"Just this once because it's a special occasion," Ellen said when she noticed Gendry's suspicious gaze. She raised her glass and encouraged them all to do the same. "Merry Christmas to us!"

Later when Gendry had returned to his room to put away the gifts he had received, he spied the little gift box on his table that wasn't going to be presented to its intended recipient. Opening the desk drawer, he put the little box inside amidst pens and school documents, and closed the drawer.

---

**Sansa**
She had a plan, of sorts. She wanted to do something for Sandor, but she knew that it couldn't be anything grandiose or expensive because Sandor didn't appreciate such gestures. She didn't have much time, and if she was going to carry it out then she needed to move before her family began to ask too many questions. She also needed help, and an alibi.

"Robb...oh, Robb," she cooed, "dearest big brother of mine whose wondrous male sexiness is beyond compare."

Robb gave her a funny look, eyebrows raised, the same look he'd worn when he'd first read the description in Gossip Spyder's post.

"What do you want, Sansa?" he asked, his tone full of suspicion.

"I need a favor, and one hour of your time..." Sansa explained her plan to him briefly, "and because it's Christmas, you can't say no."

Robb sighed. "Fine. Call him, and I'll get the car ready."

Sansa dialled Sandor as her brother went to get his keys.

"Hey," Sandor answered the phone on the third ring, "what's up?"

"Hi," Sansa said in a low murmur, "listen, can you meet me at Godswood Park in about twenty minutes?"

"Yeah," he replied, no questions asked. "Yes, of course. I'll meet you at the parking lot."

Sansa found Robb waiting for her in the foyer downstairs.

"I told mother and father that we're going for a short drive. Let's go."

"Just a minute," Sansa said, and dashed towards the kitchens.

She returned after the said minute, carrying a big basket covered with a Christmassy red cloth.

"Wow," Robb said as he eyed the basket, "Chef Martin really came through, didn't he?"

"He's the best!" Sansa agreed. "Now, let's go."

Sandor was already in the parking lot when they reached Godswood Park. Sansa and Robb got out of the car and Sansa re-introduced her brother to her boyfriend.

"We've met before," Robb said to him, "but this time, I can really say it's good to meet you. Sansa's told me a lot about you."

Sansa felt a sense of relief to see that her brother genuinely seemed to like her boyfriend.

"Good to meet you, too." Sandor shook Robb's hand.

"I'm gonna go and make myself scarce for a while," Robb said, "I'll be back in half an hour, Sansa."

When Robb had driven away, Sandor looked at the heavy looking basket that Sansa had placed on the ground by her feet.

"What's that?" he asked her.
"It's for you," she replied.

"Another present? But, you already got me something," he said, "which, I still haven't opened."

"Why not?" she frowned.

"I didn't get a chance to," he shrugged, "Gregor pissed me off so I left the house."

"What did he do?" Sansa asked, suddenly concerned.

"The gigantic asshole ate all the food at home. Two days worth of food that was meant for both of us."

Sansa beamed. "Then you're going to love what's in the basket. Go on, take a look."

Sandor bent down and pulled back the cloth covering it, and was immediately assailed with the scent of roast beef, freshly baked bread, herbs and something sugary. He looked up at her.

"Did you read my mind? How did you know I wanted food?"

"You're always hungry, isn't that what you said?" Sansa grinned at him, pleased with his reaction. "I wanted to bring a little bit of Christmas to you, and food was the only way I knew how."

"Sansa Clause delivered." Sandor's mouth lifted at the corner.

"Sansa Clause, huh?" Sansa wrinkled her nose.

Sandor engulfed her in his arms then, crushing her into his chest. "Little bird, little bird, little bird! You're fucking amazing, did you know that?"

Sansa laughed. "I helped our chef to pack the basket and I put things in there that I thought you would like. We didn't have mashed potatoes, but there's baked baby potatoes with truffle aioli. I hope that's okay? There's enough food in there to feed four teenage boys, so that should take you through till tomorrow morning."

"Thank you," he rasped, and then he kissed her, right there in full public view of anyone who cared to look.

Sansa pulled away first, smiling. "Come on, put the basket in your car and let's go for a walk. I want to make out some more before my brother comes back."

Sandor did as she said, and while he was securing the basket into the passenger seat, Sansa heard him chuckling to himself.

"Merry fucking Christmas indeed."

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**Jaqen**

He had written her a song. One he actually meant for her to hear, this time. As he sat at the baby grand piano in his uncle's music room singing it for her over a video call, he couldn't help but feel a self-consciousness he normally didn't experience when performing. But then again, he had never gifted a song to a girl before, never put together lyrics and melody that only her ears would ever hear.

*The whole world was my stage*
Until it turned into my cage
It was you who set me free
And only then could a man see
That you were a she-wolf in disguise
And the silver in your eyes
Stripped away the faces that I wear
Until all that I am had been laid bare
Other men's names may cross your lips
But I'll ask one thing and I must insist
That mine be the last name on your list...

Jaqen finished the song with a lingering strisciando on the piano keys, and only when the final note had faded did Arya clap and cheer.

"That was for me?" she asked, eyes huge with wonder. "Jaqen, that was amazing!"

"A girl likes it, truly?"

"Truly!"

Jaqen smiled. "A man is so very happy to hear that."

"Have you recorded it?"

"Not yet," he replied, "but I shall, now that I know you approve of it."

"As if I would ever say that I didn't like something that you wrote for me."

"Well." Jaqen managed to look embarrassed. "There was that one time, remember? 'Arya, how are ya, I'd like to get to know ya...'."

Arya burst into laughter. "How could I forget that!"

"I am glad to have finally redeemed myself with this new song for you." He took in the sight of her still laughing face. "I shall record it and give you a copy soon."

"Thank you," Arya said, "I love it. It really is a beautiful song."

"Not half as beautiful as you,"

"Jaqen..."

"Yes, yes," he laughed, "too much cheese, I know. But, it's true...I really would like to see you today."

"You'll see me in two days," she reminded him.

"Two days too long,"
She sighed, before she changed the subject. "I see you're wearing the gift I got you."

Jaqen pulled back the sleeve on his left arm and held it up to the tablet screen so that Arya could get a better view of the leather wrist cuff that adorned his forearm. The leather cuff was stained a deep wine-red, made of a 2-inch wide band that sat flush on his skin with two narrower bands of leather that wrapped around it, fastened with two silver buckles. Embossed into the two leather bands were Latin phrases that Jaqen regarded as a kind of motto. *Omnes homines decedere debent. Omnes homines servire debent.*

"It is brilliant," Jaqen said, "and just my style too."

"I looked up what those phrases meant, but I don't really understand what it's trying to say," she said, "I saw a sticker on your guitar case with these words on them, and I saw the same words on a poster in your room. I thought it probably meant something to you."

"It means *all men must die, all men must serve.* I do not know who first uttered these words but to me, it is a reminder that I am merely human and I only have a finite number of years on this planet, so I need to make sure that I do something meaningful with the years I am given. I am sure it perhaps has religious origins, but the only god I serve is Fate."

"That's somewhat profound," Arya commented, "I'm glad I took the risk when I asked the craftsman to inscribe those words in."

"I shall wear it always," Jaqen told her.

There was an interruption at Arya's end, and she briefly looked away from the screen to talk to someone out of his sight.

"Sorry Jaqen, I have to go. My mother is calling for me. Wish your aunt and uncle Merry Christmas for me, okay?"

"You too, lovely girl. Merry Christmas."

The screen blacked out, and Jaqen closed the lid on the piano before heading back into the house to join his aunt and uncle and the guests that they had invited to join them for Christmas. Sometimes they were musicians travelling through town, and sometimes they were suppliers that his uncle did business with. Each Christmas, his aunt and uncle would open their home to anyone needing a home to belong to for the day. Most of time, the people who came to visit them were expats like themselves who were looking for a little taste of the Christmases they had known in Germany, usually found in the dishes that Umma served up. He walked in to hear the living room abuzz with chatter in his native tongue.

"Ah. My boy," Jaqen's uncle called out to him, "come here a moment please."

Jaqen obediently walked over to join his uncle, who was currently speaking with a tall and thin man dressed in a red sweater. The man had milky white skin and a shaven head and lips so thin he appeared to have none at all. He had not met this man before, and Jaqen smiled at him politely. Uncle Otto took hold of his elbow quite excitedly, and with a beaming smile, Uncle Otto presented him to the man.

"I would like you to meet my nephew Jaqen H'ghar."

The man held out pale hand for Jaqen to shake, and when he spoke, his voice came out high pitched.

"I have heard a lot about you Jaqen H'ghar," the man said, "I have also heard your music. You are a
very talented young man."

"Thank you." Jaqen nodded graciously. "However, I did not catch your name."

"I am called Benero, and I am here to offer you a contract."

"What kind of contract?" Jaqen asked. "And with whom?"

Episode 30 "New Year, New Troubles"

Chapter Notes

Embouchure (n): the position and use of the lips, tongue and teeth in playing a woodwind instrument.

Trust me, this'll make sense when you get to it…hehehe!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gossip Spyder

And welcome back to our regularly scheduled program boys and girls. Happy New Year to all of you, and I hope everyone had a wonderful holiday. I have pictures now coming in of the New Year's parties that were held in various parts of the city. Of course, if you are anyone in this town, then you would have been celebrating the New Year with the Starks, Tyrells and Baratheons at the King's Gate Hotel, one of the most exclusive hotels in the city which overlooks Blackwater Beach. They would have had the most spectacular views of the fireworks display which went off at the stroke of midnight!

I also have pictures of Myrcella Baratheon, who came home for the holidays to visit her family. She has been studying dance at the Dorne Academy, where it appears she has caught the attention of the swarthy Trystane Martell, who is set to become a principal dancer with the renowned Sunspear Ballet.

Anywhoo…it is the first day of the new school term and already we have a potential new scandal!

Take a look at the photos below ya'll – now, I couldn't believe what I was seeing because these were sent to me by two different sources and when I checked the dates my sources claim these photos were taken on, I noticed that they were a mere 24 hours apart! Exhibit A is a photo of Sansa Stark and boyfriend Sandor Clegane holding hands at Godswood Park, taken on Christmas Day. Exhibit B is a photo of Sansa Stark standing in the circle of Willas Tyrell's arms and looking into each other's eyes, taken on Boxing Day during a riding party at the exclusive Rhaenys Hill Equestrian Club. Sansa is no stranger to cheating rumors, having been the subject of them in the past while she was dating Joffrey Baratheon. Let's hope that there is a perfectly innocent explanation for Sansa being in Willas Tyrell's embrace, because I can't say Sandor will be pleased to see this!

Little sister Arya Stark has been spotted in Braavos with boyfriend Jaqen H'ghar, having lunch at a popular cafe at The Port. Along with the other members of the Faceless Men, they were accompanied by Brea and Talea Brusco. These lovely ladies are the daughters of Hugo Brusco, the CEO of The Braavosi Seafood Emporium, home of the largest wet fish market in the South and home to what has been touted as the finest seafood restaurant on the West Coast. You may also remember Brea and Talea as the 'Oyster Girls' who starred in the TV commercials for their father's company ten years ago. It's nice to see Arya, usually always in the company of guys, making friends with other girls for once!

Also, there has been no official response from the Baratheons, Tyrells or Gendry Waters about the news that broke just before the holidays last December. The Westeros Gazette has only mentioned that the law firm representing Robert Baratheon has continued to deny all allegations.
Sandor

The fucking Spyder was trying to insinuate that Sansa was cheating on him, and he did not like it one bit. What he disliked even more was that the Spyder had those photos to begin with. Needless to say, he had been rudely awakened that morning when the blog update had appeared on his phone. He hadn't even finished reading the article when his phone had beeped with a text from Sansa.

"It's not what it looks like. I swear. I'll tell you about it when you pick me up."

I swear, Sansa had written, as though he would automatically know what she was referring to. When he picked her up from her house, she had greeted him with a wary smile, which had made him frown.

"Good morning," she greeted him, and kissed his cheek. "I can't believe someone got that photo. It's ridiculous!"

"What happened?" Sandor grunted.

"I had a fall –"

"You fell?" Sandor turned to her and quickly scanned her face and body for visible injuries.

"I did, but I'm fine."

"I thought you said you could ride a horse?"

"It wasn't a horse that I fell from," she said.

"What did you fall from?"

"The equestrian club has a terraced courtyard and I wasn't watching where I was going. I thought there was a railing behind me, but there wasn't, so when I tried to lean against thin air I fell backwards into the garden bed. Willas was the first one to reach me, that's what happened. It's pretty funny now that I think about it. Everyone was laughing after they saw that I was okay, even my brothers. I mean, I had garden mulch on my jodhpurs and in my hair…"

Sandor could see it as if he'd been right there to witness it. Sansa chatting animatedly with Margaery and not paying attention to her surroundings, taking one too many steps backwards over the terrace ledge and falling head over heels into the garden. Willas Tyrell was nothing short of a gentleman, and Sandor imagined that the guy would have vaulted over the side of the terrace railing to rescue her, pulling her into his arms with a concerned expression on his handsome features and tilting Sansa's face up to his to check that she had not gotten scratches on her cheeks or debris in her eyes. It was a perfectly innocent picture, a perfectly lovely picture of two young and good looking people too, and someone had captured it on their phone.

"You're completely unhurt?" he asked.

"I'm totally fine," Sansa assured him, "which is a good thing too because the Blue Rose Song Festival is this Friday and I would be pissed if I missed that."
"You're more concerned about missing a singing contest than a possible broken arm?"

"Yes," she replied without hesitation, "I've rehearsed four months for this."

"Your priorities are warped," he muttered.

Sansa chuckled, and Sandor focused on navigating traffic for some minutes before he spoke about what was on his mind.

"When you texted me this morning after the blog update, why did you feel you had to swear that it wasn't what it looked like?"

Sansa shifted in her seat. "Because it really wasn't what it looked like, and I didn't want you worrying about it."

Sandor frowned. "Were you scared that I would think you were cheating on me?" Sansa didn't answer, and he knew that he had hit the mark. "I never thought that," he said, "not for one second."

"But, weren't you mad when you saw those pictures?"

"Yes," he conceded, "but not for the reason you were thinking."

Sansa became silent, and a quick glance at her face told Sandor what was going through her mind.

"I'm not him, Sansa," he growled.

"I know you're not!" Sansa's head whipped around to face him, but Sandor kept his eyes fixed on the road.

"Then stop assuming that I'm going to think and behave like Joffrey," he rasped, "I'm not expecting you to justify your every move like he did. I'm not even asking you to explain anything."

"I know you're not him," Sansa said again, softer this time.

Sandor hoped she had understood what he was trying to tell her.

"Before you ask," he said, "I was mad because the Spyder is trying to pull the same shit he or she tried to do when you were dating Joffrey. The Spyder mentioned Joff's name exactly for that purpose. The Spyder is trying to plant that seed of doubt in people's minds, and in mine too. The Spyder is trying to start another fucking rumor, and that's why I'm mad."

"That's what I was afraid of when I saw the photos," Sansa sighed, "like that time I went with you to that pizza place, except there was no photo of us that time…and still…"

"I know."

He remembered what happened when Gossip Spyder's post had updated that day in the quad, remembered the look on Sansa's face when she had denied being with him, remembered the look of desperation on her face as she'd pleaded with Joffrey, trying to calm the blonde psycho's temper. Sandor also remembered going for a drink in Flea Bottom after football training that day, and his subsequent meeting with Arya Stark when he rescued her from those drunks. Gossip Spyder's post that day had been the catalyst behind the actions Arya would take on that fateful night, on what turned out to be one of the longest days of his life.

"I can't go through something like that again," Sansa said softly.
"You won't," he rasped, "we won't, because I trust you, and I know you could never do something like that."

"You trust me," she repeated.

He nodded roughly. "Infinitely more than whatever bullshit the Spyder comes up with."

"I trust you too," Sansa said earnestly.

"It's good we agree on that."

What Sandor did not say was that while he trusted her without question, it did not mean that he trusted the guys that were drawn to her side. However, Sansa didn't need to know that, so he did not tell her that seeing Willas Tyrell with his hands on her still made him mad with jealousy.

"You're wearing the pendant that I got you," Sansa said cheerfully after they'd been sitting in silence for some time.

Sandor briefly touched the silver pendant that hung from a cord of black braided leather around his neck. The design was Celtic in origin, of three stylized wolfhounds intertwined in a traditional knot pattern. Sandor had never been interested in men's jewelry, but somehow the three hounds had appealed to him.

"It's meant to be worn, so I wore it." Sandor shrugged.

"It looks good on you." Sansa smiled at him.

It was the first Christmas gift he had received in over a decade. After he had returned home from meeting Sansa on Christmas day, he had surreptitiously crept back into his house with the basket of food tucked under his arm like a football, covering it with his jacket to trap the delicious scents that emanated from it. Then, he had locked himself in his bedroom and opened the little gift box that Sansa had given him. To say that he had been moved was an understatement, but he couldn't even begin to put into words the mix of emotions he had felt when he'd pulled the pendant out of the box. Sansa had also left a note in the box, written in her small cursive lettering.

*I found this at an antique silversmith store in the city. The proprietor asked if I was familiar with Celtic mythology, and when he told me about this pendant I knew I had to get it for you. The wolfhound represents The Hound of Ulster, a legendary half-immortal warrior famed for his reckless courage, his ability to inspire fear in his enemies, his sense of self-worth and his frankness of speech. He was also known to call upon a terrifying, superhuman rage during battles, but he would return to a gentle and sensitive man when it was over. I thought that it might as well have been describing you – except for the being half-immortal part! I hope you like it, and even if you're not into this Celtic mythology business, I hope you can appreciate that it's a cool pendant."

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Sandor would never admit it, but more than receiving a piece of jewelry, he felt that Sansa had somehow re-Christened him with a new identity. He didn't have to continue thinking of himself solely as Joffrey's 'faithful Hound' anymore. He would wear the pendant as a reminder that Sansa saw more in him than the rage that everyone else saw.

At school that day, it became evident that people were expecting some reaction from the two of them because of Gossip Spyder's post, and were dumbfounded to see that he and Sansa were behaving as
though nothing had happened. By the end of the day, most people had changed their opinions and there really was nothing to that photo of Sansa Stark and Willas Tyrell.

Even as one potentially scandalous rumor had been averted, Sandor knew that another one was just around the corner.

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**Sansa**

Her reaction to Gossip Spyder’s post had been subconscious. She had seen a potentially damning photo of herself in the arms of another guy, and immediately her first instinct had been to try and subdue whatever anger her boyfriend had to be feeling upon seeing the photo. She didn't want Sandor to be angry with her for something she never did, and she’d prepared herself for this confrontation.

What she hadn't expected was how *not* angry at her he was.

"I'm not *him*, Sansa," Sandor had rasped, and at once she had realized what she had done.

"I know you're not!" she had cried, dismayed by the fact she had assumed that he would react the same way that Joffrey had under similar circumstances.

It upset her greatly to think that Joffrey could still affect her in this way. Then Sandor had told her that he trusted her, and she knew that they would be okay. She had nothing to fear from Sandor, because she knew that he could never hurt her the way Joffrey had.

"I trust you too," she had told him, and it was more than his fidelity that she had referred to.

With the heat resulting from the *Westeros Gazette*’s supposed exposé about Gendry Waters having simmered down over the holidays, Margaery had been allowed to return to school with everyone else. Margaery had caught her during a break between classes, lamenting that Gendry Waters had ignored her attempts to speak with him.

"Sweet talking didn't work," Margaery had said, "he just smiled politely and gave me a non-committal 'maybe later'."

"He's been burned by the press in a bad way, what did you expect?" Sansa had pointed out.

"Do you know if your sister has at least attempted to talk him around?"

"I don't know." Sansa had shrugged. "I'll ask her again when I see her."

"Please do," Margaery had been grateful. "I hate to imagine what could happen if Grandma gets to him first."

"I don't think Gendry would be rude to her," Sansa had frowned.

"It's Gendry I'm worried for." Margaery had laughed. "Grandma was quite taken by him that night, or so she says. She kept mentioning how back in her youth, she would have devoured handsome young men like Gendry for breakfast!"

Sansa had wanted to laugh at the thought, unable to envision Olenna Tyrell as a boy-crazy teenage girl. She was equal parts embarrassed and amused.

"Anyway," Margaery had continued to say, "Willas apologizes for unwittingly putting you in an
awkward spot. He did ask for your number so he could apologize directly, but I refused to give it to him."

"Oh, it's no problem," Sansa had rushed to say, "Sandor wasn't mad at all. He figured it was harmless from the start."

Margaery had tilted her head. "You haven't told him that Willas had very nearly asked you out?"

"No." Sansa had shaken her head vehemently. "He doesn't need to know that. Plus, Willas has never made a pass at me. I think you're making the whole thing up."

"You're so sweet." Margaery had laughed. "Thanks for the chat, now I'd better go and hold my court."

"I still don't understand why you hang around him," Sansa had said, looking at the older girl curiously.

"He's still the Prince of The Playground." Margaery had simply shrugged, as though it explained everything. "Until another guy comes along who can truly be the King of King's Landing Prep."

For reasons Sansa still could not understand, despite what Margaery had told her, Margaery continued to sit with Joffrey during lunch. Margaery had a strong influence over him, Sansa acknowledged, as she had never once been approached by Joffrey or his thugs since their break-up. It was as though she had ceased to exist in his eyes, which was just fine by her.

After school that day, Sandor told her that he had to see Coach Selmy about finalizing his application to The University of Valyria, and he hoped to be done with the meeting by the time she finished choir practice that afternoon so that he could drive her home. In the music room, Sansa found Jeyne already there along with other members of the choir.

"Hey, Sansa," Jeyne greeted her, "did you have a good holiday?"

"I did, thanks for asking. How about you?"

"Dad managed to get some time off work, so that was fantastic," Jeyne replied. Then she held up her arm and the silver charm bracelet that adorned her wrist. "Thank you for the present too."

"You're welcome." Sansa grinned.

"Randa and Mya said they texted you to say thank you for their gifts as well."

"They did." Sansa made a face. "They also said they barely get a glimpse of me now that I'm with Sandor all the time."

"We just miss you," Jeyne said with a smile, "but Randa said she'd rather make out with a boyfriend with a smokin' hot bod too, so she understands."

Sansa laughed. "Maybe we could all go out this weekend, for brunch on Sunday, maybe? I miss you girls too."

"That sounds fun."

"Great! I'll organize it."

"So, what did your boyfriend get you for Christmas?" Jeyne asked.
Sansa remembered the look on Sandor's face when he had handed her the parcel wrapped in brown paper and string. He had been nervous, and he'd tried to cover it up with his usual gruffness.

"You don't have to keep it if you don't like it," he had said.

Her lips formed into a gentle smile. "He bought me this set of three tiny watercolors that we saw a street artist painting when we were out at Trident's Bend one day. I'd made Sandor stop walking so that I could watch the artist at work, and he must have gone back to buy them when I wasn't with him."

"What were the paintings of?"

"Little birds," Sansa giggled, "little songbirds. A robin, a sparrow and a tiny chickadee, all done in muted pastel tones. They're really cute, actually. I've hung them up above my desk in my room."

Sansa held up her hands to demonstrate that each painting was no larger than 3x3 inches square.

"That was sweet of him," Jeyne remarked, "it's still so hard for me to imagine this is the same Hound everyone is so fearful of."

"He never was that guy." Sansa shook her head. "Not completely, anyway. Everyone just saw him that way because that was the only side to him that he would let people see. At least, that's what I think."

"You may be right," Jeyne agreed, "I've seen him with you and his entire aura seems to change when you're together. It's like you've gentled that rage inside him, you know?"

"I think he always had that gentleness inside him."

"Perhaps, but he needed you to bring it out."

Mr. Bard entered the music room shortly after and he quickly called for them all to stand in position, waiting until he had everyone's attention before delivering his news. "The names of the four judges who will be adjudicating at the song festival this year have been released."

There were murmurs among the choir at the announcement. This was important news, or so Sansa had learned. Knowing the judges names meant they could tailor their song repertoire to each judge's preference, selecting composers and arrangements that they hoped would appeal to the judges and gain a small advantage in the school's favor.

"Who are they?" someone asked.

Mr. Bard proceeded to name them one by one, revealing that the judges would be the Chairman of the organizing committee, a representative from Baelor's Conservatorium of Music, a representative from King's Landing School of Performing Arts, and a representative from the sponsors of the event.

Sansa had no particular interest in who the judges were, but the final name that Mr. Bard called out did make her stand straighter. Suddenly, almost everyone in the room was watching her.

"Willas Tyrell," said Mr. Bard, who continued to speak as though he had not noticed what was happening, "will be taking the place of his grandmother, Olenna Tyrell, who had been the original judge on the panel. However she has bowed out due to other commitments."

*Why Willas?* Sansa thought irritably, wondering why Olenna's son or daughter-in-law couldn't have taken her place instead. Between Gossip Spyder and Fate, she didn't know who she wanted to slap
first. It was just a minor irritating detail that she was just going to have to deal with.

*A minor detail which need not be repeated to anyone,* she thought when she met Sandor after choir practice had ended.

"Ready to go?" he asked when he saw her.

"Yeah, let's go." Sansa tucked her hand into his elbow as they began to walk towards the parking lot. "How did it go with Coach Selmy this afternoon?"

"Great. My application is ready for submission, now all I have to do is send it in time for the regular decision deadline."

"I'm still amazed you're applying for The University of Valyria," Sansa gushed, "when do you think you'll find out if you've been accepted?"

"I should know by March," he replied, "if not, then I'll accept a place at the college that can make the best offer."

"Are you that sure you'll get offers for a football scholarship elsewhere?"

"King's Landing College has already contacted me, so has White Harbor College and The Volantis Institute of Sports."

"When did this happen?" Sansa's eyes widened at this news.

"I got their emails just before Christmas, but I didn't really think about them until I read them again this morning. I told Coach Selmy about them, and so far he thinks that White Harbor College is a good second choice if I'm adamant about not going to King's Landing College."

Sansa was glad that Sandor was able to confide in Coach Selmy. Making an important decision that could affect his entire future with no one to seek guidance from would have been extremely daunting otherwise.

"So, your brother went back to the dorms?" she asked when they reached his Mustang.

Sandor nodded. "He left yesterday morning."

"Do you think I could come over for a little while?" she wondered, feeling her face heat up under his gaze.

"Your curfew isn't for a couple of hours yet." Sandor smirked. "I guess you could."

Sansa blushed, knowing that he saw right through her seemingly innocent question. Nevertheless, she was on him almost as soon as they were in his bedroom. They had not been able to see each other since Christmas day, and having gone a week without his touch, she now craved him. Sansa thought when Sandor's mouth was on hers.

Sandor had insisted that she spend time with her family while her brothers were still in town, and while she had happily enjoyed her time with Robb and Jon, her mind had frequently wandered to Sandor and what he might be doing without her. She had texted him almost constantly, and they talked on the phone late into the night. However, hearing his voice while not being able to touch him had only made her craving for him all the stronger.

Sandor sat on the edge of his bed and Sansa promptly straddled him. She liked this position because
it allowed her to see into his eyes without straining her neck, and allowed her to move her hands over his chest and shoulders unencumbered, while her thighs over his hips and the friction between their bodies gave them a heightened sense of intimacy.

While Sansa was confident enough to initiate their moments of intimacy, it was still Sandor who took control of guiding her and how far they would go. So far, they hadn't gotten beyond second base. At that moment, Sansa wanted to do something different, and made the decision to push her inhibitions aside and do something she never thought she would ever want to do.

Reaching between them, Sansa lowered her hand until she found the swell of his groin. She had only tentatively touched him there a couple of times before, and both times over his pants. But now she pushed past her shyness and moved her hand with a surety that she didn't have before. She massaged her palm over him, and she felt him pulsing beneath the denim. Her fingers sought out the shape of him, and when she found the tip of him, she applied a little more pressure. Sandor groaned in response.

Emboldened by his response Sansa slowly slid from his lap so that she knelt on the carpeted floor before him. Sandor's eyes narrowed, and his hand covered hers when she moved to undo his fly.

"You don't have to," he said, knowing exactly what she meant to do.

Sansa firmly removed his hand from hers and slid his zipper down. "I want to do this."

Sansa motioned him to move so that she could pull his jeans down his legs. His erection became even more evident when he stood there in his black boxer briefs, and when she had also pulled this down, she had to bite her lip to keep from gasping.

She indicated for him to sit back down on the edge of the bed, and when he parted his knees, she reached out and took him in both her hands, because one hand was just woefully inadequate. She was gentle at first, marveling at the weight of him, and noticing that his skin tone here was slightly darker than the rest of him, and that the thatch of dark curling hair at the base of his cock was not as coarse as she had imagined it would be. She was nervous too, because she had never done this before, and all the reading she had done in those sex columns in women's magazines and websites could not prepare her for his nearly overwhelming girth and length that she was about to attempt to take into her mouth.

She stroked him, with her fingers encircling him at the base with one hand, while the other slowly drew circles around the head of his erection. She flicked her eyes up to his face, seeing the expectant expression on his features. She met his eyes for a moment, before she lowered her head and pressed a kiss on the tip of his cock. She heard him gasp, then she spread her lips and took the head of him between her lips.

"Fuck…Sansa!" Sandor hissed above her head when she began to use her tongue to lave him.

She registered his musky scent, as well as the subtle saltiness of his flesh which she found not to be unpleasant. She used her hands as well, pumping the length that she could not fit into her mouth gently, while she built a rhythm between the movement of her head, lips and tongue. No teeth, she had read, absolutely no teeth. She focused then on maintaining the O-shape of her mouth, ensuring that her embouchure around his rigid instrument resulted in the most pleasure for him. The word had popped into her head out of nowhere, making her want to laugh, but instead she made a humming noise that sent tremors and vibrations from her mouth down along his shaft.

"Sansa." Sandor rasped above her.
She raised her eyes back to his, and she noticed the way his brows were creased above his eyes, and the way that his fingers were clenching the sheets on either side of his knees. Encouraged by his reaction, Sansa intensified her efforts. He was focused on her face, and when she fluttered her tongue around the ridge of his glans, she saw that he was carefully watching the movements of her mouth and lips around his cock.

When her neck began to strain, she lifted her head to rest for a moment and used her hands and the moisture she had left on him to lubricate her caress. She didn't care how long it would take, but she was going to bring him over the edge. With another glance at his face, she dropped her head down and took him back into her mouth. This time, she increased the pressure and speed of her efforts, and she was shortly rewarded when Sandor began to grunt and his breathing became labored.

His hand landed on her shoulder, and he growled above her head. "Sansa, I'm not going to last."

She could see it on his face that he was close. She had some trepidation about what would come next, but she was determined to see it through. Seeing Sandor shiver and shudder under her touch gave her a certain thrill, loving the feeling of being able to bring this giant, powerful specimen of a man to near helplessness in her hands.

His fingers tightened almost painfully on her shoulder, as though he wanted to push her away. She refused to budge, and when he realized she wasn't going anywhere, he instead gripped her shoulder to keep her steady as he finally lost control.

"Sansa!" he managed to warn her, moments before he spilled in her mouth.

Sansa tried. She really did, but the sudden pressure on her shoulder, his taste and smell, and his sudden surge into her mouth were too much for her to handle. As he removed himself, she held her hand to her mouth, swallowed some, but some still more escaped her lips. Wordlessly, Sandor reached into a drawer on his nightstand and handed her a box of Kleenex, which she quickly used to wipe her mouth and hands while he pulled his jeans back up.

Then with a tremulous smile, she looked up at him and met his eyes, seeing that he was watching her with a kind of wonder on his face. Sandor drew her up so that she could join him on the bed.

"That was amazing," he said, his voice raspier than normal.

"I'm glad I did it right," she said in a teasing tone, "that was my first time."

His eyes widened in surprise, before his arms came around her waist and he pulled her into his chest.

"Then you must be a fucking sexual goddess because that was unbelievable."

Sansa laughed. "Sexual goddess?"

"That should be your new nickname from now on."

"Um…no." Sansa shook her head. "You like to refer to me by my current nickname in public, and while little bird is acceptably sweet, sexual goddess is less so."

"How about I compromise and call you little goddess?"

"Nope."

Sansa pulled out of his arms and picked up the used tissues from the floor, depositing them into the wastebasket by his desk.
"Why not? It sounds a lot better than sexual bird."

"No, Sandor." Sansa laughed again as she picked up the box of Kleenex and opened his nightstand drawer to return it where it came from.

"Don't put them away yet," Sandor said, "we'll need them for...your turn."

Sansa flushed pink at the image he'd just painted in her mind. The vision of his dark head between her thighs was incredibly arousing, and she was tempted to break her curfew, but she didn't want to risk being grounded and lose the chance to see Sandor on the weekend.

"It's six-fifteen, Sandor. You need to drive me home."

He sighed, his disappointment evident. Then he gave her a wolfish grin. "You're right. Plus, it's not something I want to rush."

Sansa placed the box of Kleenex back into the drawer, but as she moved to shut it her eyes caught sight of a shiny black box tucked into the corner of the drawer. It was a brand new box of condoms, still wrapped in its plastic film. Sandor noticed what she was staring at, and he cleared his throat.

"I'm not expecting that we're going to have sex right away, Sansa. If you wanted to have sex, that is," he assured her, "I bought them because I wanted to be prepared. Just in case."

Sansa stared at him for a moment, hearing the sincerity in his voice. Sex was going to happen, she thought. She wanted it to happen, but it had to be when she was ready...when they were both ready. She had heard rumors about Sandor and his supposed past sexual conquests, much of which she doubted. However, she didn't doubt that he had been with other girls before. Ignoring the sudden bout of jealousy brought on by the thought, Sansa was aware that even as they tried to take things slowly and while she devoured every sexual advice material she could get her hands on in preparation for the moment she gave up her V-card, she knew that the odds of them having sex sooner rather than later was increasing by the day.

Sansa picked up the black box and deftly removed the plastic film, before she opened the carton and drew out a roll of the foil wrapped condoms. Sandor watched as she tore five packets from the roll of twelve, and as she tucked them into the makeup pouch she always carried in her bag.

"You're right," she said when she turned back to face him, "sooner or later it's going to happen, and I should be prepared too."

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**Gendry**

Gendry sat across the table from Donald Luwin in the offices of Luwin Lawyers, with Tobho at his side. There were a number of differences immediately visible between the small man with grey eyes and thinning hair before him who would now be his legal counsel, and the fancy-pants lawyer from Pycelle & Associates whom he had recently parted with.

For one, Donald Luwin was not fancy. He did not wear a fancy suit and designer tie, instead he wore grey tweed pants and a knitted grey sweater not uncommonly found in the closets of many a grandfather, because Donald Luwin looked exactly like a kindly grandfather himself. The second difference was that while the offices of Luwin Lawyers were situated in one of the grandest historic buildings in the city, the premises themselves held none of the pretentiousness that Pycelle & Associates screamed of. There were no ostentatious glass topped tables or sleek leather backed chairs anywhere. Instead, the reception rooms and visible offices bore elegant yet comfortable looking
lounges and classic wooden furnishings. Donald Luwin's personal office looked like a cozy library, complete with a stuffed, suede couch, warm walnut desks and even a terrarium in one corner of the room.

The third, and in Gendry's opinion, the most important difference was that Gendry trusted Donald Luwin at first sight. In comparison, he had never even bothered to learn the name of the fancy-pants lawyer who he had never warmed to.

Donald Luwin had shaken both Gendry and Tobho's hands on first greeting them, and had offered them coffee and tea before beginning their meeting. He had advised them that Pycelle & Associates had been surprised by Gendry's decision, but as suspected, the fancy-pants lawyer had been hired primarily with the Baratheon's interests first and Gendry's second.

"Although he did not say it in so many words, I did get a strong indication that this was the case," Donald Luwin now fixed Gendry with an understanding gaze. "Before we get to the boring business end of things, I would like for you to tell me exactly what you are expecting, and then we can discuss how I can make it happen for you."

"First of all, thank you again for agreeing to represent me, Mr. Luwin." Gendry gazed back into the old man's eyes, wanting him to see he genuinely meant every word he said.

"Please, just simply call me Luwin," the old lawyer said, "every time I hear someone call out Mr. Luwin, for some reason I always think they're referring to my father, though he's been long gone from this world, and I've been guilty of failing to respond when I'm addressed as such."

"Thank you for agreeing to help us, Luwin." Gendry said again, before he began to tell the lawyer what he hoped to achieve. "I'm at the point now where I think denial is pointless. I am Robert's biological son, and to be honest I was really angry at first. However, I can't change my DNA, and denying my Baratheon blood is almost like I'm denying my right to be who I am."

"I understand." Luwin nodded. "Though I can also understand why your former counsel initially went for the total secrecy approach. If certain circumstances had been different, I'm sure you would have preferred to keep your paternity and family situation out of public scrutiny, am I correct?"

"Yes," Tobho replied on Gendry's behalf, "but now that the information has been made public, secrecy no longer applies."

"Unfortunately, that is so." Luwin shook his head. "However, when the news did break, I believe the best course of action to take would not have been to deny the claims or remain silent as the Baratheons have chosen to do. Instead, I would have counseled both you and the Baratheons to issue a joint statement requesting privacy at what everyone will agree will be an emotional time for all involved, and then I would have advised you to take legal action against the newspaper, preventing them from printing anything else about you and your family. Protecting your right to privacy, particularly as you are a minor, should have been of the utmost importance, and the aim would have been to deter any other media outlet from running copycat articles, essentially minimizing any further exposure from that point on."

"That's how it should have been from the very beginning," Tobho said, looking between Gendry and Luwin. "We should have been smarter, Gendry. I'm sorry that I didn't think to question the advice that the lawyer from Pycelle was giving us."

"Don't let that worry you now," Luwin said calmly, "the important thing is that we can now begin to rectify the situation so that Gendry and your family can live your lives without worrying about constant media intrusion. I will caution that we must be realistic about your particular situation."
Robert Baratheon is a very prominent public figure, and once you decide to publicly admit that you
are his son, the interest in you will likely spike in a way we haven’t seen before. However, we will
emphasis that you are still a minor, and anyone who approaches you without authorization or prints
anything without express permission from your guardians will be seen as a threat to your wellbeing
and safety and will face legal action. In many cases, the fact that you have legal muscle behind you
should be enough of a deterrent."

Gendry felt relieved to hear this, because he finally felt that he was in a position to do something
about the nuisance that the media had become.

"What can we do about the Westeros Gazette?" he asked. "It's unfortunate, but the conversation
really did take place, and the audio is real. At the time, I didn't believe there was a reason for me to
deny it. It was the truth, and with Eddard Stark also being present, I thought I had no reason to hide it
from the Tyrells."

"It's very likely the Tyrells already knew the truth, Gendry, given the relationship between Eddard,
Robert and Mace. It's highly probable that Olenna was merely being a nosy old woman. In any case,
to the best of your knowledge, the conversation was recorded by someone eavesdropping on your
conversation without the consent of anyone present, is that correct?"

"Yes, as far as I am aware."

"Then, what I can tell you is that it is almost always illegal to record a conversation to which one is
not a party to, or without the consent from at least one participating party. These are our options…"

The meeting continued for some time, addressing not only what Gendry wished to do with the
media, but also outlining a contingency and preferred course of action, if and when Gendry should
publicly admit to being Robert's son. Gendry and Tobho were also advised that the Tyrells would
most certainly be seeking their own legal counsel, and Gendry was to refer them to Luwin Lawyers if
he were ever approached by anyone purporting to be representatives of the Tyrells.

By the time Gendry and Tobho made their way home, both were feeling more reassured that their
family's best interests were now in the right hands. Gendry was determined that the next time he
made headlines in a newspaper, it was because he wanted to be there.

Arya

She was carrying the little blue gift box in the pocket of her jacket, and for the second day in a row,
she still hadn't been able to bring herself to give it to her intended recipient. Gendry had disappeared
from school almost as soon as the final class had ended the previous day. Now, Jazmine Choi was at
his side once again. Arya also noticed that for the second day in a row, the stunning Asian girl was
wearing a navy blue jacket that she knew belonged to Gendry. It was the same jacket Gendry was
wearing the night they visited Storm's End together. And the same jacket that he had draped over
Jazmine's shoulders on the night of the recital. It's just a stupid jacket, she thought, why am I so
irritated about her wearing his stupid jacket?

The jacket was too long and too big for Jazmine's slim frame, but she had cinched the drawstring
around her waist and folded the sleeves up her forearms in a way that flattered her, especially when
worn with unbelievably tight, skinny jeans and Louboutin boots. Arya could not even hope to look
that sexy while wearing a man's jacket.

She sighed and turned away from the sight of Gendry and Jazmine. She would forget about giving
Gendry the gift in person, and decided she would just leave it in his locker for him to find. Her feet
took her to his locker shortly after that, and she stared at the combination lock trying to remember the exact sequence of numbers that she had seen Gendry using many times before.

She was still standing there when she felt, rather than saw that Gendry had suddenly appeared behind her. His cologne had given him away, because she couldn't forget his scent.

"Are you looking for me?" he asked her.

_Yikes._ Arya willed herself to smile before she turned to face him. "Oh, you're here!"

Gendry smiled back at her. "How are you?"

"I'm doin' okay," she replied. "How about you? How were your holidays?"

"Yeah, the holidays were good." Gendry reached past her and twirled the combination lock. She stepped back when the door swung open. "My foster-parents have bought a business, and Tobho is handing in his notice at _Baratheon Inc._ today."

"Really? That's wonderful for them," Arya said enthusiastically, "why did they decide to buy a business?"

"Tobho said he trained to be a steel craftsman, not a processing plant supervisor, and with everything going on with me and the Baratheons he said it seemed like the right time to make a change."

"Tell them congratulations," she said.

"I will." Gendry closed his locker door once he was done swapping books. "Was there something you needed from me?"

Arya blinked, remembering he'd found her loitering by his locker. "Yeah, I...um...wanted to give you something."

With that, she pulled out the little gift box from her pocket and held it out to him. He looked at it curiously for a couple of seconds before he took it from her fingers.

"Is this a Christmas present?" he asked.

"It is," she answered, "it's nothing much, but I found these and I thought you might like them."

Gendry lifted the lid and emptied the contents out onto the palm of his hand. "Guitar picks."

"They're not just any old guitar picks," Arya corrected him, "these are handmade and hand carved. The guy who makes them only produces certain numbers of each kind."

"I see why." Gendry chuckled when he picked out a bright orange plectrum shaped to look like a slice of Swiss cheese.

The other plectrums included one that looked like a tongue, a thumb pick that resembled a coiled serpent, some made out of wood, and another made from mother of pearl.

"I thought they were kind of funny," Arya said.

"They are," he agreed, and put them back in the box for safekeeping. "They're awesome. Thank you, Arya."

"You're welcome."
"I didn't get you anything," Gendry said awkwardly, "but maybe I can take you out for coffee or something today after school?"

Arya made a face. "I can't today."

"Oh." Gendry's features began to cloud over.

"I have an appointment with my hairdresser," she elaborated, "I'm bored with these purple tips."

"Okay." Gendry's expression cleared. "Another day then."

"Sure."

Arya looked at the ground, unsure what to say next, unable to make her feet move to walk away from him.

"Um…was there anything else you wanted?"

"Yeah." Arya suddenly remembered she did have something she had to discuss with him. "Yeah, there is. Um…Margaery's grandmother."

Gendry frowned. "Is Margaery putting you up to this?"

It was Arya's turn to frown. "How did you know?"

Gendry shrugged. "Margaery's been trying to get me to see her grandmother since before the holidays."

"Really?" Arya's frown remained between her brows. "Is there a particular reason you don't want to speak to her?"

He shrugged again. "I'm just not really keen on the idea of being lied to."

"How do you know Margaery's grandmother will lie to you?" Arya wondered. "Maybe she genuinely wants to apologize for what happened."

"How do you know she won't?"

"I don't," Arya said, "all I know is that you have more to gain by going to speak with her."

"How? What would I gain?"

"The old lady seems to think she owes you something. You'd have a Tyrell in your debt," Arya pointed out, "and that's not such a bad thing to have."

Gendry appeared to be thinking about it, but again, in the end he just shrugged once more. "I'll think about it."

"Seriously," she added, "think about it seriously, please."

"I will. Enjoy the rest of your day, Arya." Gendry began to walk away. "And if you're going to color your hair again, I'd go for emerald green."

She watched him until she could no longer see him, and only then did she move towards the exit herself. She made her way to Harrenhal Mall and checked herself into the salon that Brea and Talea Brusco had recommended to her.
"What can we do for you today?" the stylist asked her.

"A cut please," Arya replied, holding her hands up about her shoulders, showing the lady how short she wanted it. "And, I was hoping to change color."

The stylist looked up at the clock on the wall. "We close at 9 PM tonight. We have some time, so what color did you have in mind?"

Arya looked at her reflection in the mirror in front of her as the stylist began to wrap a cloak around her. She hadn't really thought about what color she wanted. All she'd been intending to do was to cut the purple tips off, but now she decided she wouldn't mind an ombré. After she told the colorist what she was after, she had her hair washed. Then she texted her mother to let her know she was going to be at the salon late and to ask if their driver could come for her later. After that, she settled into the chair and prepared herself to endure the long process to re-color her hair.

"This is your first time here, right?" the stylist asked her. "How did you hear about us?"

"Some friends of mine told me about this place," Arya replied, "do you know Brea and Talea Brusco?"

The stylist's eyes widened, and Arya could see the lady's mind ticking, wondering who she was, and how much money was behind her.

"The Brusco sisters are among our best clients." The lady eventually smiled. "We'll be sure to take good care of you."

Shortly after that, a latte served in a tall cup appeared in front of her, along with some Florentine cookies drizzled in chocolate. Arya liked to think this was all part of the service, but still, she wasn't sorry she'd mentioned Brea and Talea's names.

She had met the two sisters over the holidays, introduced by Jaqen. Brea was the older of the two, a junior while Talea was a sophomore, both attending Braavos Academy. Brea, as it turned out, was also dating Ky, the handsome bassist for the Faceless Men.

"They're all over each other," Talea had said of her sister and Ky, "Ky is always coming over to our house. Dad usually falls asleep straight after dinner, and when he does, they disappear so they can go and feel each other up."

Talea was dark haired, tall and gangly, and Arya had liked the frank and open way that she spoke. Brea, also dark haired, was the more feminine of the two, and while she feigned being offended by her sister's accusation, she had not denied it.

Arya had only ever met Jaqen's friends who were, in one way or another related to music, so when he had suggested she meet his friends outside of his circle of fellow musicians, Arya had been more than welcoming of the idea, curious to learn more about him.

Brea and Talea had assessed her when they had first laid eyes on her, but Jaqen must have already told them about her because they had seemed to accept her without much question. It wasn't until Jaqen and a couple of the guys had gone to place their order at the counter did Brea and Talea begin to say anything meaningful to her.

"We were curious when we heard he was dating someone," Talea had said, "it's been a while since he last had a girlfriend."

"That's right," Brea had agreed, "and even longer since he let us meet one."
"Have you both known him very long?" Arya had asked.

"Our father and his uncle first met when Jaqen's family first migrated here. We were all in elementary school then, so yeah. I guess you could say we've known him a long time." Brea had replied.

"He's like another brother to us," Talea had added, "not like we needed another one to add to the two we already had. But, Jaqen became our favorite because he was actually nice to us and didn't do shit like fart in our faces or eat the ice cream we were saving for later."

"I have four brothers," Arya had told them, "I understand."

The three girls had then bonded over their experiences and gripes about living with boys.

"The toilet seat is always up! It's so frustrating!"

"They eat everything in the house!"

"Their rooms always smell funky!"

They had laughed, and Arya had found herself enjoying their company, until Brea had suddenly sat up and glared over Arya's shoulder.

"Damn bitches!" Brea had hissed.

"That's what you get for dating a hot guy." Talea had shaken her head.

"What's wrong?" Arya had turned to see what was causing Brea's agitation.

Over by the restaurant counter, a couple of girls had begun chatting to Jaqen, Ky and Izembaro while they waited in the queue. Jaqen was smiling at them, chatting back and seeming to enjoy the attention. Ky and Izembaro merely looked on politely.

"Ky doesn't flirt back, I know." Brea had pointed out. "But, it still bugs the hell out of me when I see girls trying to get close to him."

"That's normal isn't it?" Arya had asked. "They're the Faceless Men, they're going to attract attention all the time."

"How do you handle it?" Brea asked her.

"Handle what?"

"The jealousy, of course." Brea had nodded towards the counter again. "That girl is touching your boyfriend's arm. Don't tell me you don't want to tear her apart limb from limb?"

Arya had glanced back towards Jaqen again, seeing the said girl's hand on his forearm as she flirted with him.

Arya shrugged. "I don't feel anything. I trust Jaqen, plus I know that it sort of comes with the territory."

"That is not normal." Brea had shaken her head. "If Ky were as popular as Jaqen, I would be marking my territory in any way I can, you know? I'd give him hickeys he couldn't hide, have him tattoo my name on his arm or make him wear a vial of my blood around his neck."

"That's extreme and creepy." Talea had made a face at her sister. "I think Arya's way is more mature.
I mean, Jaqen is always going to be surrounding by girls. If Arya lets herself get jealous about every girl that so much as breathes in his direction, she'd go insane. Like she said, she trusts Jaqen, so there's no need to be jealous."

"But, to feel nothing when you see another girl touching your man right in front of you?"

Talea waived her sister's concern aside. "I'm sure she feels something, right Arya? She just doesn't need to get violent about it."

Arya had said nothing, and while the sisters continued to debate the issue, she had stared at Jaqen as he had continued to smile at the girls flirting with them. She'd found herself searching then, searching for that something Talea believed she had to be feeling. There was no jealousy, at least none that she could recognize. There was definitely no desire to cause physical harm to the girl who'd touched Jaqen either. All she continued to feel was a kind of mild awe, that of all the girls Jaqen must see and meet every day, he had chosen to want her. She wondered if she was lacking something as a girlfriend, being unable to feel jealous when the situation apparently called for it. Or perhaps Jaqen had to do something more drastic in order to trigger her jealousness?

She had still been pondering over the thought a couple of days later when she and Jon had finally sat down for that chat Jon had offered to have with her on Christmas Eve.

"Tell me what's so complicated?" Jon had asked.

They had been in his bedroom late one night, seated at opposite ends of his bed keeping their legs warms beneath his blankets.

"Where should I start?"

"Start with Gendry," Jon had prompted, "the last I heard, you'd turned him down in favor of Jaqen."

"Did I tell you how Gendry punched Jaqen in the face?"

"No." Jon's eyes had widened. "You failed to mention that last time."

Arya had spoken then, telling her brother almost everything that had transpired since, of the apologies that she and Gendry had exchanged, what happened when news of his paternity broke out, and the help he had asked from her since.

"Gendry said he couldn't trust anyone else to go with him when he went to meet Stannis, and I was the only one who could help him."

Jon had frowned in thought. "It is complicated. He still has feelings for you, and you care about him. That makes it hard for the two of you to maintain a purely platonic relationship."

Arya had then told Jon about Jazmine Choi and how she had snubbed the girl, and being irritated because it appeared that the girl was trying to use Gendry's current emotional state to try and get close to him.

"Are you certain that's why her presence bothers you?" Jon had asked.

"Of course," Arya had replied, "what else could it be?"

Jon had shrugged. "Okay, maybe it's nothing…how are things with you and Jaqen?"

Arya had told him the important parts, including how she'd met the Brusco sisters, and what Brea
had said about how her reactions to seeing girls flirting with Jaqen had not been normal.

"Wait up…you didn't get jealous?"

"Should I have?" Arya had frowned. "Even though I trust Jaqen?"

"Trusting him is one thing, but feeling jealous is only a natural human reaction when you see someone getting too close to something that's yours."

"So, am I not normal for not feeling jealousy?"

Jon had given her an odd look. "You don't think you could possibly be jealous about this Jazmine girl getting so close to Gendry all of a sudden?"

"If I can't get jealous about a girl touching my boyfriend, why would I get jealous about a guy who isn't my boyfriend?"

"But, you hate seeing Jazmine touching him?"

"It irritates me," Arya had said adamantly. "I'm not jealous."

"Does the word possessive mean anything to you, Arya?"

Jon had sighed. "Did you ever wish that you didn't have to share Jaqen with anyone? Like, maybe you've thought he spends too much time with his band, or maybe you've felt resentful about having to be penciled into his schedule like everyone else because he has so many commitments?"

Arya had thought about it for a good long while, but she couldn't honestly say that she had resented having to share Jaqen's time or attention with anyone. She did miss him when she couldn't be with him at times, but never once had it upset her.

"No, I can't say that I have."

"And what about Gendry? I know you will say you're just friends, but can you think of any instance at all, no matter how small, where you wished you didn't have to share him? Think really carefully before you answer."

Arya didn't have to think long about her answer at all. She immediately recalled the night after the recital when Gendry and Jazmine had gone to The Hollow with everyone and she had imagined them together flirting in a booth. For a moment, even through her irritation, she'd seen herself in that booth with Gendry, like she had done many times in the past. Before Jazmine had come into the picture, she had been the girl by Gendry's side.

"Why are you so silent, Arya?" Jon had asked her.

Arya had felt a chill then, and suddenly she had wanted to be out from under her brother's too knowing gaze.

"It's late." Arya had gotten up from the foot of Jon's bed. "I'm going to sleep."

Jon had not brought the subject up again until he and Robb were leaving to head back North after New Year's Day.

"Have a good think about what we talked about, little sister. Be honest with yourself, okay?"

Arya had thought about it, and eventually her thoughts had began to merge and muddle,
contradicting and second-guessing her ideas and beliefs about her relationship with Jaqen and Gendry, and about what it meant to be a friend and a girlfriend. It got to the point where it became overwhelming…and now she was in denial.

*Jon is wrong, she thought, I'm not having possessive thoughts about Gendry. I'm just concerned, that's all it is. I can't just stop worrying about him, even if I did choose to be with another guy. From now on, I have to keep my distance. Things are fine between Jaqen and I. Things are perfect. What could possibly be wrong?*

In the back of her head however, was a tiny voice that was taunting her, calling her out repeatedly so that it became impossible to ignore.

*Liar.*

Chapter End Notes

A/N

Celtic Hounds can be found in Celtic jewelry designs and paintings as far back as the 17th century. Celtic Hounds symbolize hunting, healing, and the Otherworld in Celtic legends. Hounds were the traditional guardian animals of roads and crossways and are believed to protect and guide lost souls in the Otherworld. Many Irish myths and legends include mentions of hounds. One of the most famous involves the Celtic hero Cúchulainn (The Hound of Ulster) or (The Hound of Culann) who killed a blacksmith's Celtic hound in self-defense. When Culann, the blacksmith asked who would now guard his shop the young Cuchulainn offered to take the dog's place thus gaining himself the title of 'The hound of Culann'. The offer was turned down and Cuchulainn went on to become one of the greatest warrior legends of that era, but the nickname stuck. (Wikipedia)
Episode 31 "My Fair Gentleman"

Gossip Spyder

Gendry Waters was spotted in the Rosby Road district after school yesterday. Rosby Road is famous for its exclusive hotels, the most exclusive being The Grand Citadel Hotel which is a favorite among the 'ladies who lunch' crowd. What he was doing at Rosby Road is anyone's guess, but if anyone should find out, please let me know!

Arya Stark was seen leaving a hair salon yesterday evening flaunting a new cut and color. She has traded in her purple tips for a long-bob and emerald green ombré. What does your boyfriend think of your new look, Arya?

Speaking of your boyfriend, there's been little whispers around the music circles that the Faceless Men have been approached by Red God Records! Jaqen H'ghar and other members of the band have been seen leaving their offices in Essos City, though there is no word on whether the band have cut a deal with the label, who are veritable giants in the recording industry.

This may not be the only decision that Jaqen has to make, as the senior from Braavos Academy like many other seniors at this moment, will need to submit college applications shortly if he hasn't done so already. The application deadlines for all the major colleges, performing arts academies and conservatories are fast approaching!

All you seniors out there, good luck on getting into your chosen colleges! After that, the next big decision will be what to wear to Prom and who to bring as your date!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Gendry

Damn. He had been seen at Rosby Road which meant that he needed to try harder if he was going to be successful at keeping the reason for his visits there a secret, particularly because he was going to be there three times a week for the next six weeks. Despite the area's reputation for being ritzy and high-class, the address that Davos Seaworth had provided him had led him to a handsome looking building at the quieter end of Rosby Road. The door he had knocked on had been unmarked, bar the number of the suite.

The man who had opened the door had given him a quick assessing glance, taken in the perplexed expression on his face, and then given him a reassuring smile.

"I've been expecting you, Mr. Waters," the man had said, "come in, and let us get started."

The man had introduced himself as Mr. Cressen, and though he appeared very old and frail, his mind and eyes remained sharp.

"Image, contrary to what you may believe, is not how you view yourself. In fact, it is how the world at large sees you. My job Mr. Waters, is to ensure that he image you project to the world is the exact picture that you would like them to see." Mr. Cressen had given him another measuring stare. "You are of Baratheon blood, and I can see for myself that what Stannis has said is true. You look remarkably like your father. As a Baratheon, in the world you are part of, image counts for
everything."

For the next hour after that, Mr. Cressen had lectured him on the various aspects of his image that they would be correcting, developing and enhancing. Deportment and etiquette classes were a hell of a lot more involved than he had first imagined, and from the schedule he had been given, they were going to be intensive.

It was a good thing that Beric had been so understanding about why he would be missing from band rehearsals half the time for the next few weeks.

"I have some personal things I have to deal with," he had told his friend, "six weeks, three days per week, then after that I'll be back as normal."

"It's cool, man. We don't have anything lined up until the end of February anyway. Do what you gotta do."

Gendry had another lesson with Mr. Cressen that afternoon, but that was still hours away yet. He read Gossip Spyder's post to the end, and went back to the part about Arya's new hair. Emerald green. The corner of his mouth tilted a fraction. Was it coincidence, he wondered, or had he really influenced her decision? In any case, he wanted to see the results for himself. He picked up his backpack from the chair by his desk, giving the little box of plectrums that Arya had given him a lingering glance before he left his room to go to school.

He had lied when he had told her that he did not have a Christmas present for her. The truth was that he did, in a gift box of its own sitting in the back of his desk drawer. It wasn't an expensive gift, but rather something he thought she would find amusing, just like the novelty guitar picks Arya had chosen to make him laugh.

As Arya had claimed to have done, he had purchased something for her on impulse after seeing it in a shop window where he'd been buying gifts for Ellen and Tabitha. However, he hadn't been able to give it to her in the end. Not even as a gift between friends. His pride had not allowed him to give her something that could not compare to what that sly-faced boyfriend of hers would undoubtedly have given her. He's Jaqen H'ghar. The smug bastard would probably have written her a soppy love song or some shit like that.

He got to school and made his way to his locker, detouring through the hall where he knew Arya's locker was, just in case she was there, and finding himself slightly disappointed when she wasn't. Sighing, he went to put away unwanted books before he went to his homeroom classroom.

He caught a glimpse of Arya during lunch as she was coming out of the cafeteria with Hot Pie, balancing a tray of food as they made their way to a table. Her hair, as Gossip Spyder had said, was now cut to just below shoulder length and colored in varying gradients of emerald green. She was wearing her green leather jacket again, and the combination made for a striking effect.

"I think I understand now why you've been trying to keep me at arm's length."

Startled by the sound of a feminine voice, Gendry looked down to find Jazmine at his side, looking up at him with an expression that was part pity, part disappointment and part determination all at the same time.

"Jazmine." Gendry managed to look embarrassed. "I didn't hear you."

"It's okay," she said, glancing towards Arya. "You were…absorbed elsewhere."

Gendry's expression turned apologetic. "I'm sorry, Jazmine. I --"
"Don't apologize." She held up her hand. "You can't help who you like. You don't have to be sorry about your feelings."

Gendry had to admire her for being so direct with him. "Then, I'm sorry that I can't return yours."

Jazmine smiled at him, and he wondered how she could do so while being rejected. He knew how painful rejection could be, and he wondered at the strength Jazmine was calling on to bring herself to smile at him.

"I'm not giving up just yet, Gendry," she told him, her eyes on Arya once again. "She's with someone else, and what you feel for her is unrequited. You'll move on, one day."

"I don't know that it's that simple," Gendry sighed.

"I heard that you're quite close to her," Jazmine continued, "and I've noticed that she's been quite… reserved, towards me. She cares for you as a friend, Gendry. Please don't confuse that with anything else, and definitely don't cling to the hope that her feelings for you will suddenly change. You'll only hurt yourself more."

"I know. I just…"

"You can't help it." Jazmine gave him a look full of understanding. "You owe it to yourself to move on."

"I don't know how." Gendry shook his head.

"Give me a chance, Gendry." Jazmine's smile turned hopeful. "You have my number, so when you're ready, call me."

Before Gendry could realize what she had intended to, Jazmine had already closed the distance between them, standing on her tip-toes to press a soft kiss on his cheek.

"Oh, and I'm still keeping the jacket," she said into his ear.

Then she was pulling back, and with a final smile she turned and walked away. Stunned, because it wasn't everyday that pretty girls randomly kissed his cheek, Gendry could only stare after her. When he turned back around towards the cafeteria he noticed about a dozen heads hastily look away. There had been plenty of witnesses to that kiss, including Hot Pie and Arya. Gendry sighed, because now that they had noticed him, he couldn't simply walk away as he'd planned to do.

"Hey, man." Hot Pie greeted him when he reached their table.

"Hey," Gendry returned his friend's greeting, before turning to Arya. "Emerald green was a good choice after all."

"Thanks," she said. "you could say I was inspired."

"Take a seat, dude." Hot Pie indicated the empty seat at their table.

Gendry shook his head. "I need to speak to Beric about one of his latest compositions. I won't have time this afternoon, so I gotta go."

He had seen Arya now, as he'd wanted.

"Edric said you wouldn't be going to band practice half the time for the next few weeks." Hot Pie glanced at him with mild concern on his face. "Anything the matter?"
"Nah, I just have some things I have to take care of." Gendry shrugged, unwilling to get into it as he had not told either Hot Pie or Arya about taking deportment classes.

Hot Pie's glance changed. "Jazmine Choi just kissed you, and you act like nothing happened."

Gendry shrugged again. "It was nothing."

If he had told them that the entire scene with Jazmine had been about him turning her down, he didn't think they would believe him, so he chose not to elaborate.

"If you say so." Hot Pie smiled at him.

"The two of you look good together," Arya suddenly said, "she seems to really like you."

The expression on Ayra's face seemed guarded, and Gendry recalled Jazmine saying that Arya had appeared reserved towards her. He also remembered how Arya had failed to greet Jazmine in the past. Jazmine seemed to think Arya's reserve was because she was concerned for him, and he frowned. Arya didn't need to be wary about Jazmine.

"She's a nice girl," he said, "you don't have to worry about her."

Arya's expression remained unreadable, though she nodded in the end. "That's good to know."

He left shortly after that and found Beric, with whom he spent the remainder of his lunch hour going over the tablature that Beric had arranged for a new song. He was just hoping for the rest of his day to pass by uneventfully, but he was hoping for too much when he walked into his final class of the day, which he shared with Margaery Tyrell.

She watched him from beneath her lashes as he made his way to his table, and Gendry thought back to the conversation he'd had with Arya about meeting Olenna Tyrell. To an extent, he did agree with Arya when he looked at the positives of hearing Olenna's apology, but he still held a healthy degree of wariness, given the circumstances. In the end, he figured he really didn't have much to lose. He took his phone out and scrolled through his contact list until he found Margaery's number. He wasn't about to speak to her in front of a whole classroom of witnesses.

"I'll meet with your grandmother." He texted her, and watched her reaction from the corner of his eyes.

Margaery glanced at her phone, and the small frown that had been between her brows when the unknown number had come up vanished when she realized that the message had come from him. She looked at him from across the room, then texted him back.

"She'll be at Rosby Road this afternoon. You know where that is, right?"

He saw by the way the corner of her mouth lifted that she knew something about his visit to the neighborhood. "Tell your grandmother that I can give her thirty minutes. I have another appointment today."

Margaery quietly stood up and left the classroom with her phone held up to her ear, and he presumed she was calling her grandmother. When she returned a minute later, she texted him again just as their teacher came into the room.

"She'll meet you at 5 PM at The Wild Orchid Tea Room, at the lobby of The Grand Citadel Hotel."

He didn't look at her again as the class began, but as the class ended, Margaery sent him a final text
as he left the classroom.

"Thanks Gendry!" Margaery had written, followed by at least a dozen smiley face emojis.

Gendry swiftly made his way to his car and drove away from the school grounds. Rosby Road was an hour away if he factored in traffic, and he couldn't afford to be late. Tardiness had been one of the things Mr. Cressen had lectured him on concerning etiquette.

Rosby Road and its wide lanes reminded him of the pictures and movies he had seen of Park Avenue in New York City, with the addition of traffic islands covered in greenery that offered a welcome splash of color amidst the polished glass and stone facades of the historic buildings and skyscrapers that lined the street.

Gendry parked his car in a side street away from the main thoroughfare and reached under the passenger seat beside him for the spare shirt and jacket he had stashed there that morning. He changed his clothes, and when he was dressed again he completed his disguise with a baseball cap to cover his hair. There was no guarantee that the disguise would fool anyone, but at least he tried, and anyone from school seeing him might at least think twice before reporting his whereabouts to Gossip Spyder.

The Grand Citadel Hotel had been built just before the turn of the 20th Century and had retained much of its old-world opulence in the century since. He had driven by the hotel many times, but this would be the first time he would ever step inside. The doorman greeted him with a polite smile and was happy to point him in the right direction when he asked about The Wild Orchid Tea Room. Gendry walked through the marble-floored foyer, past the concierge desk and headed towards a set of double doors marked only with an emblem of an exotic flower on the front.

"I'm here to meet Mrs. Olenna Tyrell," Gendry said to the hostess, who greeted him from a counter discreetly tucked into a corner of the room.

"Mr. Gendry Waters?"

"Yes."

"This way please."

Gendry took off his cap as the hostess led him to a private alcove, where he saw an elaborately dressed table, bearing tiered stands of tiny cakes and finger sandwiches, and dainty china cups with impossibly delicate handles. Olenna Tyrelly looked up from the book she was reading as he approached.

"Mr. Waters." The old woman smiled at him pleasantly. "Thank you so much for coming to see me. Please sit down and join me for some tea. I've just had them bring all of these delicacies out, so the tea should be hot."

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Tyrell." Gendry nodded at her as he returned her greeting.

As the hostess walked away, Gendry sat himself down across from the old woman, and eyed the food in front of him hungrily. He'd had no plans to stay long, but he was a growing teenage boy and the food looked too enticing to remain untouched. Olenna noticed his expression, and she chuckled.

"Go on and eat," she encouraged him. "I didn't order all of this food to eat by myself."

"Margaery said you wanted to meet with me so that you could offer an apology," Gendry said as he loaded his plate with little sandwiches filled with things he couldn't identify. "Is the food part of it?"
Olenna Tyrell laughed, making the strings of pearls that she wore around her neck rattle together. "It can be, if that helps. However, I've learned a thing or two about teenage boys, having three grandsons as I do, and I know for a fact that young men such as yourself are always ravenous at the end of a school day. Besides, one cannot visit The Wild Orchid Tea Room without trying their signature English High Tea." Olenna picked up the dainty looking teapot in front of her and poured for the both of them. "This is Assam tea, a blend from India known for its distinctive malty flavor."

Gendry had not known that tea could taste like malt, but he was getting lessons in many things recently. He took a tentative sip of the tea, which tasted like ordinary black tea to him, and shrugged.

"It's okay."

Olenna chuckled. "Perhaps you could ask Mr. Cressen to give you a tea tasting lesson one day."

Gendry did not miss the knowing expression on the woman's face. "How do you know about Mr. Cressen?"

She proceeded to layer clotted cream and jam onto a scone that she had split in half. "Us old-folks run in very tight circles, you know. However, your secret is safe with me. Don't fret, Mr. Waters."

Gendry downed a couple of the sweet fruit tarts from the tray before getting down to the matter at hand.

"Thank you for the food," he began, "but I'm afraid I can't stay long. If there is something you wish to say to me, please let me hear it now."

Olenna put down the scone she had just bitten into, and gave him a careful stare while she ate.

"You're right, Gendry," she said, reverting to his first name. "I did want to offer you an apology, but it is perhaps not the apology you were expecting."

Gendry frowned. "I'm listening."

"All right. I'm not sorry for the things that I said to you that night, Gendry. I meant every word, though none of it was meant to seem condescending. I meant them as compliments, because I can see that there is a lot of potential about you, and I for one, am delighted to see that the only things you inherited from Robert are his dashing looks. What I am sorry for, is that I was overheard and our conversation was recorded. I do apologize, wholeheartedly, for any of the unwanted attention you and your foster-family may have endured as a result."

Gendry knew he had no reason to believe her, but he did. Either Olenna was an expert liar, or she was genuinely offering him a sincere apology.

"Why are you going out of your way to apologize to me? I'm no one important. Robert Baratheon won't care if you apologize to his illegitimate son."

"I'm not doing so for any other reason beyond assuaging my own sense of responsibility and regret." Olenna picked up her teacup and took another sip of the Assam. "I also don't care one whit what Robert thinks. Mark my words, Gendry. I see a bright future for you. One day you will make a name for yourself, and I would rather we didn't begin our acquaintanceship off on the wrong foot."

"How can you be sure of that?" Gendry wondered. "No one can see that far ahead."

"I'm no clairvoyant," Olenna said, "but I do consider myself a good judge of character, and I can see how you are so very different from Robert's other son."
"You mean Joffrey?"

Olenna inclined her head in a small nod. "Legitimate or otherwise, you are Robert's first born son and it will be your face that people will think of when they hear the name Baratheon, whether you bear it or not. It is you who will became a leader among men one day. I just know it."

Gendry shook his head. "I don't see how that is even possible when the Baratheons continue to publicly deny everything."

"The Baratheons can deny it all they want, but the people are not all as ignorant as they believe, and neither are all of them blind. Many already recognize you to be Robert's son, and when you are ready to make your official debut into the public eye you will find that many people will readily acknowledge you for who you are."

"You make me sound like I'm one of those debutantes being groomed to be presented to society, like in those Jane Austen adaptations on TV that my foster-mom likes to watch."

Olenna chuckled. "Yes, I daresay that it's very much like that."

Gendry finished his cup of tea and prepared to leave. "Thanks again for the tea and food, Mrs. Tyrell. I'm glad I came to see you."

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with me, Gendry." Olenna held out a small, wrinkled hand towards him. "If there is ever anything you need, or if there is anything I or my family can help you with, I am at your service."

Gendry shook her proffered hand. "That's kind of you, Mrs. Tyrell. Have a nice evening."

He took his leave then, exiting The Wild Orchid Tea Room quietly and placing the cap back on his head before heading out onto the street. As he quietly made his way to Mr. Cressen's building he thought back on Olenna's words and her belief that there was a bright future ahead of him. It made him wonder what was being said about him in the society circles, and why she believed he would be readily accepted among King's Landing's elite.

What was clearly evident was that Olenna did not have the best impression of Robert or Joffrey, and it seemed to him that the old woman would have preferred not to bother with the Baratheons, if it wasn't for their business ties. Perhaps, he thought, Olenna knew something about the Baratheons that he didn't.

Olenna had extended her hand to him, and offered him her help should he need it, at that moment, he couldn't begin to fathom what it meant to have a Tyrell in his corner.

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Sandor

The Blue Rose Song Festival was underway. It was being held at the King's Landing Royal Hall in the city, and being a Friday, Sandor was at school and wasn't able to readily go and watch Sansa and the choir perform. He knew that the category the choir was competing in didn't begin until 2 PM, and by the time lunch hour came around he'd made up his mind to skip the rest of his classes that afternoon and drive to the Royal Hall.

When he got there, he paid the admittance fee before navigating his way around the various concert theatres within the complex. He'd had no idea how big the event was until he saw school kids of all ages running around in choir gowns. It appeared that there were categories for elementary, middle-school, high school, college choirs, and even an open category for outside organizations and clubs.
What really surprised him was that all of these choirs were competing purely for accolades as there were no monetary prizes on offer.

Sandor found the theatre where the high school choirs were competing and took a seat in an inconspicuous spot towards the rear of the theatre. There was a gigantic screen at the top of the stage which projected close-ups of the choir on the stage, which was great for Sandor as it was difficult to make out individual faces from his vantage point.

The high school choir competition began with a school from Asshai County, followed by a school from Essos City and another from Volantis City. All of the songs they performed sounded nearly identical to his untrained ears, and Sandor began to wonder if coming to support his girlfriend was worth the ringing that had started to buzz in his ears.

Yes! Fucking, yes! Shouted a voice in his head. The unburned side of his mouth lifted in a smirk when he realized it wasn't the head above his shoulders but the one in his pants that had spoken. Not that he expected Sansa to go down on him again just because he showed up to watch her, but a guy could hope, he thought. The sight of Sansa's flaming hair against his thighs and her blue eyes glancing up at him as she'd taken him into her mouth had been one of the most sensually beautiful images he'd ever seen. He'd been surprised when she had knelt on the floor and reached for the snap on his jeans. She had never been so bold with him before, but she had made it clear she wanted to do it, and he hadn't really wanted to stop her.

He was glad that the theatre was dark, because his eyes had taken on a glazed look as yet another choir began to perform another boring song on stage. Sandor allowed himself to continue remembering the sensations of Sansa's mouth, lips and tongue on him, and how determined she had been to make him cum. Being so turned on as he had been, it hadn't taken him long, and then to see her trying so hard not to spit or choke had been fucking adorable. There had been no reason for him to think she'd never gone down on a guy before – hell, she'd had Joffrey for a boyfriend – but she'd told him he'd been her first, and the experience for him had become infinitely better. He wanted to be her first in many other ways too, if she wanted him to be, but that ball was in her court. He would wait until she was ready.

Finally, the King's Landing Preparatory Harmonic Choir took to the stage, and Sandor shook himself out of his stupor to pay attention. It was easy to spot Sansa on the stage, with her red hair gleaming like a fiery beacon under the stage lights. Whoever was behind the camera seemed to agree, because Sansa's beautiful face was suddenly in close up on the big screen behind them. There were more than a few whistles and whoops of appreciation from guys belonging to other schools in the audience. Sandor felt a moment of possessive pride even as he was irritated by the catcalls. She's my girl.

When the choir began to sing, Sandor had been expecting more of the same religious songs, and classical opera arias that the other schools had chosen. Except that was not what he heard. It took him only a few moments to recognize the opening bars that the choir had began to hum, even before the first words had been sung by the male soloist.

The heart is a bloom...Shoots up through the stony ground...

It was Beautiful Day by U2, performed like he had never heard it before, and suddenly Sandor's boredom disappeared. The audience clearly felt the same way, and soon people began to clap along. When the song was over, the majority of people in the audience stood up and cheered their appreciation. Sandor remained seated in case his height attracted attention, but he clapped harder than he ever had for anything in his life. It turned out that King’s Landing Prep were among the last to perform, and when the final choir had completed their performance, the compere announced a forty-
five minute break so that the judges could deliberate and results could be tallied.

Sandor had no idea where Sansa had vanished to after the choir had left the stage, but he was determined to find her. Getting up from his seat, he observed where the other students who had just performed were emerging from, and he discreetly made his way to an unmarked door to the side of the room. He saw students wearing the King's Landing Prep choir uniforms coming from a corridor that led to various waiting rooms, and he knew that she wasn't far.

When he found her, she was with someone he had not expected to see that day. Sandor pressed himself behind a corner, far enough to be out of their sight, but close enough to still hear what they were saying.

"Willas, you shouldn't be out here talking to me," Sansa said in a disapproving tone to the handsome Tyrell heir. "You're a judge and I'm a competitor."

"Don't worry, no one saw me leaving the room." Willas laughed.

"They'll notice soon enough," she said, "you need to go back in there and help them make a decision."

"You know where my vote is going."

"I didn't hear you say that." Sansa laughed nervously.

"It's true though. I swear I was almost asleep in my chair until your choir came on stage. I have to say that Beautiful Day was a bold choice."

"Stop talking Willas." Sansa giggled. "I don't want anyone saying that I influenced your vote."

"All right fine," Willas said, "at least let me take you home after all of this is over."

"Will you go back into that room if I say okay?"

"I will."

"Then okay," Sansa finally said, "now go!"

"I'll see you shortly, Sansa."

Sandor watched as Willas Tyrell walked back down the hall and as Sansa disappeared into the waiting room that was marked with their school's name on the door. She emerged a short while later with her friend Jeyne, but Sandor made no move to follow them. Why hadn't Sansa mentioned Willas Tyrell being a judge at the competition? And why had she agreed to get into a car with him later?

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he took it out to see a text from Sansa.

"Competition just ended. Waiting for result now. Wish us luck!"

He obliged and responded to her. "Good luck. Do you need a ride home later? I can come and get you."

He waited for her response agitatedly, nearly dropping his phone when it buzzed again.

"No need. I've got a ride home, but thanks for offering. Talk to you later."
What the fuck? He thought angrily. If he hadn't just witnessed her conversation with Willas Tyrell, he wouldn't have thought anything of her answer. But now he was just pissed off, and all kinds of jealous. Somewhere in the back of his mind, logic was telling him that there had to be a valid explanation for her behavior. However, the part of his mind that was all rage and testosterone was not listening.

Fuck this shit, he thought, I'm going home.

Sansa

It was Saturday morning and she was looking forward to seeing Sandor later that day. The choir had come in at third place overall and she wanted to tell him all that had happened at the song festival. She'd called him the night before, but he'd been quite abrupt during their brief call, and eventually he'd excused himself and said that he was tired, but that he would still see her on Saturday afternoon.

Sansa now sat at her desk doing research for an assignment. There was a knock on her door moments before Arya came through it.

"Sansa, can I borrow that liquid eyeliner that you used on me the other night?"

"Yeah, sure," Sansa replied, "it's in my makeup kit in my bag."

"Thanks."

Sansa began Googling another search topic as Arya dug through her bag, and it wasn't until she heard Arya's gasp that she belatedly remembered what else she was carrying in her makeup kit.

"Well, well…what do we have here?" Arya asked in a sing-song voice.

Sansa's head swiveled around so fast she nearly caused herself an injury, and found Arya holding up the packets of condoms between her thumb and forefinger.

"Put them back, Arya!" Sansa hissed, glancing at the door to make sure it was closed.

She quickly got up from her desk and snatched the condoms from her sister's hand, shoving them back into her makeup pouch.

Arya was grinning at her. "Someone's been busy!"

"Shhh!" Sansa held her finger to her lips, even as she began to grin too. "We haven't! Not yet anyway."

"Oh, my god!" Arya covered her mouth to keep from squealing. "But you're going to!"

"We're not there yet." Sansa blushed.

"Just how far have you gone?"

Sansa turned even redder. "Third base."

Arya nearly fell over from the force of having to hold back her snorts of laughter.

"How far have you gone?" Sansa shot back.

"Second base…and a half." Arya made a face.
"How can you have gone only half a base?" Sansa asked, curious. "Nope…on second thought, I don't need to know."

Arya cackled with laughter, the eyeliner momentarily forgotten as she inched herself closer to her sister. "Have you thought about taking the pill yet?"

Sansa shook her head. "Not yet. I mean, we're not having sex yet, and if something happens, we have condoms."

"How will you know when you're ready?" Arya asked her seriously.

"I think, you just do." Sansa replied. "With the right person, it just feels natural. I mean, with Joffrey I just never wanted to get that physical with him…and he pushed for it so many times, but it never felt right…it's different with Sandor, though."

"Then why are you waiting?"

"I just want it to be special." Sansa tilted her head and returned her sister's questioning glance. "Have you thought about taking the pill?"

Arya also shook her head. "I'm not ready to go all the way yet. Jaqen's been really patient about it. I know he's way more experienced, and even though I like him and we've done some naughty things, I think sex is like this final leap I'm not prepared to make, just yet."

Sansa could understand that. "There's no rush."

"But," Arya said as she leaned in closer still, "just in case it happens…what are you doing about your lady-garden?"

Sansa's mouth dropped open. "Arya…"

"It's a serious question." Arya insisted. "I'm thinking about having a Brazilian wax, but I'm worried about the pain."

"Because…it is painful," Sansa told her.

"You've had a Brazilian?" Arya's eyes widened. "Which type? A Full Brazilian? The Heart? The Postage Stamp?"

"Arya…"

"Which salon did you go to?"

"I think it was called The Bare Necessities Salon at Harrenhal."

"Is it really super painful?"

"You have someone smearing warm wax over your lady-bits then ripping out your pubes in the opposite direction of its growth…of course it's gonna sting like a bitch."

Arya screwed up her nose. "Maybe I'll just stay au naturel. I mean, the Amazon Jungle is Brazilian too, right?"

"The Amazon Jungle…" Sansa repeated with a frown, before she burst out laughing as the mental imagery proved too much for her to handle.
Arya laughed too, before she noticed the time. "Oh hell, I'm gonna be late! What was I in here for?"

"Eyeliner." Sansa replied, handing her the sought after beauty product.

"Thanks, I'll bring it back when I'm done."

Sansa went back to her researching while Arya returned to her own room. No doubt her sister had a date with her boyfriend. She had seen Jaqen H'ghar a number of times since Arya had started dating him, and each time Sansa couldn't help thinking that Gendry would have made a better match for Arya. Perhaps it was because she didn't know Jaqen all that well, but the way Arya looked at him reminded her of how an adoring fan-girl would gaze at a beloved pop-idol. Perhaps Arya did idolize Jaqen in a way, but Sansa had also seen how Arya looked at Gendry, and there was a definite softness and warmth about Arya's eyes and in her smile that Sansa did not see when her sister was with Jaqen.

Arya came back soon after to return her eyeliner, wearing the new Balmain leather jacket that Sansa had given her for Christmas.

"Where are you both going today?" Sansa asked her.

"Lunch with some of his friends, then we'll probably just hang out until his gig at The House of Black & White." 

"It must be hard not being able to see him as often as you'd like," Sansa commented, "I know you only see him once or twice a week."

Arya shrugged. "I don't really think about it. I mean, he spends whatever free time he has with me. I can't really ask for more than that."

"Do you ever get jealous of all the girls that must have crushes on him?"

Arya's expression turned curious. "That's the second time someone's asked me that question."

"And your answer is…?"

"My answer is no, I don't get jealous because I know Jaqen is faithful to me. Other girls don't matter."

"Wow." Sansa raised her brows. "You're a better woman than I am. If girls were all over Sandor they way they're all over Jaqen, I don't think I'd be that calm about it, even if I knew he was one hundred percent faithful to me."

Arya's expression became serious after hearing her words, and Sansa wondered if she'd touched on a sensitive topic.

"But, I guess different girls deal with jealousy and that type of thing in their own different ways." Sansa hastened to add.

"Yeah." Arya nodded. "Each to their own."

When her sister had left Sansa spent another couple of hours working on her assignment before she called it a day and began to prepare for her date with Sandor. She sent him a text message to confirm what time he would be picking her up, to which she received a three character response.

"1 PM"
Sandor was not good with text messages at the best of times, but even that was short for him. It appeared that his abruptness from the evening before was persisting, and it was with a measure of wariness that Sansa greeted him when he arrived in his Mustang.

"Hi." Sansa kissed his check as normal, but she felt the tension around him the moment she had entered his personal space. "How are you?"

"Fine," Sandor replied.

Sansa noticed that his fingers were gripping the steering wheel tightly, making his knuckles turn white.

"Has something happened?" she asked him. "What's the matter?"

Sandor didn't answer her, but neither did he deny that there was clearly something bothering him. As Sansa sat there worrying, Sandor continued to drive until they reached a deserted local playground, where Sandor abruptly pulled over and killed the engine. Neither of them spoke for some minutes, because Sansa couldn't fathom what had possibly put Sandor in this black mood. She could see the line of his mouth was thin, his jaw was stiff, as was the breadth of his shoulders.

When he spoke, his voice was like gravel. "How did you get home yesterday?"

Sansa frowned. "Jeyne dropped me off."

"Really?"

"Yes," Sansa replied, "Mr. Bard and the assistant teacher drove the school mini-buses to and from the Royal Hall, then Jeyne drove me home from school."

Sandor's brows drew together at her answer, but his jaw maintained a hard line.

"I don't like being lied to, Sansa." Sandor rasped.

"I'm not lying," she said, aghast. "Why would you say that?"

"Why didn't you tell me that Willas Tyrell was going to be a judge at the contest?"

Sansa's eyes widened. "Who told you?"

"No one told me," he said, "I saw it with my own two eyes."

"You came to watch us sing?"

"I came to watch you sing," he corrected her, "I didn't go there to watch Willas fucking Tyrell flirt with you."

Sansa was beginning to add things up, piecing together the puzzle of his thoughts that he was allowing her to glimpse.

"What exactly did you see, Sandor?" she demanded. "What exactly did you hear? Tell me so I can tell you how wrong you are."

"Are you going to tell me you didn't agree to let him drive you home?"

Sansa blinked. "You were right there, and you didn't bother to ask me in person what was going on?"
Sandor flinched, but he returned the glare that she was giving him. "Just answer my question, Sansa."

"Okay," she snapped, "yes, I did tell him that I'd let him take me home."

"Son of a –"

"But, what you didn't bother finding out was that Willas would have had to ask Mr. Bard for permission to let me go with him. What you didn't know is that Mr. Bard refused him, citing school rules which required that I return to the school with everyone else on the mini-bus, and that the rule would not be broken even for a Tyrell. I knew this, and I could have told you this if you'd asked me at the time. I only told Willas I'd go with him so that he would go back to the deliberating room because I didn't want anyone seeing him speaking to me before the results of the contest had been declared, and risk our school being disqualified."

Sandor said nothing while he mused on what he'd just heard, but Sansa saw the moment when the truth of her words sank into his head.

"I see," he grunted.

"I hope you do," she muttered, "and I hope you see how much of an ass you're being."

"Yeah." Sandor sighed.

Sansa sighed too. She was a little mad at him, but more than anything, she was saddened by what had just occurred. It was only earlier that week that they'd had an emotional discussion about trust and not jumping to conclusions and being open with one another, and yet here they were having another emotion filled discussion about the exact same thing. Was it coincidence that both times, Willas Tyrell had been involved? Sansa wondered. Just what did Sandor have against Margaery's oldest brother.

She sighed again, knowing she was partly responsible for what had happened. She thought that keeping Willas Tyrell's involvement in the contest a secret from Sandor was the right thing to do.

"I should have told you that he'd be a judge," she said to him, "I already knew that you disliked him. I thought that if you didn't know he was there, then you wouldn't be worrying unnecessarily."

"You're right about me being an ass," Sandor said, "I knew better, but I just can't think straight when it's about you. After I just told you that I wasn't like Joffrey, I go and act exactly like him. I'm the worst kind of jerk."

Sansa knew that Sandor's behavior wasn't exactly like Joffrey's, and she was coming to better understand this, now that he was sharing his thoughts and feelings more openly with her. Joffrey's jealousy and anger had come from a mindset of dominance and possession, but Sandor's came from someplace much more vulnerable. She sensed fear about him, and she understood that he had insecurities that he wasn't sharing with her. Unwittingly, she had fed his insecurity by keeping Willas Tyrell's involvement a secret.

"I should have told you," she said again, "I see that now."

"And I should not have gotten angry like that." Sandor released a breath he seemed to have been holding. "I guess, seeing you with Willas together, after seeing that photo of you two just the other day…"

He didn't need to finish his sentence, because Sansa already knew what he was saying.
"I'm not interested in Willas," she told him, "not one bit. The only reason I run into him so much is because of our fathers business. You don't need to worry about him. How can I make you see that?"

"I know, Sansa. I know." Sandor said in that same gravelly voice.

Sansa was aware by the way he avoided her eyes that he was still keeping something back, and she didn't know what she could do to reassure him about her feelings for him. Right then, all she could do was reach for him over the gears, and in the confines of the front seat she pulled him to her as close as she could.

"I want to be with you."

"I know," he said again, his arm curling around her back. "I'm sorry."

Sandor's insecurities ran deeper than he was letting her see, and she wondered what it would take for him to understand that her feelings for him were stronger than anything she had ever felt before. She had her own insecurities, left behind from her experience with Joffrey, but Sandor had found a way to alleviate those fears. She wanted to alleviate his fears too, before it was too late.

She was afraid that if Sandor allowed his insecurities to get the better of him, if she allowed his insecurities to get in between then, then there was a very real possibility that his insecurities would tear them apart.

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**Jaqen**

It pleased him to see Arya getting along with his friends. He'd been worried at first, because she would be the youngest among them and he did have reservations about her maturity, concerned that some of his older friends would not take her seriously. Izembaro and Jorge were among his friends who were already out of school, while he and Ky only had months left to complete their senior year. The only one among his friends that was closest to Arya's age was Talea Brusco, but even she had a worldliness about her that Arya was only beginning to develop. He need not have worried, because Arya happened to be a chameleon, able to change faces and attitudes to suit different company.

He loved watching her, particularly when she was unaware that she was being watched, because it allowed him to see her genuine reactions to the conversations and people around her. He had soon come to see that no matter what face or persona she took on, she could not completely disguise the facets that distinguished her blue-bloodedness, or the quirks that defined her as Arya Stark.

"You're friends with the guys from *Brotherhood Without Banners* aren't you, Arya?" Talea asked her, and Jaqen now paid attention to the conversation happening around him.

Arya nodded. "I do know them, yes."

"Is Edric Dayne dating anyone?"

Arya smiled. "I don't think so, do you want his number?"

Talea laughed. "I'll take it!"

"Is Gendry Waters really dating Jazmine Choi?" Brea asked suddenly.

Jaqen watched Arya's expression, and noted a distinct lack of reaction on her features.

"I'm not sure, but I know that they've been seen together a lot lately."
"You're not close enough to talk to him about this kind of stuff?"

"Not recently, no." Arya shook her head. "I'm sure you guys would be familiar with what's going on around him. I've been giving him some space."

Jaqen was pleased to hear this too. He had briefly mentioned Jazmine Choi's name to Arya once, after Gossip Spyder's post had linked the girl to Gendry. He'd expressed to Arya that it was probably prudent to keep her distance from Gendry if there was another girl in the picture. He had not mentioned it again, and as far as he knew, Arya had not been in Gendry's sole company again.

"Who is this Jazmine Choi, anyway?" Jorge asked.

It was Talea who gave them all a knowing smile. "She's the current heir to the Choi International Group. They're a family owned conglomerate based in Seoul, Korea. You may have heard of The Lotus Hotel chain? Jazmine's family owns it. But, it's not just hotels that they own. They also have a string of award winning restaurants on both coasts, and resorts on all the major tropical islands in the Southern Hemisphere."

"How do you know so much about her?" Brea asked her sister.

"Edric wasn't my first choice." Talea grinned. "I was doing research on my potential competition at the time, but I decided I liked Edric more than Gendry."

"Oh, boy…"

"Plus, didn't you know that father's company has been supplying the Choi's restaurants and hotels with seafood for years?"

"Why is she studying here and not in Seoul?" Arya asked suddenly.

"I think her mom is a second generation Korean born here, and she wanted Jazmine to grow up away from the family's notoriety in Seoul."

"Do you think that she would be a good match for Gendry?" Arya pressed.

Talea shrugged. "If Gendry likes intelligent girls who also happen to be gorgeous, then yeah, she would be a good match."

Jaqen noted the slight crease that had formed between Arya's brows. "Are you concerned about the kind of girl that she is, Arya?"

Arya looked at him briefly and nodded. "I guess I'm worried for him."

"Then you should be glad to hear that Gendry is in good hands with this Jazmine girl."

"Yeah." Arya smiled. "It is reassuring to learn that."

"Your hair looks awesome, by the way," Brea said, "did you get it done at the salon we told you about?"

Arya grinned. "I did! Thank you for recommending them, they were great!"

"What do you think of her new color, Jaqen?" Talea asked him.

Jaqen already had his arm resting behind Arya's shoulders on the chair she occupied, and he now reached up to run his fingers through the emerald green strands.
"My lovely girl is beautiful no matter what color her hair might be," Jaqen bent down and kissed the top of her head, "although if she had asked me, I would have recommended red so that we may match."

His friends laughed, and Arya wriggled in his arms as he then smothered her with more public displays of affection.

Later, after they had bidden farewell to his friends, he took her back to his house and led her to the music room where he made her sit next to him at the baby grand piano.

"I have made some small changes to your song, lovely girl," he told her, "and I wanted to play it for you in person."

Arya looked up at him with awe in her eyes. "I still can't believe you wrote a song for me."

Jaqen began to run his fingers over the piano, playing the soulful intro with skilful hands and a light touch. When he sang, his molten caramel voice resonated within the room, and Arya got to hear the song as he intended for it to be heard; intimately and honestly. It was, he would admit to himself, perhaps the most honest he'd ever been.

Arya's eyes never left his face as he sang, and he wondered what thoughts were behind her grey eyes because they had become impossible for him to read. She had seemed quite happy and upbeat during lunch, and that was a good thing, because he had something quite serious that he needed to discuss with her.

He finished his song, and Arya clapped and smiled for him.

"It didn't sound like that the first time you sang it for me," she said to him, "I love it."

"Ah, that would be because you heard it over Skype on a connection that frequently lagged."

Arya laughed. "No, that's not it. What did you do differently?"

Jaqen shrugged. "I sang it from my heart, instead of from my head. I guess it was always meant to be performed while you were by my side to hear it."

"It was beautiful." Arya said.

"Thank you." Jaqen kissed the tip of her nose. "I finally recorded it."

"That's awesome!"

"I have a copy of it on a flash drive for you. Remind me to give it to you before you leave, okay?"

"Sure." Arya resettled herself into the piano bench beside him. "You said you needed to speak to me about something?"

"I did." Jaqen nodded. "Perhaps you have heard the rumors about Red God Records approaching myself and the band?"

"I have, but it's not the first time you've spoken to a producer. I thought that if it was something major, you'd tell me yourself."

Jaqen smiled. "Well, I wanted to tell you that the rumors are true, and they have offered us a contract."
"Jaqen, that's fantastic!" Arya exclaimed.

He held up his hand to show her that she shouldn't get too excited just yet. "I thought so too. A man named Benero came to see me on Christmas day, and at first I did not believe him, but the guys and I went to their offices and they were completely serious."

"Oh my god! Why didn't you say anything sooner?"

"Because I wanted to have something tangible to tell you before I said anything. Besides, we have not signed anything yet."

"Why not?"

"For one, the terms they were willing to offer us were not terms that all of us were happy to agree to. Basically, they wanted to retain control of much of the creative direction, and that's not who the Faceless Men are. I cannot allow someone else to tell me how the Faceless Men must sound."

"That's totally understandable. It's your band, and it wouldn't be your sound otherwise."

Jaqen sighed. "So, my uncle has agreed to act as our manager for the meantime and he is currently in the process of re-negotiating terms with the record company."

"That's so exciting, Jaqen you guys could soon be getting signed to a huge label!"

"That may be so." Jaqen refused to allow himself to get too caught up in the what-if scenarios. "Though my Umma would prefer it if I finished high school and went to college first. However, that is not what I wanted to discuss with you."

"Then what is it?"

Jaqen indicated for her to sit closer to him, and when she scooted over, he lifted her so that she sat on his lap. He rested his palm over one of her thighs and gently rubbed her leg over her jeans.

"If we get signed, it means that my focus will have to be on the band and on the first album that we will have to make. The band will probably have to stop playing gigs at The House of Black & White, because our time would then belong to Red God Records. It also means that you may not see me as often."

"I know," Arya said, "I understand."

He frowned. "You do not look overly upset about that. It would mean I would get to see you even less than I already do now."

"I can't be upset about it," Arya told him, "I have to be happy because getting signed has been your dream. And it's not as though I'll never see you. I'm sure we'll manage to see each other somehow."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure that I'm sure," Arya replied.

"Of course, this is still all hypothetical," Jaqen pointed out, "but it makes me feel a lot better to know that you are supporting me."

"That's what I'm supposed to do, isn't it?" Arya looked up at him, her eyes wide and searching. "I'm your girlfriend. I'm supposed to support you."
Jaqen dropped his head down to hers and kissed her, pulling her up against his chest so that he could plunder her mouth. He was feeling hopeful about his music career, and hopeful that his relationship with Arya could be maintained if the band really did get signed. He had many things going on in his mind even as he relished the sweetness of her kiss. If he had not been so pre-occupied he might have noticed how in that moment, Arya's kisses began to change.
Good morning King’s Landing!

We are now more than half-way through January, which means that there are only a few weeks until Valentine’s Day! It also means that the Valentine's Day Bachelor Auction is just around the corner! The annual event will this year be held at the Acorn Ballroom of the Lion’s Gate Hotel. Hosted by Mrs. Ravella Smallwood of the King’s Landing Women's Association, the bachelor auction will see young eligible men from some of King’s Landing’s most prominent families donate their time to raise money for charity. The highest bidders will each win the sole company of one bachelor for the evening, enjoying dinner for two in a private room, and a tour of the city's sights in a limousine. Proceeds from the auction will go towards a charity of the bachelor's choosing.

I have it on good authority that the usual suspects, including all three of the Tyrell brothers, Renly Baratheon and Joffrey Baratheon will be included in the bachelors up for auction, the remaining spots are still to be nominated, so if you have anyone you wish to include, please submit their names to the King’s Landing Women's Association as soon as you can!

Jazmine Choi and Gendry Waters have been spending more time together with reports coming in that Jazmine has been seen on numerous occasions at The Hollow, favored hangout of the Brotherhood Without Banners. However, apart from that one public kiss on the cheek that I reported about a couple of weeks ago, there has been no word or evidence that the two are dating. Perhaps they're just really good at hiding it, hmmm?

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Arya

Something had changed. She had been in denial at first, but in the weeks since that uncomfortably revealing conversation she'd had with Jon, Arya could no longer deny that there had been a subtle, yet ultimately profound change in her relationship with Jaqen. She had been unwilling to face the fact that their relationship was perhaps not as perfect as she had come to believe.

However, she had been forced to acknowledge the reality of their situation the day when Jaqen had run his fingers through her newly colored, emerald green hair, and her first instinct had been to pull away from him. Though she had stopped herself from doing so, the unexpected reaction had shocked her and its effects on her had lingered long after the moment had passed. When Jaqen had kissed her that day, she'd found herself unable to respond the way she normally did.

Arya had tried to tell herself that her reaction had been something she'd just imagined, but after a week had passed and she had still been unable to warm to his touch, she had been forced to make up some excuse about being worried for an upcoming math test when Jaqen had noticed her less than enthusiastic response to his kiss. She couldn't understand her sudden lack of reaction, especially when she had been more than willing to get undressed in front of him not so long ago.

The conversation she'd had with Jon, Sansa, Talea, Brea and even her discussions with Jaqen had been on constant replay in her head. Their words had looped over and over in her mind – the lack of
time she and Jaqen had to spend together, her inability to feel jealous about Jaqen's popularity with girls, Jon's theory about her possessiveness towards Gendry, and Jaqen's apparent disappointment when she had failed to be distressed at the prospect of spending even less time with him – all of which seemed to lead to one conclusion.

Arya refused to accept the direction that all of these signs were pointing to, and she tried to find other clues within their words that could explain the detachment she now felt towards the emotions she was supposed to be having for Jaqen…because she refused to consider that she might have made a mistake…a wrong decision.

No, I did not choose wrong. Jaqen is not a mistake.

She'd tried to tell herself that a supportive girlfriend would and should be excited about her boyfriend's band being signed. Jaqen was going to be a bona fide rock star and nothing was going to get in the way of that happening. Jealousy had no place here, and time spent apart was a small price to pay if it meant Jaqen's success. That's what she was tried to tell herself, at least.

Even as she had accepted that her feelings had changed, she still believed that her relationship with Jaqen could go back to normal. All she had to do was work harder at being the girlfriend she was supposed to be. She needed to stop unnecessarily fixating on other people's relationships – namely Gendry's relationships – so that she could focus on her own. Arya hoped that her aversion to Jaqen's touch would resolve itself when things went back to normal, because she loathed having to give him excuses to avoid intimacy. As things were, she supposed she was somewhat relieved that Jaqen was busy that Saturday and wouldn't be able to see her until Sunday.

Her phone tinkled then, a notification that she had received a message through Messenger. She was mildly surprised when the name that popped up on her screen was not one that had ever crossed it before.

"Hi, Arya. How are you?" Myrcella Baratheon had written. "It was so nice to see you again at the New Year's Eve party. I've missed King's Landing."

Arya sat up in her bed, wondering why Joffrey's little sister was messaging her.

"Hi, Myrcella. I'm fine thanks. It was nice to see you too." Arya wrote back.

Almost a month before, Arya had run into Myrcella at the New Year's Eve party their families had attended at the King's Gate Hotel. Arya had been surprised when the pretty blonde girl had said hello to her when they'd bumped into each other on the way to the restroom, because she hadn't recognized her at first.

"Oh, my god…Myrcella. I didn't know you were back." Arya had said to her. "You look great!"

"Thank you." Myrcella had beamed at her. "As do you. Is your dress from House of Holland?"

Arya had looked down at the orange fit-and-flare dress she was wearing and remembered only that she had bought it because of the spaceships printed in red foil across the bodice and skirt, which made it fun and quirky.
"I think so," she'd replied, "anyway, how long are you going to be home for?"

"Only two weeks," Myrcella had said, "I have to get back so that I can rehearse for a show that the academy is putting on. Plus, I'm missing my boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?"

"Yeah," Myrcella had giggled. "He's the son of the school's current director. His name's Trystane, and he's just the most beautiful dancer I've ever seen!"

"Wow, that's great." Arya had grinned at the dopey expression that had come over Myrcella's face when she'd spoken about her boyfriend.

Myrcella had then grown serious for a moment, and she'd looked around them to make sure no one was close by before she had asked the question Arya had least been expecting.

"Arya, could I ask you to tell me about Gendry Waters?" Myrcella had looked at her with a soft plea in her eyes. "I've heard that you're good friends with him. My parents refuse to answer my questions about him, and all I know is what I've been able to find online. Joffrey's a jerk at the best of times, but he gets so aggressive if anyone even hints about Gendry."

"Myrcella, I don't know what to tell you." Arya's expression had become guarded, knowing very well that it was not her place to say anything on this issue.

"I know that Gendry really is my brother," Myrcella had continued, "and I know that none of what is happening is his fault. I just feel so helpless that I can't do anything or say anything to comfort him, even just to make all of what's going on just that little bit less...awful. You know what I mean?"

Arya had sensed that Myrcella's concern was genuine, but still, it was not up to her to say anything on Gendry's behalf. Arya felt bad that Myrcella was being kept in the dark, and so she'd offered her what little she could.

"Gendry's really strong," Arya had told her, "mentally, I mean. He's been through a lot, but nothing's broken him. He's also a really nice guy. I think, in time maybe, if things work themselves out, you'll be glad to have him as a brother."

Myrcella had been grateful for her words then, but Arya had not even thought about it since. Now, she hazarded a guess at what Myrcella's purpose for messaging her could be about.

"Arya, I was wondering if you could give me Gendry's email address. Please? I've been thinking a lot about what we talked about at the New Year's party, and I feel really strongly about reaching out to him. Even if he ignores me, at least I can let him know that I'm not like the rest of my family."

Arya sighed and took a while to figure out how she could respond. She knew how Gendry felt about the Baratheons, and even if Myrcella's intentions were pure, she couldn't give out his email without his permission.

"Have you tried contacting him through Facebook?" she wrote back.

"I have, but he hasn't accepted my friend request, and my Messenger messages have gone unread too."

"I think he's being wary about accepting friend requests or reading messages from people he doesn't know."
"I can understand that, especially with what's happened in the past."

"I can try and speak to him about it first. Can I give him your details just in case?"

"Yes, of course! Thank you, Arya!"

Arya spent some minutes longer chatting to Myrcella about general things, with the conversation ending when Myrcella sent her a picture of herself and her boyfriend, Trystane Martell. Myrcella had looked insanely happy in the arms of her curly-haired boyfriend as they'd posed for a couple-selfie together.

Arya was feeling lazy after her chat with Myrcella. Consequently, she went down to breakfast that morning still in her pajamas, much to her mother's disapproval. Catelyn always maintained that her children display a minimum standard of dress at the table, and sleepwear did not meet that standard.

"It's Saturday morning and I was too lazy to get changed out of these comfy pajamas," Arya explained when her mother gave her a look.

Catelyn shook her head. "It's just as well that I don't have time to lecture you this morning. I have to attend a meeting with the Women's Association today."

"What's the meeting about, Cat?" Ned asked over the rim of his coffee cup.

"It's about the Valentine's Day Bachelor Auction," Cat replied, "I'm part of the organizing committee."

"So, the Bachelor Auction is real?" Sansa asked with an amused grin on her face.

"Afraid so," Cat replied, an equally amused expression now crossing her features. "The President of the association, Ravella Smallwood, has asked if I would be willing to nominate one of the three – Robb, Jon or Theon – to be in the bachelor line up. I told her it wouldn't be possible because they're up North for school."

"But, Robb will be here that week." Ned pointed out. "He's going to be interning with our Operations Director for two weeks as part of his course. Didn't he tell you?"

Catelyn looked genuinely surprised. "No, Robb has not told me. Whether he meant to tell me at a later date is another matter, but he will not go unscathed for failing to mention it to me sooner. He had to have known about this internship before Christmas!"

"Are you going to nominate him, mother?" Arya couldn't help but ask.

"I am now." Catelyn smiled. "And then I'm going to enjoy calling your brother to tell him what I've done. He has a choice of course, but I'm going to make it extremely difficult for him to say no."

Arya and Sansa laughed while Bran made a comment about being glad he was too young to be nominated.

"Will it actually be on the fourteenth, mother?" Sansa then asked, "I might have other plans for that night."

"I thought you might ask about that," Catelyn replied, "you'll be glad to hear that yourself and Arya need only attend for a couple of hours at the most. The auction begins at 5 PM, so you'll both be free to go on dates with your boyfriends afterwards."
"Great!" Sansa smiled.

"5 PM is an early start, isn't it?" Ned asked with a small frown between his brows.

"Well, part of the prize involves dinner with the bachelor, and then a limousine tour of King's Landings' sights afterwards. The 'date' is scheduled to end at roughly 10 PM, so they factored in time for the auction itself and a two-hour meal, give or take."

"What will the rest of us do after the auction?"

"Of course there's dinner and dancing, Ned. The Acorn Ballroom is known for hosting the grandest parties, and I know for a fact a full Jazz ensemble has been hired for the night, as well as a DJ."

"Do I have to wear a tuxedo?"

"No, Ned. You don't have to wear a tuxedo. It is a formal event, but it will not be black tie…and speaking of formal wear, girls, I've taken the liberty of organizing your dresses for the event."

"Oh, mom…" Arya sighed.

"Which designer, and what color?" Sansa asked, appearing resigned to her fate.

"Christian Dior, from their Spring-Summer collection. Sansa, yours will be pink and Arya, yours will be green to match that hair which you went and colored without consulting me beforehand."

"Green again?"

"Green suits you," her mother quipped, "though you're aware of that as you would not have dyed your entire head emerald green otherwise."

Arya shrugged. "I'm only going to wear the dress a couple of hours anyway, so I guess I can deal with it."

Catelyn then finished her breakfast before reminding Rickon to complete his reading assignment before playing computer games.

"Okay, I promise," Rickon said, "what time will you be home today, mother?"

"I'm not sure, sweetie," Catelyn replied, "why, was there something you needed?"

Rickon shrugged. "Not really. There was just this new movie that I wanted to see at the cinema."

"Oh, honey. Your father and I will take you another day, okay?"

Rickon was looking dejected, and Arya felt bad for her little brother.

"I can take him," she heard herself saying, "I'm not doing anything else, so I can take him after he finishes his reading assignment."

"Did you hear that, Rickon?" Catelyn ruffled his hair. "Arya says she can go with you."

Rickon was grinning at Arya now. "Thanks Arya! I'm going to finish all my reading so we can go right away!"

"Finish your breakfast first, okay?" Arya smiled at him before pouring herself some juice and loading up her bagel with smoked salmon and cream cheese.
Her mother smiled at her gratefully. "Thanks, Arya."

"No worries, Mom." Arya nodded.

"Have a nice time at your meeting, dear." Ned said as Catelyn got up to leave.

"You're in charge of the kids today, Ned." Catelyn turned to her husband. "Make sure they eat, and if all else fails, give them money."

The three older Stark children laughed while Ned gave his wife a long-suffering stare. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Cat."

After their mother had left, Arya and Sansa encouraged Rickon to finish his breakfast. When his plate was clear, Arya then asked him to bring down his book bag so that she could help him with his reading. Sansa, who was working on an essay, decided to bring her laptop down so she could help out if needed, and Bran decided to join them too because Rickon had looked at him expectantly.

"Aren't you lucky that we pretty much take care of ourselves, father?" Arya asked him when he came into the living room to find his four youngest kids sprawled on the floor, along the sofa or seated in front of the coffee table doing their homework.

"I don't know why your mother complains about how difficult you all are," their father said, before he left them to it. "I'll be in my study if you need me."

Arya then had Rickon read out aloud to her until he had completed the book he had chosen for his book report. She even went through the guidelines that his teacher had set out so that Rickon could write down the main plot points of the story.

"Good job, Rickon," Arya told him when he put down his pencil. "You have a whole week to write your report, so I guess we're done for today."

"Can we go to the movies now?" he asked excitedly.

Arya nodded. "Sure, but first you need to put your things away, and let me change out of my pajamas, okay?"

Her little brother hurriedly packed up his books and pencil case before bounding out of the room to return his belongings to his bedroom. Arya stood up and stretched, then gave Bran a look.

"Do you want to come with us, Bran?"

"To watch a Disney movie?" Bran glanced at her skeptically.

"You're never too old for a Disney movie."

"I'd go too if I didn't have this essay to write," Sansa whined.

"You're not seeing Sandor today?" Arya asked her.

"Tonight," Sansa replied, "that's why I want to get this done."

"Are you going to feed me if I come with you?" Bran asked.

"Sure, Bran." Arya replied.

"How come you're not with Jaqen today?" Sansa asked her.
In that case I want to go to the Dragon Pit Steak House later," Bran continued to say, "they have Wagyu burgers, and those curly fries that Rickon likes too."

"Okay, Bran." Arya sighed before answering her sister's question. "Jaqen's busy today, but we have plans for tomorrow."

"I'll go and get ready now." Bran excused himself, sensing a girly conversation in the air.

Arya did not move from her spot, even though Sansa was expecting her to go and get changed.

"What's wrong, Arya?" Sansa was prompted to ask.

Arya shook her head. "I'm just thinking about something that Jaqen said to me. He told me that if the Faceless Men get signed to Red God Records, he and I would see each other even less than we do now."

"Oh, Arya..." Sansa looked at her sympathetically. "That must be hard to deal with."

"I told him something encouraging, but I wasn't like...devastated about it, you know? I mean, I'm sure it's something you've thought about, with Sandor going to college come September, so you should know how a girlfriend is supposed to feel."

"What are you talking about?" Sansa frowned at her.

"Where's Sandor hoping to go for college?"

"The University of Valyria,"

"Really? Wow." Arya was surprised by the answer. "That's interstate. It's two hours by plane, I think, and at least nine hours if you drive. How will you feel when he starts college in September and you guys won't get to see each other every day like you do now?"

"I'd...I'd be devastated." Sansa replied, her face suddenly ashen.

"Exactly," Arya continued, "and if Jaqen and the guys do get signed, who knows what his schedule is going to be like? Maybe I'm already used to not seeing him because his schedule is so busy as it is now, but I think I disappointed him somehow because I didn't get upset...We don't even have pictures of the two of us together."

"You don't?"

Arya shook her head, remembering the photo of Myrcella and her boyfriend together, and not being able to imagine herself and Jaqen posing for a couples-selfie.

"Not one."

"Maybe you and Jaqen just aren't like other couples?" Sansa offered.

"That doesn't make me feel better." Arya frowned.

Sansa sighed. "I'm sorry, Arya. I don't really know what to say. You're not like other girls, so I never expected that you would get hung up about something like this the way that other girls do...you will miss him though, right?"

"Of course I will."
"Then, it's not like you're totally indifferent about not getting to spend time with him. If you didn't care at all then I'd probably say that maybe —" Sansa abruptly stopped speaking, her sentence unfinished.

"What?" Arya prompted. "Maybe, what?"

Sansa looked uncomfortable all of a sudden. "I was going to say, if you didn't care at all about not getting to see Jaqen, then maybe you don't really feel as strongly for him as you thought you did."

The floor felt like it was giving way from under her feet, and Arya took a step backwards, trying to regain her footing.

"What makes you say that?" she asked her sister.

"I don't know, I was just thinking out loud." Sansa shrugged. "I'm not saying it's true or that it applies to you at all, but I read something like that in an advice column and it popped into my head when I thought of your situation. But, forget I said it because you do care about Jaqen and you'll miss him if you don't get to see him, so your situation is totally different."

Rickon came running back into the room then, and he let out a groan when he saw Arya still standing there in her pajamas.

"Arya, you're still not ready!" he whined.

Arya mentally shook herself, dispelling Sansa's worrying words from her thoughts for the time being. "Sorry, I'm going to my room now. Five minutes, okay?"

"Go!" Rickon gave her a push out of the living room.

"Thanks for the chat, Sansa." Arya said to her.

"Anytime."

Arya went upstairs to her room and changed into a comfy and stretchy pair of dark blue jeans, which she matched with a practical grey sweater and sneakers, because who knew how much Rickon was going to make her run around that day? When she finally rushed downstairs, their father was giving Rickon a firm lecture about not running off while he was with Arya and Bran.

"If you want to look at something, you must make sure that Arya or Bran are with you at all times, all right Rickon?"

"Yes, father."

"Good boy." Ned then turned to Arya. "How much money do you need?"

"It's fine, father. I'll put everything on the credit card."

"Then have fun, and be back in time for dinner."

"We will, don't worry."

Their driver was waiting for them in the garage with the town car ready to go, and soon, Arya and her two younger brothers were on their way to Harrenhal Mall. Rickon was in high spirits, and Bran had come around to the idea of watching the Disney action-adventure movie, though Arya suspected he'd wanted to see it all along.
The cinema at Harrenhal was busy, given that it was a Saturday, and Arya held tightly onto Rickon's hand to make sure that he didn't get separated from them. Bran offered to buy their tickets, while Arya and Rickon went to buy popcorn and drinks. It was while Rickon was going crazy in the candy section that Arya spied a tall familiar figure leaning against a wall across the foyer, his face turned to the side, revealing his handsome profile.

"Gendry." His name had passed her lips like a whisper, with no one hearing it but her.

What he was doing at the cinema was evident, but it was who he was with that piqued her curiosity. Gendry was currently alone, but looking around him as though he was expecting someone. Is he with her? Arya wondered, and looked around to see if Jazmine was nearby.

She had been doing her best to keep out of Gendry's way over the last few weeks, especially after seeing Jazmine kiss him that day. She had watched as Gendry had stared after Jazmine, who'd left a look of wonder on his face. Gendry had made a point of telling her that Jazmine was a nice girl, and from that moment on, she'd tried to limit their interactions, only really talking to him when Hot Pie or Edric or anyone else could be there to act as a buffer for the awkwardness she now felt around Gendry.

If he was on a date with Jazmine Choi, then Arya wanted to make sure to stay out of their way.

"Shireen!"

A voice that was unmistakably Rickon's shouted out over the crowded cinema hall, and before Arya could react, her little brother had shrugged out of her grasp and bolted across the carpeted foyer. Gendry's attention had been attracted by the shout and he turned his head in their direction.

Suddenly, he was looking right at her.

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**Gendry**

Mr. Cressen had scheduled for him to come in at 8AM that morning, which was a break from their usual after school routine. The reason for it became clear when he had arrived at the man's Rosby Road premises to find Shireen Baratheon already there, under the care of Davos Seaworth.

"Hello, Gendry," Davos had greeted him. "Good to see you again."

"You too, Mr. Seaworth." Gendry had said, before turning to greet Shireen who had been gazing up at him expectantly. "Hi, Shireen. How are you?"

"Fine. Thank you," his cousin had replied. "And yourself?"

"I'm great, thank you." Gendry had smiled at her. "Are you here for etiquette classes too?"

"No." Shireen had shaken her head. "I'm here to have breakfast with you."

"Oh?" Gendry had glanced at Mr. Cressen and Davos.

"Stannis and his family are staying at their apartment here in the city for the weekend, and when the little lady heard that you would be in the neighborhood this morning, she insisted that she had to see you." Davos had told him.

"And as you are here this morning to learn all about breakfast table etiquette, I proposed a most fitting solution." Mr. Cressen had added. "Come along now. The food won't wait."
Mr. Cressen had led them to his dining room where four places had been set at the table, and as Gendry had come to expect, there was decidedly more crockery and cutlery involved than he was used to seeing at breakfast.

With just a look from Mr. Cressen, Gendry had pulled out a chair for Shireen, and he had been pleased to see that his effort this time was far smoother than his previous attempts.

"Have you done this before?" Gendry had whispered to Shireen after he had taken his own seat.

"I have, but it was a long time ago," she had replied matter-of-factly.

"Shireen completed her first lessons with me when she was six years old," Mr. Cressen had informed him, "you have some catching up to do, Mr. Waters."

Gendry's lesson began with a quick but detailed explanation of the tableware in front of him, learning the placement of each knife and fork, learning the difference between the glass for juice and the one for water. They were to have an English style breakfast, and as soon as Gendry had laid his napkin across his lap, Mr. Cressen's own personal housekeeper had entered the room and began serving out food, starting with a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice.

Gendry's lesson in breakfast etiquette had been a practical one, carried out as the meal progressed. He learned that the napkin was to remain in his lap at all times, and that if he had to get up for any reason, then the napkin was to be placed on the chair to hide any stains he might have dropped on it. The napkin was only to be placed on the table, to the left of the plate when the meal was done.

Cereal had come next, not the sugar coated variety he liked, but the healthier toasted oat and bran type which he ate without complaint. A full English breakfast included bacon, sausages and eggs, which Gendry had been excited about, but first he had to learn about how toasted bread always came with the crust cut off and in rectangles because toast must never be cut or broken into pieces at the table. Condiments such as butter and jam should be portioned to the side of one's plate and applied to the piece of toast from the plate, never directly from the butter dish or jam container.

"Only the rich could make something like eating toast so complicated!" Gendry had muttered, earning him a grin from Davos Seaworth, and a look of reproach from Mr. Cressen.

The way he used cutlery was also corrected, with Mr. Cressen having explained that American etiquette dictated that the knife should always be held in the right hand and the fork, facing downward, should be in the left. The knife should be placed to the side of the plate after cutting food, with the fork being switched into the right hand and used to eat. However, continental style, where the knife and fork were retained in the hands as one ate was also acceptable.

There was, Gendry learned, far more intricacies involved in dining etiquette than merely starting with the cutlery on the outside and working your way in.

"And this is only breakfast." Davos had laughed when Gendry had made the comment. "Just wait until you get to the etiquettes of a formal dinner!"

Shireen had giggled at Gendry's expression of horror, though she had given him an encouraging pat on the back.

"Don't worry Gendry. If I can do it, so can you."

Even Mr. Cressen had laughed at her mischievous remark. When all the food had been consumed, Gendry considered this particular lesson to be the most enjoyable one he'd had, and not just because food had been involved.
"Is it over already?" Shireen had asked with a disappointed note in her voice. "I was hoping to spend some more time with Gendry."

"Cheer up, Shireen. I'm sure you'll get to see him again soon." Davos had said, attempting to lighten her mood.

"You're more than welcome to join him next weekend when I take him through the formal dinner," Mr. Cressen had suggested.

"I'm not sure we'll be in the city next weekend," Shireen had said dejectedly, "but thank you for offering."

"Well, there might be a way we can spend some more time together." Gendry had looked at Shireen and Davos. "Provided we get permission from your parents, of course."

"What might that be?" Davos had asked.

"I'm actually taking my foster-brother and sister to see that new Disney movie in a couple of hours, perhaps Shireen could join us?"

"Really? You're inviting me to come with you?" Shireen had looked genuinely surprised.

"I sure am," Gendry had replied.

"Now, now Shireen." Davos had cautioned. "I must call your mother first, but bear in mind that I also have a schedule to keep and I cannot accompany you all day."

"I can take care of her," Gendry had offered, "I've been babysitting my foster-siblings for years. I can also take her back to their apartment later if necessary."

Davos had excused himself to make the call to Selyse Baratheon, and he returned five minutes later wearing a surprised expression similar to the one Shireen had worn moments earlier.

"What did my mother say?" Shireen had asked hopefully.

"She said that you have permission to go with Gendry, but you must be back at the apartment no later than 5 PM."

Shireen had whooped in delight before grabbing Gendry's hand. "Did you hear that? I can go with you!"

"I don't know what you did or said to so encourage Selyse Baratheon's trust that night, but she's entrusting you with her only child, so you best get her back in one piece, all right?" Davos had said to him sternly.

Shortly after that, Gendry had strapped a very excitable Shireen into the back seat of his car and had driven home with her, back to The Forge Estates so that he could pick up Toby and Tabitha. Ellen and Tobho had been speechless when he had walked into the house with his cousin, who bore the same inky black hair and deep blue eyes that he did.

Gendry had introduced Shireen to Toby and Tabitha, and Tabitha had taken Shireen by the hand and promptly started showing her the new dollhouse that Tobho had built for her over the holidays.

"That's Shireen Baratheon in my living room, playing with my children." Ellen had said. "That's Stannis Baratheon's daughter in there…Robert's niece."
"Why are you so flustered, Ellen?" Gendry had asked her.

Ellen had smiled wistfully. "We were living in such different worlds not so long ago. I could never have imagined that my children would ever play with children like Shireen Baratheon."

"Shireen is my cousin…my only cousin, as it turns out. From what I've seen, I think her childhood has been quite lonely so far, and filled with private school and after school lessons. I'm sure she would rather grow up the way Toby and Tabitha are, with friends and less structure."

"How did she come to be with you today?"

Gendry had previously told his foster-parents about Stannis Baratheon, his visit to Storm's End and of the deportment classes that Stannis had enrolled him into.

"She joined me for my morning lesson with Mr. Cressen today," Gendry had told Ellen, "and Shireen had not wanted to say goodbye at the end of the lesson. I thought it would be nice for her to come along with us to see a movie, and much to everyone's surprise, her mother had allowed it."

"I suppose it's a win-win for everyone, in that case. Shireen gets to play with other children, and you get to know your cousin better."

"That was the plan," Gendry had agreed, "now, I need to get ready so we can get to the cinema on time."

"Take the SUV, it'll be more comfortable than fitting all three kids into your little sports car."

"Thanks Ellen, I will."

He soon wondered what he had gotten himself into when the drive to Harrenhal Cinema proved noisier than he'd expected, with all three elementary school kids giggling non-stop at Toby's surprisingly extensive repertoire of possibly the worst Knock-Knock jokes that Gendry had ever heard.

"Knock knock," Toby had said.

"Who's there?" came the reply from the girls.

"Cows go,"

"Cows go who?"

"No silly," Toby had replied, "cows go moo!"

Childish laughter had filled the SUV.

"Knock knock," Toby had began again.

"Who's there?"

"Doris,"

"Doris who?"

"Doris locked, that's why I had to knock!"

And then came a classic that Gendry had remembered from his own elementary school days.
"Will you remember me one year from now?"
"Yes,"

"Will you remember me one month from now?"
"Yes,"

"Will you remember me tomorrow?"
"Yes!"

"Knock knock,"

"Who's there?"

"See, you've forgotten me already!"

When they had reached the cinema, both Tabitha and Shireen were in high spirits and it was with one of their hands tucked into each of his that Gendry had to walk them across the parking lot to make sure they crossed the road safely. Toby, at eleven years old, saw that he needed assistance and took hold of his sister's hand while Gendry paid for their tickets. He was about to suggest buying popcorn and candy when Tabitha had suddenly declared she needed to go to the bathroom.

"What about you Shireen?" Gendry had asked.

"I think I should go too, just in case."

"Great. Toby, you should go just in case as well."

Gendry had found a spot where he could wait for the kids without being in the way and kept his eyes trained on the entrance to the bathrooms. It had been a while since he'd spent any substantial amount of time with his foster-siblings, so when Tabitha had mentioned the new Disney movie, it had been hard for him to refuse her. He had also thought about Shireen on numerous occasions since he'd met her, but he had not wanted to push his presence into her life when her family barely knew him, blood relation aside. He had sent her a Christmas present however, just a simple silver charm bracelet for little girls similar to the one he'd bought for Tabitha, with a charm of a book and little baby deer hanging from it. Shireen had shyly shown him that she was wearing the bracelet that day, and Gendry decided that there was after all, one Baratheon that he did not mind sharing DNA with.

The girls emerged from the bathroom followed by Toby not far behind them. Gendry stepped away from the wall he'd been leaning on, prepared to call out to the girls when someone else beat him to it.

"Shireen!"

Gendry whipped his head around to find an auburn haired little boy dashing across the foyer towards them, and when Shireen responded with a beaming grin, he finally recognized the boy to be Rickon Stark. Swiftly, he looked in the direction Rickon had come from, and there his eyes had locked with those of Arya Stark. She looked just as surprised as he did.

"Hey." Gendry lifted his hand in a wave, just as another auburn haired boy appeared beside Arya.

The second boy was clearly Bran Stark, and as both Stark siblings walked over towards them, Rickon introduced himself to Toby and Tabitha Mott.

"Shireen is my friend," Rickon was saying, "and that's my sister Arya, and my brother Bran."
"We know Arya," Tabitha said, "she's friends with my brother, Gendry."

Rickon now looked up at him, and his eyes lit up with recognition. "I've met you before! You sang a song with my other sister."

"Yep, that's me." Gendry laughed.

Arya and Bran reached them, and after they'd exchanged greetings, the younger kids decided that it was a good idea for all of them to hang out together.

"Rickon says you're here to watch the same movie we're watching, Arya." Tabitha said to her.

"They are, Arya!" Rickon nodded his head enthusiastically. "Can we sit with them? I want to sit next to Shireen."

"I want to sit next to Shireen too!" Tabitha said.

Flustered by the dual attack, Arya glanced at Gendry questioningly. "Is that okay with you?"

Gendry saw the gleam in the kids' eyes, and sensed that they were ready to gang up against the older teenagers if they didn't get their way.

"Yeah, it's no problem." Gendry smiled resignedly. "I don't think we get a choice in the matter anyway."

Gendry saw that Bran and Toby had already introduced themselves to one another and were now bonding over their apparent mutual love of a video game called Bloodraven. Both boys happened to be wearing similar t-shirts bearing images of the silver-haired, bow and arrow wielding hero character from the game.

"Can we go and buy popcorn and candy now?" Tabitha asked.

"Come on then," Gendry motioned for them all to follow him. "Let's buy popcorn and candy, then we can go and find seats before all the good ones are taken."

With some wrangling between himself and Arya, they eventually bought enough popcorn and candy for the kids to share before making their way into the cinema to find seats. Bran, who was only a year older than Toby but acted older, had somehow rubbed off on Toby who had started to emulate the older boy's calm demeanor, which was a great help because it meant Gendry had less to worry about.

They found seats toward the rear of the cinema, with Toby and Bran seated together at one end, followed by Rickon, Shireen then Tabitha, with Gendry and Arya closest to the aisle. The lights had not yet dimmed, and the adverts had yet to start, and in the meantime Gendry wondered what he could say to fill the silence. As it was, being with Arya was a totally unexpected development.

"You know, this is the first time we've ever been to see a movie together," he heard himself saying.

Arya's brows furrowed for a moment in thought. "You're right."

"Why did we never see a movie before?"

"I'm not sure." Arya shrugged. "I guess you kind of got really busy with the Brotherhood soon after I met you, and then a bunch of other stuff happened…"

Arya's voice had trailed off, and Gendry realized that they simply never had the chance to before. He
had never got the chance to ask her out on a date. It seemed ironic for fate to now throw them together like this.

"How have you been?" he now asked, realizing he hadn't spoken to her with any depth in some time.

Arya shrugged, the movement causing the side of her arm to brush against his where he rested his elbow on the armrest between them.

"I've been okay. Just trying to get through the rest of freshman year without too much incident, you know?" Arya gave him a look from below her lashes. "How about you?"

"I'm doing okay," he replied, then nodded towards Shireen. "I'm getting to spend some time with my only cousin in the world. Her family were in the city this weekend and she wanted to see me. It was good of her mom to give her permission to come out with us today. Look at her, she seems to be loving this."

Indeed, Shireen, Tabitha and Rickon were in the middle of some serious whispering, their little heads huddled together over a box of popcorn.

"So, it hasn't all been bad," Arya commented, "finding out about your father, I mean."

"Shireen has been the only real positive so far," Gendry agreed, "even more so than learning about all those dead Baratheons that I'm related to."

"Would you be open to getting to know some of the other living ones?" Arya asked him. "I don't mean Joffrey obviously, but Myrcella or Tommen, maybe?"

Gendry shrugged, his arm brushing against hers again. "Somehow, I doubt that their mother would be very welcoming of that idea."

"Cersei doesn't know everything that goes on in her children's lives, you know." Arya told him. "I saw Myrcella at the New Year's party when she came home for the holidays, and she asked about you."

"She did?"

"I didn't tell her anything that the public don't already know, but I didn't realize she was serious until just this morning. She messaged me again, asking me for your email address."

Surprised, Gendry recalled the one and only time he'd ever seen Myrcella Baratheon, and he remembered a very pretty girl with soft blond curls and a dancer's lithe frame. She had been hanging around the Performing Arts building, and from what he had seen, she'd been shy but well liked. First impressions at least, she had none of the arrogance that had oozed from Joffrey's pores.

"Why does she want to reach out to me all of a sudden?" he wondered.

"Myrcella's a sweet girl, and from what I know of her, she has a big heart. If she's reaching out to you, you can be sure there's no hidden agenda behind it."

"I don't know, Arya." Gendry had hesitated. "I'm not sure I'm ready for a relationship with my half-siblings right now."

"That's totally your call," Arya said gently, "but, will you be okay taking her details from me? When or whether you use it, it's up to you."
"Sure," Gendry agreed, "I don't see why not."

He wasn't sure how to feel after learning that his half-sister was trying to get in contact with him, but he admitted that he wasn't totally against the idea. One day, he'd be ready to explore the possibility of a relationship with his half-siblings…except Joffrey, that douche could go to hell.

The cinema lights finally dimmed, and for the next couple of hours he simply forgot about everything and just enjoyed the lighthearted movie on the screen, and the presence of the girl sitting next to him, whose warmth seeped from the inch of contact where their arms touched on the armrest, right through his entire body. Time had passed, and the initial pain he'd felt had began to heal, but he could not stop himself from missing her.

After the movie, Bran had rallied the younger ones into demanding curly fries at the Dragon Pit Steak House, which was how Gendry had found himself seated across the table from Arya with a mountain of curly fries and pulled-beef sliders for the younger kids, while the older boys ordered Wagyu beef burgers. Arya had ordered a house special Dragon Burger with jalapeños, and Gendry had opted for another house special called the Firebreather Burger with jalapeños, serrano peppers and Tabasco sauce.

"What's in the Black Dread Burger?" Arya had asked the waitress.

"Ghost peppers and habañero peppers," the waitress had replied, "no one has ever managed to finish an entire burger. Would you like to try it? Your meal is free if you finish the burger."

"Nope. No, thank you." Arya had quickly shaken her head. "No way!"

The kids had laughed at her horrified face, and during the meal Gendry and Arya talked and laughed the way they had before everything had turned pear-shaped for them, and he was aware that the awkwardness and tension that had been present between them since the day he had kissed her, was somehow eased by the presence of their siblings. They talked about Hot Pie and his latest pie creations, and about Beric's latest song compositions. They talked about the next gig that the Brotherhood were booked to perform after Valentine’s Day, and Arya told him about the Valentine's Day Bachelor Auction, where her mother had nominated her brother Robb as a candidate.

"You're mom is really going to do that to your brother?" Gendry asked, mildly shaken at the notion of some stranger bidding for his time and company.

"Yes," Arya replied, "though I know Robb will protest, he'll give in because it's for charity."

"How much money are we expecting all these girls and women to bid for?"

"I think the record ever was a hundred grand, or so Sansa says when she did her research after mom told us about it, but I think fifty grand is about normal."

"One hundred thousand…dollars?" Gendry baulked at the sum. "Who was the bachelor?"

"Jaime Lannister, over twenty years ago."

"Joffrey's uncle?" Gendry laughed. "I guess his looks were good for something. Who was the winning bidder?"

Arya's face broke into a grin. "His own sister."

"Cersei Lannister paid a hundred grand for a date with her own brother? That is both impressive and really, really sad. Wasn't there anyone else who was willing to bid on him?"
"I don't know," Arya replied between bouts of laughter, "either that, or Cersei really didn't want anyone else going on that date with him. The Lannisters are crazy like that."

"I read that Joffrey is going to be in the auction this year, is that true?"

"If it is, then I hope he gets someone he'll consider beneath him to bid on him…like one of the Frey girls that go to *The Crossing Secondary School*. I'm sure they're nice girls, but they're nothing like Margaery Tyrell."

"I think I've heard of the Freys," Gendry mused, "is that the family where their ninety-year old grandfather keeps outliving his wives, and now he's onto his eighth wife?"

"That's them. There's so many of them now that no one can keep track of them all. A few of the granddaughters were at the New Year's party a few weeks ago and I saw two of them trying to flirt with Joffrey."

"Are they pretty?"

Arya almost choked on the soda she was drinking. "I'm sorry," she said, her eyes watering with laughter and tears from nearly choking. "It's mean of me to say this, but they remind me of skinny ferrets."

"That's mean!" Gendry agreed, even as he started laughing too.

The next stop after they had all eaten was the *Five Towers Funhouse*, which turned out to be the first time Shireen had ever set foot inside an amusement arcade and games center. Gendry showed her how to play games like 'Whack-a-Mole' and air hockey, as well as skill testing games like throwing mini basketballs into hoops. Once she got the hang of things, he let her loose with the rest of the kids.

Gendry now stood behind Arya as she tried her hand at a claw machine game, trying to win a plush Husky puppy from the mound of stuffed toys inside the glass cage.

"Ah, damn it!" Arya swore when she failed all of her attempts at the toy.

Twice she had managed to grab the toy with the claw, but the machine had released them far from the exit chute.

"Let me have turn," Gendry said, and dropped some coins into the slot.

"Okay, let's see if you can do better." Arya smiled at him, watching as he used the controls to align the claw over the toy puppy Arya had been aiming for.

"You know, I'm glad you were here today." Gendry said, pressing the button for the claw to drop.

"So am I," Arya said, "my brothers had a really good time. Rickon especially, and I think Shireen feels the same."

The claw grabbed hold of the toy, shifting it about three inches before releasing it. Gendry tried again.

"I think her day was made just that much more special with Rickon being here." Gendry agreed. "I had a good time too."

He looked at Arya to see how she would react, and he found a soft smile about her lips.

"Me too," she said.
Gendry hit the button to release the claw once more, and this time when the claw grabbed the toy, it carried it and dropped it directly down into the chute. Picking up the stuffed Husky puppy from the collection slot, Gendry turned to present it to Arya.

"This is for you," he said to her.

Arya's smile broadened as she accepted it from his hands, and that was all he needed to see to make his day that much more special.
Episode 33 "Matters of The Heart"

Gossip Spyder

Hi everyone!

Gendry Waters and Arya Stark have been photographed out on a date, of sorts, over the weekend. They were chaperoned by five kids who, by these pictures show, appear to be their respective siblings. With that many kids in tow, I'm guessing they were all at Harrenhal Cinemas to watch the new Disney film that just came out. While the two auburn haired boys are clearly the younger Stark brothers, and the two brown haired children can be identified as Gendry's foster-siblings, I am most curious about the identity of the little black-haired and blue-eyed girl who could easily pass as Gendry's sister. However, as Gendry was not previously known to have any biological siblings, I am willing to bet that this little girl is none other than Shireen Baratheon, niece of Robert Baratheon, and technically Gendry's cousin. The only photo I could find of her had been taken six years ago, but the facial scarring on the girl seen with Gendry looks to be identical…does this mean that the Baratheons have acknowledged Gendry on the sly? Compare the pictures for yourselves and speculate as you wish!

The whole group was then seen at the Five Towers Funhouse arcade later in the day, where Gendry and Arya made this claw machine game look like the most fun thing ever! Arya's face is clearly beaming in these photos – she must really have wanted that plush toy that Gendry eventually won for her! You two have got to be the cutest babysitters ever! It's well known that they have been friends since day one, and with Arya's boyfriend Jaqen H'ghar rumored to be signing on with Red God Records along with his band, Arya could be spending more time with her friends in future.

With Valentine's Day drawing nearer, excitement about the Bachelor Auction has been building among King's Landing's eligible bachelorettes! Prepare yourselves, ladies! I have received a tip-off from a friend of a friend whose cousin's step-mom is a member of the committee involved in planning the auction, and word is Beric Dondarrion, Edric Dayne and Robb Stark have all been nominated to take part in the auction! Can you believe it? If this is true, the auction is bound to turn into a feeding frenzy. I would love to take part, but opening bid usually starts at one thousand dollars and unfortunately my pockets don't go that deep!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

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Jaqen

Arya had told him that she had taken her brothers to see a movie, and while they were at the cinema they had run into Gendry, his foster-siblings and his cousin who happened to be seeing the same movie. She had given him brief details about how Rickon and Shireen Baratheon had been excited to see each other, and there really was no reason why the kids couldn't all hang out together. Jaqen had understood, as he always did, but it did not stop him from feeling an uneasiness that had been creeping under his skin more and more in recent weeks.

For the rest of the day as he and Arya had gone from having lunch, browsing through the shops and outdoor markets in Braavos, he had spent more effort just watching her. Trying to find little clues as to why he continued to feel discomfited when he was with her. At times she hadn't been herself, but when he had questioned her about it, she had given him reasons involving schoolwork and tests. He
had believed her at the time. Now seeing the pictures of her smiling at Gendry as he gave her the plush toy he'd won for her, Jaqen was filled with a cold dread.

He looked at the lines of Arya's face, and the tilt of her head. He studied the way her lips parted, and the crinkling at the corner of her eyes. The cold dread turned into a knot at the pit of his stomach, because he didn't recognize the face that Arya was wearing. She had never worn it in front of him.

"Jaqen! Breakfast is ready!"

Jaqen startled at the sound of his aunt's voice calling him from the kitchen.

"Coming!" he shouted back, and shut his laptop.

He grabbed his backpack from the floor before making his way downstairs. His aunt was placing a plate of scrambled eggs on the table at his usual spot, but his stomach roiled at the sight of all that protein.

"Are you feeling all right, my boy?" Uncle Otto asked him.

Jaqen sat down and smiled, clearing his features. "I'm fine."

"That's good." His uncle watched as he poured himself a cup of coffee, before fixing him with a questioning stare. "Did you read that email from Benero this morning?"

Jaqen nodded, welcoming the distraction from his thoughts regarding his girlfriend. "I did, uncle."

"And what did you think about his new offer?"

"Now, now Otto," Umma said as she took her usual seat at the table, "business talk can wait until later."

"It's fine, Umma." Jaqen said, "I will be late home tonight, so we may as well discuss it now."

"Then at least you must eat your breakfast while you have this discussion."

"Eat up, boy," Uncle Otto said, "now, tell me what you thought of Benero's proposal."

Jaqen forced himself to swallow a couple of mouthfuls of scrambled eggs and a bite of unbuttered toast, washing it down with the strong coffee that his uncle preferred, before trying to find a response to his uncle's question.

Earlier that week, his uncle had received a call from Benero with an offer that had seemed too good to refuse. His uncle had insisted that it be put into writing, and true to the man's word, Benero had listed down all the conditions that his uncle had been so excited about. After several meetings, Red God Records were willing to meet them halfway with terms that were more than generous, Jaqen acknowledged. But, there was always a catch.

Jaqen was insistent on retaining creative control, and for that to be possible, they had to find a producer that was willing to work with them and help them develop the sound that the Faceless Men were known for. This was a big ask because their fame was limited to Braavos and the cities closest to them like King's Landing, Essos City and Volantis, and the producers at Red God Records were not known for taking direction from unsigned bands.

However, Jaqen had recently uploaded a clip from one of their latest gigs featuring some of his new compositions onto their YouTube channel, and a producer affiliated with Red God Records had happened to see it. The well-known producer, known only as Moqorro, had personally requested the
opportunity to work with the *Faceless Men* under one condition.

"They want us to move to New York," Jaqen stated.

"Yes, that was one stipulation," Uncle Otto agreed. "I think this is a fair thing to ask, considering Moqorro is based in New York, and you will only have to be there until your album is completed."

"It is not something that the guys might easily agree to," Jaqen pointed out, "Ky and I are still in school, and Izembaro and Jorge have jobs outside of the band. This is something we need to discuss."

"Then by all means discuss it," his uncle said, "but keep in mind that Moqorro will not wait indefinitely."

"Otto, why are you in a hurry?" Umma asked her husband. "He is still so young, why must he rush into this decision?"

"This opportunity may not present itself again," Otto replied, "if he hesitates, the god of Fate may find his indecision to be a sign of fickleness and this chance may be taken from him, and this I do not want to see happen…not when he and his friends have put so much time and effort into their music."

"I will speak to the guys and we will make this decision together," Jaqen said, hoping for the end of the discussion.

Uncle Otto gave him one final, all-knowing stare. "I hope that for all of your sakes, you all make a decision with your heads and with your future goals in mind, not merely with your hearts and what attachments may be keeping you here in the present."

Jaqen understood his uncle's message loud and clear. His uncle was worried that his hesitation was due to his relationship with Arya, and Jaqen could not deny that this was true, in part at least. He did not want to leave her, it was that simple. However, he was coming to see the signs that suggested Fate might have other plans for them.

He finished the rest of his breakfast in a rush and downed the remainder of his coffee. "I'm going to school now. Umma, please don't worry about making dinner for me tonight, I will be eating out."

Jaqen promptly got up and left as his aunt and uncle bade him a good day. On the drive to school, his mind inevitably wondered to the concerns that had been splitting his thoughts for the past few weeks; his musical ambitions, and his relationship with Arya.

With the email from Benero and the images of Arya and Gendry on Gossip Spyder's blog going around inside his head, Jaqen's mood was far from jovial when he finally reached the grounds of *Braavos Academy*. Gossip Spyder's followers among the students of *Braavos Academy* had been steadily rising ever since his name had been linked to Arya Stark, and it was probably for this reason that Jaqen felt more than the usual gazes on him as he walked towards his homeroom.

"*Do you think the Faceless Men will really get signed?*

"*Of course they will. Jaqen won't pass up a chance a like this.*

"*If they do get famous, I don't see how Jaqen and Ky can keep their current girlfriends. Groupies, you know?*

"*Don't let Brea Brusco hear you say that!*"
Jaqen heard the whispers that came in his wake, but they were the same ones he had heard before. He was prepared to ignore them, until he heard something that made him pause in his step.

"Did you see the pictures this morning? I thought Arya and Gendry looked really cute together."

"Shh! He might hear you!"

Jaqen continued walking, but his features had taken on a darker expression. Once he finally reached his homeroom, he managed to avoid conversing with people by taking out his phone and looking very engrossed as he forwarded the email from Benero to the rest of the Faceless Men. Ky was the first to respond, being just in another homeroom class down the hall, sending him a quick message via group chat.

"Is this for real?"

"Very," Jaqen replied.

"WHERE DO I SIGN?"

Jaqen sighed before he typed a response. "All of us must talk."

"Izzy? Jorge? Can we meet today?" Ky addressed their two absent friends.

"Working today. Tomorrow I'm free." Jorge responded.

"I can't today. I'm meeting Arya." Jaqen wrote.

Izembaro also wrote back. "Tomorrow it is. I need to speak with my parents. My dad will need to hire someone to work at his shop if I need to move to New York."

Jaqen thought that was the end of the conversation, until Ky sent him one more question that unbalanced him for the rest of the morning.

"Have you told Arya?"

"Not yet." Jaqen replied, then put his phone back into his pocket as the teacher walked into the classroom.

He got through the morning without incident, despite his lack of concentration, even managing to smile every so often, but people must have sensed his aloofness that day as no one tried to engage him longer than he was willing.

"Are you okay, man?" Ky asked him at lunch later that day.

"I just have a lot on my mind." Jaqen shrugged and slumped into the plastic cafeteria chair, the food he had just purchased looking less appealing by the second.

"You have about five minutes before Brea gets here," Ky stated, "do you want to talk about it?"

Jaqen's friends had watched the evolution of his relationship with Arya right from the beginning. They had all been with him at The Hollow when Arya had fallen into his lap, had endured his giddiness when they'd had their first date and listened to the songs and music that he'd been inspired to write during the tumultuous period before Arya had finally ended her fake relationship with Sandor Clegane. They had also been aware of the rivalry Jaqen had with Gendry Waters, and Ky had even threatened retaliation against the guy when Jaqen had turned up to practice with a busted lip following their altercation at the Heart of Fire. Finally, they had been happy for him when he and
Arya had finally gotten together, supporting their relationship, and remaining open minded about the Stark girl who had been the subject of so much gossip.

He remembered that Ky had been the first kid to say hello to him when he'd first arrived at The Titan of Braavos Elementary School as a transfer student in the fourth grade, speaking limited English and experiencing some culture shock. They had bonded over their love of the Red Hot Chilli Peppers, Nirvana and Pearl Jam, bands that no one in their grade had ever heard of, and it had been Ky who had encouraged him to step out of his classical music comfort zone during their first year of middle school when Jaqen had proposed the crazy idea of starting their own band.

Ky, then twelve years old, had volunteered to learn to play bass guitar so that he could compliment Jaqen on his electric guitar, unfazed by Jaqen's talent. Ky had proven to be a prodigy in his own right, learning the bass in the course of a year, and it was while the two of them were jamming away in their middle school band room that they had attracted the attention of two eighth-grade boys from the classroom next door. The older boys had introduced themselves as Jorge and Izembaro, members of the percussion ensemble, and for the next hour they had all played and improvised music together. They had continued to meet up regularly over the next few months for fun, until Ky had suggested they make their foursome official.

The Faceless Men had been born that day, and they made their debut at the school variety show that year, before the older boys became high school students. The following year when Jaqen and Ky entered Braavos Academy, Jaqen had already compiled a folder full of original compositions that would form the style and sound that would earn them a solid local following. Their bond as a group had only strengthened with the years, defying those who had believed them too young to be a serious band, and their shared experiences had helped each of them develop as individual musicians, and as young men.

"Jaqen?" Ky's voice broke into his thoughts. "Is there anything you wanted to talk about?"

Jaqen shook his head. "No, it's nothing to worry about."

Brea and Talea arrived to join them, and while Brea fusssed over Ky, with much eye-rolling from Talea, Jaqen came to a realization about what he had to do.

The Faceless Men wasn't just about him. Without Ky, Jorge or Izembaro, Jaqen was no one. They had made him their leader, not because he'd asked for it, but because they trusted him, his judgment and in his talent. It was together that they now found themselves on the verge of the rock'n'roll stardom they'd jokingly imagined six years before, and only together could they make that dream into reality. They all wanted this record deal to happen, and Jaqen could not deny them their chance at fame, fortune and their own personal success.

A man has duties. Jaqen owed it to his friends and to himself, as well as the people who continued to support them, to see how far this journey would take them. As much as he wanted to stay in Braavos to be close to Arya, he knew he needed to put aside his own selfish wants in order to fulfill his duty to the Faceless Men.

"Hey, Jaqen." Talea now called his attention. "Have you seen these pictures of Arya and Gendry Waters?"

Jaqen instinctively pulled his head back a few inches when Talea shoved her phone under his nose, and once again Jaqen had to see the unfamiliar smile that his girlfriend was showing to some other guy.

"Yes, I have." Jaqen replied in a casual tone, pushing Talea's hand gently but firmly away from his
Arya told me that she and her brothers met up with Gendry and his siblings by chance that day. It was sweet of her to take her little brothers out to see a movie.

"I wish I had a sweet older sister who'd take me out to see a movie too," Talea said, distracted by Jaqen's comment.

"You do have a sweet older sister," Brea stated.

"You don't count." Talea swiftly countered.

"Why not?"

"Your definition of sweet is different from mine."

"You ungrateful little bitch…"

Ky attempted to placate the sisters, but Jaqen had seen this display before and knew it was nothing to be concerned about, so he tuned out, focusing again on the picture of Arya and Gendry still on Talea's phone on the table in front of him. The cold dread crept back into his stomach as he continued to stare at the photo, and once again he couldn't help but think that Fate had one path in mind for him, and an entirely different one for Arya.

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Sandor

He had a browser open on his phone while he waited for Sansa's choir practice to finish, and he hesitated for a few moments before he gave a defeated grunt and punched in the search topic he'd been mulling over for most of the day; Valentine's Day ideas for her. Sandor read the first hit that came up.

*Gift ideas that will make her feel like a goddess and earn you best boyfriend status.*

Sandor grimaced in disgust and shut the browser down, before growling to himself. "What the fuck am I supposed to do for Valentine's Day?"

In recent years, from middle school all through high school, Sandor only had the worst memories of Valentine's Day. School halls had been decorated in red or pink streamers and ribbons, with cut outs of cardboard and foil love hearts plastered on walls and balloons hung from ceilings and rafters. Some committee would be selling red roses at the entrance to main buildings and in the quad and those lucky enough to receive one that day would be blushing or gloating about it, while those who did not even receive a card would mope or bitch about how unfair it was. Couples around the school would use Valentine's Day as an excuse to demonstrate excess public displays of affection, while shopping malls and restaurants around the city would be full of couples out on dates and holding hands and being far too revoltingly happy.

Not once in all those years did he ever wish to take part in any way, shape or form in the hyper-commercialized event. Not once in all those years did he ever imagine he'd have a girlfriend like Sansa Stark either, yet now here he was, dating one of the most popular girls in the school with Valentine's Day just around the corner. He still didn't give a shit about Valentine's Day, but Sansa was the kind of girl who did, and he was going to try and make an effort for her.

He went back to Googling possible gifts, date ideas and making a mental list of likely restaurants that wouldn't be overrun by other students from school, the whole time fighting the urge to hurl his phone against the wall because of the fluff and sugary content now flashing across his screen. *Madness,* he thought, *utter madness.*
"What are you looking at?"

Sandor swore loudly, caught unaware by Sansa's sudden appearing at his side. Hastily he put his phone away.

"Nothing you need to know right now."

"If you say so."

Sansa looked up at him with suspicion in her eyes, and he realized that Sansa was likely to try and pry the information out of him unless he gave her something to chew on.

"Valentine's Day," he heard himself say, "what time did you say you'd be free after the auction?"

"Seven," Sansa replied with a smile, "mom is insisting we stay until after the actual auction event. Plus, I want to see who ends up bidding for and winning a date with Robb."

"Your mom really nominated her own son, without hesitation?"

Sansa laughed. "Robb's reaction was priceless. I mean, he was furious when mom first told him, and then he tried pleading his way out of it, but now he's determined to break Jaime Lannister's twenty-year-old record by gaining a bid over one hundred thousand dollars."

"Are you sure that it really happened?"

"I saw it on the Women's Association website when I was procrastinating the other day." Sansa admitted. "It was more interesting than working on my assignment."

"I can't believe Joffrey never said anything about it." Sandor said when they reached his car, unlocking the doors so they could both get inside and out of the cold.

"Why would he? It's pretty embarrassing when you think about it, having your mom bid for her own twin brother, and paying a ridiculous amount of money just to keep his company at that."

"Well, I guess if anyone has a chance at breaking that record then it would be Robb Stark."

Sansa buckled herself into her seat as Sandor backed out of the parking space and drove out of the school grounds.

"You want to stop somewhere for something to eat?" Sandor asked her.

"Sure. I could go for a coffee and cake."

"Trident's Bend, or Harrenhal Mall?"

"Neither," Sansa replied, "the cafe near your house does a nice mocha, let's go there."

"Okay," Sandor agreed.

Sansa settled into her seat and gave him a glance from the corner of her eyes. "So, did you find anything useful on that Valentine's Day tips site you were checking on your phone earlier?"

Sandor grunted. "You saw it after all."

"You were so focused on it you didn't even realized I'd been standing there for close to ten seconds."
He threw her a look of disbelief. "Since you already know what I was looking at, was there something you particularly wanted to do on Valentine's Day?"

Sandor really hoped she would tell him so he could avoid playing the guessing game, and inevitably get it wrong.

"I don't care what we do," Sansa shrugged. "I just want to be with you."

Sandor narrowed his eyes. He didn't trust her answer because it seemed way too easy, and totally not what he expected from Sansa.

"Sure about that? What if we end up at McDonald's?"

"Then I'll have a cheeseburger, a chocolate milkshake and a strawberry sundae." Sansa smiled at him.

Sandor's eyes narrowed even further. She wasn't going to make his job easier, but neither was he serious about McDonald's. Once they reached the cafe, Sansa ordered a mocha and a lemon meringue tart for herself, while Sandor ordered a flat white and a Rueben sandwich. They found a seat by the window which looked out over the street, and Sansa asked him about his application for The University of Valyria.

"I sent my application a couple of weeks ago, and I got the confirmation email saying they received it. They said they'd be making offers before April."

"That's not that long to wait," Sansa's voice softened to a low murmur.

"I place my chances at getting in at fifty percent," he said, "it's a super competitive school, and there are far better students who deserve to go there more than I do. In any case, I'm prepared to go to White Harbor College if Valyria rejects me."

"White Harbor is how far from here?"

"About three or four hours drive, I think."

Sansa made a noise like a sigh, and Sandor glanced at her closely.

"It's so far away," she murmured.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Sansa looked hesitant, but she answered him with the barest quiver in her voice. "Have you thought about how often we might get to see each other when...when you move away for college? You'll find out soon enough which college you'll go to, and come August you'll be moving away from King's Landing. I won't get to see you everyday like we do now."

Hearing her say the words out aloud, and having the inevitable reality of their situation vocalized in such a tone of concern made him realize, like he hadn't before, that the issue was more serious than he had first thought.

"I have, Sansa," he said quietly, "I have thought about it."

The moment he had began to fill out his college application form, in the back of his mind had been the knowledge that no matter where he went, Sansa would not be there. Thousands of students faced this same situation every year, leaving behind the people they cared about to attend school someplace
far away.

Sandor had never thought he'd ever find himself facing the same dilemma. Now that Sansa had spoken about it, he could finally acknowledge the worry that had been growing in his heart. He would be leaving Sansa behind, and he didn't know how they were going to survive the separation.

"How…how are we going to make things work?" Sansa asked softly.

He didn't know. He barely knew what he was doing in the current form of their relationship, and the thought of a long-distance relationship was making him break into a cold sweat. The only way he knew how to be a boyfriend was by being at Sansa's side, being physically able to touch her and breathe in her scent and being able to assert his presence so that other guys kept their distance. For so long, all he had thought about was being next to her, and now he was at a complete loss when he imagined not being able to be at her side.

Sansa was watching him with hopefulness in her eyes, as though he would somehow have the answer she was looking for, and because he didn't, Sandor responded the only way he knew how… by evading it.

"Why are you worrying about that now?" he rasped. "There's no point getting all worked up about it until we know which college I'll be going to."

Sansa's face registered a momentary expression of disappointment. "I guess you're right."

"Finish your mocha before it gets cold," Sandor urged her, and picked up his own cup of coffee.

At length, Sansa changed the topic. "Have you ever been to any of the previous bachelor auctions?"

"Nope." Sandor shook his head. "That event isn't open to just anyone, but I can tell you what I heard from other people."

"Yeah?" Sansa leaned forward. "How crazy does it get?"

"You might know that last year, Renly Baratheon gained the highest bid of the night,"

Sansa nodded. "I read that he got close to the one hundred thousand mark."

"Eighty-seven thousand was what his time and companionship was worth last year." Sandor recalled Joffrey telling him. "But even though Margaery Tyrell ended up being the winning bidder, there was another girl who put up quite a fight, which was why the number got so high."

"Who was it?"

Sandor frowned. "I can't remember her name, but I know that she's the daughter of that jeweler who's famous for his sapphires."

"You mean, Evenstar Jewelers?" Sansa prompted.

"That's the one."

"Then, you're talking about Brienne Tarth." Sansa eyes lit up. "I know of her from my mother. Brienne's involved in one of the charities my mom sponsors."

"Brienne Tarth, that's her." Sandor confirmed. "Apparently she really wanted that date with Renly, but Margaery just had deeper pockets. Or she was willing to throw away more money, at least."
"It's for charity, Sandor. It's a worthy cause."

"Same thing."

Sansa shook her head at his indifference. "Do you think she'll bid for him again this year?"

"No idea, but Margaery will be there for sure, and you can bet she'll bid on the most eligible bachelor on the night."

"Maybe she'll bid on Robb?"

Sansa continued to speculate about the other candidates going on auction, wondering who would take the highest bid of the night and the girls most likely to bid on them. Sandor humored her, because he enjoyed watching her face light up mischievously, but mostly because it prevented her from asking uncomfortable questions that he couldn't answer.

For the longest time, he had believed himself incapable of feeling emotions like gratitude, concern for someone other than himself and genuine happiness. For years he'd felt nothing but apathy for almost everyone he met, anger and hatred towards his brother, and a general bitterness about everything else. Then, Sansa had come along and shown him that indeed he wasn't emotionally deficient, and he had been bombarded with feelings of envy, desire and joy ever since.

He had learned how it felt to be forgiven, knowing a new kind of relief when Sansa had let him off lightly for the way he had overreacted when he thought she had lied to him about accepting a ride with Willas Tyrell. At the same time, he had learned how to forgive in return, genuinely accepting Sansa's apology for keeping Willas Tyrell's involvement as a judge at the song festival from him. Making concessions for people was also a new thing for him, but he'd learned to do it for Sansa when he made himself understand and see things from her point of view and why she had chosen to keep Willas a secret to begin with.

Now, even as he wrestled with the thought of leaving Sansa's side at the end of the coming summer, Sandor felt a thrill of happiness at hearing that Sansa meant to continue being his girlfriend for the foreseeable future. It was wonderful knowing that she wanted him, but as always, his insecurities made him wonder for how long Sansa would continue to want him, once he was no longer a constant presence at her side.

Gendry

He had an appointment to keep that afternoon, but it wasn't with Mr. Cressen for another deportment lesson. It was Stannis Baratheon himself who had requested the meeting, and the address that Davos Seaworth had provided him was located in the city in one of the historic buildings located in a busy pedestrian mall known as Ateliers Lane, famed for the most exclusive of ateliers whose workshops and showrooms were located there. Over time, new businesses and corporations had also moved in, taking advantage of reasonable rent and property prices when compared to office spaces in King's Landing's CBD, and now the district was also a bustling business hub.

Weaving his way through a sea of business men dressed primarily in suits, Gendry entered a building with a limestone façade and took the elevator to the third floor, finding himself facing a wall of mannequins dressed in expensive suits of all descriptions when the doors opened. There was a discreet plaque on the wall next to him when he stepped out of the elevator, bearing the name of the tailor, letting Gendry know that he had come to the right place.

"Good afternoon, may I help you?"
Gendry turned to find a grey-haired gentleman with the most impeccable mustache he had ever seen gazing at him with a helpful expression on his face.

"Uh…yeah, I'm meeting someone here." Gendry looked around him. "Stannis Baratheon."

The older man's expression turned to one of recognition immediately. "Mr. Baratheon is now currently having a fitting. If you would follow me, Mr. Waters, I will take you to him."

Gendry wasn't surprised that the man knew who he was. Wondering why Stannis had chosen to meet him while he was having a suit made, Gendry followed the man past shelves and racks of materials and display cases of readymade suits and shirts, until they had come to another room tucked into a corner of the suite. Ahead of him, in front of three full-length mirrors, Stannis stood on a small podium with his arms held away from his body as another grey-haired man quietly moved about him with a tailor's chalk, periodically stopping to place markings on the partially completed jacket that Stannis was currently fitting.

"You found the place then," Stannis said, seeing his approach in the mirror.

"Davos gave really clear directions." Gendry shrugged. "Which was just as well, because you would never know this place was here just by looking at the building from the outside."

"This atelier has been in this location for the last one hundred and fifty years, and in my opinion, this is the only place to go if you need a suit made to measure. Isn't that right, James?" Stannis addressed the grey-haired man who was now placing pins in the sleeve of Stannis' jacket.

James nodded with a smile. "Not meaning to toot my own horn, but I do agree, Mr. Baratheon."

"Take a seat, Mr. Waters," the man with the mustache said to him, indicating an upholstered chair in the corner. "I'll bring refreshments momentarily."

"Thank you, Jacob." James acknowledged his assistant.

Gendry took a seat as indicated, and glanced at Stannis through his reflection in the mirror. "How's Shireen?"

"Shireen is fine," Stannis replied, "she hasn't been able to stop talking about you or your foster-siblings since you delivered her home on Saturday."

"I'm glad she had fun."

"She also said something of running into the Starks while you were at the cinema."

"That's right." Gendry nodded, and proceeded to tell him briefly what had happened.

"It's good that she gets to be with other children every now and then," Stannis stated, "her mother keeps a very close eye on her, so you can imagine my surprise when my wife told me she'd allowed Shireen out of her sight."

"Surely she's not as overprotective as you say she is?"

"She is," Stannis stated. "It is not by choice that Shireen is an only child. It is unfortunate, but we have lost three sons due to stillbirth, and because of that, Selyse has taken to shielding Shireen from anything she perceives to be a threat."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Gendry said, surprised that Stannis would share something so personal with
"It was a long time ago." Stannis momentarily turned his head to look at him directly. "Shireen doesn't normally take to new people as well as she has with you, and perhaps that is why Selyse found it hard to deny her when she asked to spend time with you."

Gendry could find nothing to say to that, but he did feel a warmth in his chest similar to the time Tabitha had first introduced him to her friends as her big brother. Though, he did realize that Tabitha probably made no distinction between him and Toby, never having known her life without him in it. Shireen's fondness for him affected him, and definitely in a positive way.

Jacob the assistant returned carrying a silver tray with a pot of tea and two cups, along with a small selection of cheeses and crackers. As Gendry helped himself, he briefly thought about Gossip Spyder's post that morning, concerned that Shireen had so readily been identified. It was, he came to see, truly just a matter of time before people would stop doubting his paternity and start accepting him as the son of Robert Baratheon.

"You're probably wondering why I asked you to come here today," Stannis now said.

"Of course I am," Gendry replied, popping another sliver of cheese into his mouth. "But I figured you'd tell me eventually."

"Then I'll just be frank with you," Stannis began, "it would seem that despite our best efforts, the fact that you and I have been associating has become known to some of the more astute members of our society. Simply put, it's no longer a secret that I and my family have acknowledged you for who you are."

Gendry was not surprised that it had happened. Harrenhal Mall had been teeming with students from KL Prep the day he'd taken the kids out, and Arya being even more recognizable than he was, they were bound to attract attention. If those same students who'd seen them at Harrenhal Mall had also seen Gossip Spyder's post mentioning Shireen Baratheon, all it would take was for one student to mention it to a parent and the rumor would soon spread like fire among the adult community. But the photos had only come out that morning, which would mean people had been speculating long before that day, Gendry thought.

"How do you know for sure?" Gendry asked.

Stannis' mouth formed a thin line. "I've had several people allude to it in passing, but the most definitive proof was when a Tyrell also made mention of it."

"Oh." Gendry could not deny this.

Margaery and Olenna Tyrell had made it clear they knew of his appointments with Mr. Cressen, and who had facilitated them.

"Have you given anymore thought about publicly acknowledging who you are?"

"I have," Gendry sighed, seeing where the conversation was heading. "I just wasn't prepared for it to happen so soon."

"I heard you left Pycelle & Associates and hired Donald Luwin, is that correct?"

"You heard correctly."

"Then, I suggest you speak with him and your foster-parents and prepare them for what may happen.
You could be making your public debut much sooner than you think.”

Stannis gave him a measuring stare, and Gendry could see that a plan was forming inside the man's head.

"What are you planning to do?" Gendry asked cautiously.

"Preparing for a battle with Robert."

"What?"

"Robert is bound to know by now that I sought you out behind his back," Stannis said grimly, "and I imagine he'll be furious."

Gendry swore, realizing that Joffrey would have seen Gossip Spyder's post too. "I really don't have any other option, huh?"

Stannis nodded. "Come out and publicly acknowledge who you are, before they get another chance to deny it."

"How do I do that, exactly?" Gendry rubbed his temple, which had suddenly begun to throb.

"You don't need to verbally acknowledge it," Stannis told him, "you just need to be seen somewhere a Baratheon would be seen at, doing something a Baratheon might do."

"Those instructions don't help." Gendry frowned.

Stannis mirrored his frown, and for some moments the man appeared to be mulling something over. Eventually, apparently having reached some sort of decision, Stannis nodded to himself before glancing at Gendry once again.

"I may have a solution for you, but I will need to look into some things first."

"What is it?"

Stannis shook his head. "There's no point telling you until I know all the details myself. Just wait and I'll let you know when the time comes. In the meantime, make sure you talk to your foster-parents and your lawyer. Make sure that you are all prepared."

Gendry sighed, frustrated and mildly anxious. His days of relative anonymity were numbered. If he thought he was in the public eye before, he knew that coming out and publicly admitting to being Robert Baratheon's son was bound to attract more than just the attention of a couple of local newspapers.

"Are we done, in that case?" Gendry asked, finishing the tea in his cup.

"Done?"

"Yeah." Gendry shrugged. "That's all you wanted to discuss with me, right?"

"Is that all you thought this meeting was about?"

"What else would it be about?"

Stannis, assisted by James, shrugged out of the unfinished jacked that the tailor had finally completed marking and pinning. Gendry watched as the tailor carefully placed the jacket onto a dressmaker's
dummy, before the tailor turned to face him.

James gave him a pleasant smile. "If you would please step onto the podium Mr. Waters, let's get you measured up."

"Huh?" Gendry blinked.

"James needs to take your measurements," Stannis proclaimed. "He can't make a suit for you without them."

"But, why?" Gendry asked, even as James firmly led him from his seat to step onto the podium in front of the mirrors.

"Place your arms by your sides please, Mr. Waters," James instructed him, "back straight, and stand nice and tall."

"Do you already own a suit, Gendry?" Stannis asked him.

"No, I've never needed to wear one."

"You soon will," Stannis declared. "It is part of the image Mr. Cressen is teaching you to build. For the apparel oft proclaims the man, as Shakespeare once wrote. Clothes make the man, Gendry. If you are to be seen at public events where there is every possibility you could encounter not just Robert or Joffrey, but any number of other prominent identities, then you need to be attired appropriately."

"You could have just told me to go and buy a suit," Gendry pointed out, "you didn't need to bring me here…Sorry, no offense James, your suits are really nice."

The tailor chuckled. "None taken."

"James doesn't make nice suits," Stannis rebuked him. "James' suits are handcrafted, individual works of art."

"That is high praise, Mr. Baratheon." James said, running his tape measure efficiently over Gendry's body, jotting down on his notepad occasionally.

"I would never have pegged you for a man that cared about these things," Gendry shook his head.

"Have you been listening to anything Cressen has been telling you?" Stannis glared at him. "You cannot just walk into these events wearing a suit you bought from a department store. Even if you care nothing for fashion, there will be people who will delight in pointing out that your suit was off the rack…common, just like the young man wearing it."

"This is total bullshit." Gendry shook his head. "My apologies again James, your suits are works of art."

James chuckled again, clearly amused by their exchange.

"He'll have five suits as we talked about, James. He'll need shirts, ties, pocket squares and cufflinks to match as well." Stannis said to the tailor.

"The standard five it is," James nodded, before he indicated Gendry's form. "With his height and muscular build, I suggest single breasted suits with un-slanted pockets. Younger men tend to prefer slimmer silhouettes too, and thinner lapels. British Cut jackets with dual vents should look marvelous
on his frame. As for the shirts, I also suggest he have a couple with French cuffs."

"Five? Why do I need five suits?"

"Care to explain it to him, James?"

"Certainly." James met Gendry's gaze. "You will need a navy blue woolen suit, a mid-grey woolen suit, a cotton suit for summer, a suit with subtle pattern, and a classic black suit. The reason you will need these five suits is so you will have one for every and any occasion that may arise. A different suit, for a different purpose."

Gendry listened for some minutes as the tailor went into detail about the versatility of the suits he was about to craft for him, and gave examples of occasions where each suit would be suitable attire. Gendry was shaking his head again by the end of the explanation.

"I leave the styling and fabric choice entirely in your hands, James. I'm sure Gendry will have no complaints about that." Stannis stated.

"Like he said, James," Gendry sighed, and raised his arms as the tailor instructed so that measurements could be taken of his biceps. "It's all up to you."

"I'm certain that you will not be disappointed," James assured him.

"Will this take much longer, James?" Stannis asked him. "We have an appointment at the cordwainer after this."

"I shouldn't be too long," James replied.

"What's a cord…wainer?" Gendry asked, perplexed at hearing the unfamiliar word.

"A shoemaker," Stannis replied, "you're going to need new shoes to match your new suits."

"Oh my god…" Gendry sighed in total resignation.

The shoemaker, or cordwainer as Stannis insisted on calling the man, was located in another studio on the ground floor of the same building. The space had been divided into a small store with shelves of selected, readymade shoes at the front of the building facing the street, while soundproof walls hid the workshop at the rear of the building.

"You've come at the best time," the bespectacled and bearded man said, "feet are best measured in the afternoon. Swelling of the feet occurs during the day, so taking your measurements while your feet are already in this state means we can find the most comfortable fitting shoes for you."

Gendry owned one pair of black dress shoes and the only time they had been worn was at his graduation from middle-school, and he was certain they no longer fit. Gazing at the array of readymade shoes in different colors of stained leather on display, he could only think of one word to describe them and that was beautiful.

"See any you like?" the cordwainer asked him.

"I like the square-toed styles, I think, and the round-toed ones are okay. I'm not into the pointy ones." Gendry shrugged.

The man laughed, seeing his somewhat overwhelmed expression. "Four pairs, I was told you needed; one black, one dark brown, one tan, and one burgundy. Leave it to me."
His feet were measured, and then the man disappeared to fetch a selection of ready-made styles in his size and preferred colors. Gendry did not see price tags on any of them but he suspected they would have made him gag.

"I will have them couriered to your home before the week's end," the cordwainer told him once Gendry had made his choices. "Next time, please come in so we can have some bespoke styles made for you."

"Sure." Gendry nodded, skeptical of there being a next time.

"Put them on my account," Stannis told the man, then indicated to Gendry that they were leaving.

"Where are we going now?" Gendry asked him.

"Somewhere we can get a drink. A soft drink for you, and something harder for me. I hate shopping at the best of times, but that left me parched."

Gendry followed him into an office complex inside another historic looking building further down the pedestrian mall, and they entered a discreet looking doorway on the ground floor which led to a carpeted bar that reminded Gendry of something from the set of an old 1950's film. Dark woods, dark leather and muted lighting was the go here, and it looked exactly like the kind of place Stannis Baratheon would frequent...along with many other middle-aged business men.

Despite his discomfort, Gendry sat down at the bar on a stool next to Stannis and sipped the cola that the bartender placed in front of him. He regarded the man that was his uncle, and tried to understand why he appeared to be going out of his way to take him to be fitted for suits and shoes. The deed just did not match the persona, or his initial impressions of the taciturn and aloof man.

"Speak your mind, boy." Stannis grunted when he sensed Gendry's appraising look.

"I'm still not entirely sure why you're doing this for me?" Gendry said. "If your aim was just to preserve the reputation of the Baratheon name, you didn't need to meet with me in person. You or Davos could have just called me about acknowledging my paternity to the public, and I could have easily had my measurements taken without you there. Why are you doing this, Stannis?"

"Duty is an all-encompassing word," Stannis replied, taking another sip of the amber colored liquid in his glass. "I'm the one who reached out to you, and that means taking responsibility. I don't take either of those things lightly."

Gendry didn't buy it, not entirely, and he got the feeling that Stannis was deliberately hiding something from him. With a kind of déjà vu, he recalled feeling the same way back when he had visited Storm's End and had asked Stannis a similar question.

It's still only half of the story, he thought to himself, wondering if he was ever going to hear the rest of it, and why Stannis was keeping it from him.

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**Arya**

Jaqen was already waiting for her when she arrived at Harrenhal Mall afterschool that day, but being a school night they had a limited number of hours to spend with each other. In the past, she would have flown across the expanse of the shopping mall to get to Jaqen's side that much faster. However, even as she saw his tall figure standing in front of the indoor water fountain, her feet stayed grounded to the polished tiles beneath her. As when she had seen him over the weekend, she was feeling slightly on edge, conscious of the resolution she had made to try harder at becoming the best
girlfriend she could be for Jaqen, and she blamed this self-consciousness for her nervousness.

Jaqen's back was towards her, and while he was unaware of her gaze she allowed herself to observe him anew, and it did seem to her that she was looking at him again with new eyes. The red and white of his hair was striking to look at, while his height, broad shoulders and lean physique attracted stares from the women walking by, who all then wore expressions of appreciation when they inevitably saw his face. Jaqen turned his head to his right, allowing her to study the masculine line of his jaw. He was dressed in a khaki jacket, with dark jeans and black boots on his feet. Even as simply dressed as he was, Jaqen exuded a presence that made people want to stop and stare…and admire.

Arya had always held an admiration for him, but looking at him now, she realized that something had changed in the way she saw him, though she couldn't put a finger on why she felt this way. As though sensing her stare, Jaqen finally turned in her direction, and his smile when he saw her prompted her to pick up her feet, reaching his side a short moment later.

"Hi." Arya smiled back at him as his arm found her waist. "How was your day?"

"Just so," Jaqen replied with a shrug, and lowered his head.

For a moment she stiffened in his arms as his lips pressed against hers, and only when she felt his palm pressing into her back did she relax. When he pulled back, Arya gave him another smile hoping to ease the sudden awkwardness she was feeling. This was not the start of their date that she had imagined, and now she tried to overcompensate for the awkwardness.

"Are you hungry? Let's go and grab something to eat. I'm starving!"

She looped her elbow with his and began pulling him towards the food hall. Jaqen did not resist and obediently followed her, readily agreeing when she suggested sharing a bowl of nachos with extra guacamole.

"How was your day?" Jaqen asked her when they had settled at their table.

"It was okay, considering it's a school day," she replied.

"Nothing exciting happened?"

She shook her head. "Not for me. What about you?"

"I might have some exciting news, but firstly I wanted to discuss our plans for Valentine's Day."

"What about it? We haven't really made any definite plans."

"That may be just as well," Jaqen sighed. "I know that you mentioned having to attend that Bachelor Auction and that you would be able to meet me afterwards, however I do not see myself being able to take the night off. I will also not be free in the morning as my uncle has asked me to help him with some tasks around the club."

Jaqen looked apologetic, but Arya immediately understood the reason for it.

"Oh…I understand. Lots of couples will be going to The House of Black & White on Valentine's dates. I guess…we can see each other the day after, on the fifteenth?"

Jaqen nodded. "I am sorry, Arya. I really did want to spend Valentine's Day with you."

"If you can't come to see me, perhaps I can come to see you at the club after the auction?"
Jaqen shook his head. "Thank you for the thought, but I'm afraid I will not be able to keep you company. If I am not on stage I am expected to be working the room, as my uncle would say, greeting fans and speaking to regular customers. *The House of Black & White* is where I work, and I cannot expect you to just sit around waiting for me."

"Then, the fifteenth it is."

"Thank you for understanding." Jaqen reached for her hand. "And again, I am sorry."

"You don't have to apologize," Arya told him, "it's not a big deal."

Jaqen tilted his head. "Why are you so understanding about this? Most other girls would be angry in the same situation."

"I thought you already knew that I'm not like other girls, Jaqen."

He smiled softly at her. "You are right. Not only are you an incredibly accommodating girlfriend, tolerating my hectic schedule as you have been, you are also a kind older sister who takes her little brothers to see a Disney move. Talea thinks that was a very sweet thing to do."

"Huh? Did you tell her about it?"

"She read about it on Gossip Spyder's blog this morning."

"I didn't know she followed Gossip Spyder that closely."

"Only since I started being mentioned on the blog, but more so since she met you."

"Ah, geez." Arya shook her head. "Whoever these people are that are taking my pictures always seem to get my worst angles."

"Some would disagree," Jaqen said quietly, "there were people at my school who thought that you and Gendry looked cute together."

Arya's smile froze at the mention of Gendry's name, and she looked up to see an unreadable expression on Jaqen's face. She had not meant to bring attention to the photos taken of her and Gendry, and despite the seemingly neutral set of Jaqen's features, she sensed that he was not happy about those photos.

"Hav…having your pictures taken with your mouth hanging open is most definitely not cute." Arya heard herself say. "No matter who you are."

"That depends on who you ask," Jaqen continued, "but the two of you certainly looked like you were really having fun together."

His tone was innocuous enough, but Arya sensed once more that there was a confrontational element about his demeanor.

"We did have fun," she said carefully, choosing not to deny it. "But it was just a coincidence that we ran into each other, and seeing as neither of us take our siblings out all that often, I doubt it will happen again."

Jaqen's expression did not change, but the sudden tension about him eased somewhat at the mention of the word *siblings*, as though he was reminded that neither she nor Gendry had purposely planned to meet each other.
"I see."

Arya had abated Jaqen's jealousy for the meantime, and she hastened to change the subject.

"So, what was the exciting news you mentioned you had?"

Jaqen's smile returned, but it was accompanied with a long sigh. "We got another offer from Red God Records this morning. It is incredibly generous, and they even have a producer willing to let us take the creative lead."

"That's awesome, Jaqen!" Arya exclaimed. "But why do I get the feeling you're not entirely excited?"

"Because…there is one stipulation," Jaqen's expression now turned serious, and Arya's own smile waned in response. "They want us to go to New York to record an album. The producer who is willing to offer us the creative freedom we want is based in New York City."

"That's…that's a major stipulation." Stunned, that was all Arya could respond with.

"The guys will be speaking to their families, and we will all be meeting up tomorrow to see what we would all like to do."

"It's a huge opportunity for your band," she agreed, "but it's also a huge decision."

"It feels like a dream," Jaqen said, "we were just kids in middle school when we started the band six years ago, and now someone is offering us a recording contract."

"Is there any reason that the other guys or their families might say no?" Arya asked him.

He shook his head. "No, there is no reason why they would not agree. They all want this as much as I do."

"And, is there a reason why you seem to be hesitating?" Arya tried to see into his eyes, but Jaqen was looking at a spot above her head.

"There is," he said dully, "but she does not seem to realize it."

Arya blinked when Jaqen finally met her eyes, and she suddenly understood that he was referring to herself. "Me?"

"Who else would I be talking about, lovely girl?"

Arya was aghast. "Jaqen, you can't seriously be hesitating because of me!"

"Why are you so happy for me to leave? New York is far, far away and who knows how often I will get to see you. Will you not miss me?"

"Of course I will miss you," Arya assured him, "but you cannot, and you should not make me the reason you pass up this contract. Think about how I'd feel knowing that you gave up on your rock star dream because of me!"

"And…what of us, Arya?"

There was a look on Jaqen's face now that she had never seen before, and for a brief moment Arya was disconcerted by the uncertainty and despair that darkened his handsome features.
"Jaqen, you were the one who told me that Fate brought us together for a reason. Don't start doubting her now."

Jaqen gave her a smile tinged with some other emotion that she couldn't identify. "Do you still believe in Fate, lovely girl?"

"I do," she said adamantly.

"And you would be happy to leave what we have…our relationship, to the hands of Fate?" Jaqen's eyes had narrowed now, and once more his features had become unreadable.

"Yes, Jaqen." Arya repeated.

"Just so, huh?" Jaqen ran a hand through the red and white streaks of his hair. "Then, let us trust in Fate."
**Episode 34 "Breaking Records"**

**Gossip Spyder**

Good morning King’s Landing!

Excitement about the Valentine's Day Bachelor Auction is at fever pitch with the final list of the bachelors being published on the *King's Landing Women's Association* website over the weekend. There are fifteen young men in total, however it is expected that the serious *moola* will be attracted by the following bachelors; Willas, Garlan and Loras Tyrell, Renly and Joffrey Baratheon, Edric Dayne, Beric Dondarrion and last but not least, Robb Stark!

As I mentioned in an earlier post, all proceeds of the auction will be going to charities chosen by the bachelors, and as per the *Women's Association* website this list currently includes various cancer research foundations, education funds for the under-privileged and non-profit organizations that help the homeless get back on their feet again. The *Women's Association* kindly reminds all guests attending on the night that everyone is welcome, and indeed encouraged to donate to these charities. You do not have to bid on a bachelor to give money, so give generously people!

In other news, I have received a couple of anonymous tips from separate sources claiming that Gendry Waters had been spotted in the company of Stannis Baratheon last week in the business district of *Ateliers Lane*. My first source claims that his father had recognized Stannis Baratheon at *The Alchemist's Guild*, a bar favored by businessmen of the area, and that his father had been about to greet Stannis when he had apparently recognized Gendry's face from the photos that have been published in the media. My second source appears to corroborate that story, claiming that an older sibling who works in the same building where *The Alchemist's Guild* is located actually saw Gendry and Stannis walking in together. With two sources pinpointing them at the same place and time, I'm inclined to believe this to be true, which now makes me wonder what this could mean for Gendry and the Baratheon family…stay tuned!

Tata for now!

**Gossip Spyder**

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**Gendry**

He frowned when he read the part about being spotted at the bar with Stannis Baratheon. The bar had been located in the business district, as Gossip Spyder had described, which was not a popular destination for teenagers, especially not during a week day. He had thought the risk of anyone recognizing him would have been low, but he had not counted on adults taking notice of him. Perhaps Stannis' presence was to blame, but now everyone at school had another rumor to talk about.

Gossip Spyder's post had not been his first shock of the day. Uncannily enough his first surprise had been caused by another Baratheon too. Myrcella Baratheon had sent him a friend request on Facebook, and another request to follow on his private Instagram account. He recalled other requests from a 'Myrcella Baratheon' on his social media accounts before, which he'd ignored because he never believed they could be from the real Myrcella. Had it not been for Arya telling him that his half-sister was seriously trying to contact him, he would have ignored these latest requests too.

Instead he'd just stared at Myrcella's profile picture, his fingertip hovering uncertainly above the 'Accept' button. He still had reservations about interacting with yet another half-sibling, and
accepting her request on any social media platform was also the fastest way of attracting acute speculation about their relationship.

Arya had told him that Myrcella was hoping to connect with him, but he'd put it out of his mind because he didn't believe Myrcella's interest was more than just courtesy. However, Arya had been quite certain that Myrcella would have no ulterior motive, and after some thought he figured he was prepared for whatever speculation resulted in his accepting her friend requests. Besides, if there was a possibility of a positive outcome, he was willing to take his chances. *I took a risk when I went to meet Stannis and his family, and Shireen had been worth that risk.*

He was sitting in his homeroom class waiting for the teacher to arrive when he casually accepted Myrcella's requests, both on Facebook and Instagram…and then he waited.

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**Arya**

Her phone buzzed just as she was heading to the cafeteria at lunch time, and she was surprised to see a message from Robb.

"*Want me to pick you up from school today? I get to finish work early. P.S. Sansa already has other plans.*"

Sansa always had other plans with Sandor. *Having a boyfriend at the same school has its perks,* Arya thought, not without a pang of envy.

"Yes! Pick me up! I'll be at the gate." Arya wrote back.

Robb had arrived in King's Landing on the previous Sunday afternoon toting a suitcase and a couple of suit bags containing his best evening suits slung over his shoulder.

"If I'm going to break Jaime Lannister's one-hundred-thousand-dollar record, I need to look sharp, right?" Robb had said when their mother had asked why he'd brought two suits.

Catelyn had merely smirked in response before muttering something about how quickly his tune had changed, from vehemently protesting one minute to now boasting about breaking a record that had stood for twenty years.

Everyone had been excited to have Robb staying with them, even if only for the two weeks duration of his internship. Rickon had been especially excitable, and Robb had been careful to remind their youngest brother that he was there to work and wouldn't be able to play all day.

"But you can play with me when you come home, right?" Rickon had asked hopefully.

"Sure, I can do that," Robb had replied.

Arya now remembered this, and she texted Robb to see if he could pick up Rickon before he came to get her.

"*Mom said it's okay. I'll pick up Rickon first, so I'll be an extra twenty minutes, okay?*" Robb replied some minutes later.

"Sure, take your time." Arya then put away her phone.

She was almost at the cafeteria when she noticed a commotion near the entrance. A crowd had stopped and gathered, and when Arya approached them she was dismayed to find Gendry and
Joffrey at the centre of all the attention. *This is bad,* she thought, even as she pushed her way to the centre of the circle.

"…You're a dumbass, Waters," Joffrey was hissing, his face reddened with anger. "My sister's a stupid little girl, and you're just as stupid to think she seriously wants anything to do with you."

Gendry's face remained remarkably calm although Arya saw the tension he was keeping in check in the way he held his arms and by the stance of his feet, as though he was readying for a fight.

"Your sister was the one who contacted me first, which tells me she's accepted who I am."

"Not all of us have," Joffrey snarled, "and you're never going to be one of us."

Arya could clearly hear every word they were saying, and by the whispers around them, so could everyone else. Gendry and Joffrey may as well be declaring the truth about Gendry's paternity to everyone there.

"Dear old Uncle Stannis doesn't agree with you," Gendry shrugged. "Cousin Shireen seems to think otherwise, too."

Joffrey sneered. "A little girl's opinion means nothing, just as my uncle's opinion means nothing to my father."

Gendry's lips curled in response. "The truth is going to come out sooner or later. You know this, and it's got you terrified. I can see it in your eyes."

"Bullshit!" Joffrey spat. "You're just trash from Flea Bottom, and trash doesn't scare me."

"If you say so, Baratheon." Gendry made to walk away.

"I'm not done with you, asshole!" Joffrey called after him.

Gendry turned and shook his head. "We're done, fuckface. Nothing more to talk about here."

Gendry pivoted on his heel and barged through the still gathered crowd, not noticing Arya who stood at the opposite side of the circle.

"Get back here Waters!" Joffrey shouted, but Gendry was ignoring him. "Run away then, you coward!"

Joffrey then seemed to realize that people were still watching, and he glared at them all before finally walking away in another direction.

"What just happened here?" someone near Arya asked in shocked tones. "Let me get this straight… so Myrcella Baratheon and Gendry are now friends on Facebook, and that's what Joffrey got mad about?"

"That's exactly what it is," someone else confirmed.

"Oh my god…did you hear what they were saying? It sounded like Gendry and Joffrey really could be half-brothers!"

"That's what I thought, too! Why else would Myrcella and Gendry become friends on Facebook?"

Arya slinked away slowly, but it was clear from the chatter that was building among the crowd who'd witnessed the exchange between Gendry and Joffrey that a new rumor was about to gain
momentum, one that would make it hard for anyone to deny that Gendry was Robert Baratheon's son.

Quickly taking out her phone, she checked Facebook and saw that she and Myrcella now had a mutual friend in Gendry. She then checked the only other social media platform Gendry used, and after a short search, she found Myrcella on his list of Instagram followers.

"Oh, shit…" Arya muttered under her breath.

This act, seemingly ordinary enough as it was, signified something much bigger in the life of Gendry Waters. Arya looked back in the direction Gendry had disappeared, half tempted to go after him, but she resisted the urge. Gendry would want to be alone, and she had to respect that. What's next? She wondered. What's going to happen now?

Lunch hour had been about to end when the update from Gossip Spyder came in, causing near simultaneous chimes to ring in the cafeteria. Sure enough, the post was about the face-off between Gendry and Joffrey and an almost word for word transcript of what had been said between the two. By the end of the day, almost everyone was talking about it, and when Arya saw Gendry at his locker at the end of classes, she was unable to fight the compulsion to speak to him.

"Hi, Gendry." Arya greeted him when she was close enough for him to hear her.

Gendry glanced at her, and the frown between his brows momentarily cleared. "Arya."

"How are you?" she asked him. "Are you okay?"

"Of course I am." Gendry gave her a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Why wouldn't I be?"

It was clear that he knew the real reason she had approached him, and it was also clear that he didn't want to talk about it.

"That's good, I guess."

Gendry closed his locker door and gave her another look, softer this time. "Really, everything is under control."

Arya wanted to ask him about why he suddenly decided to befriend Myrcella on social media, and whether there was any truth to the rumor that he'd been seen with Stannis Baratheon in the city, but Gendry's facial expressions had closed over, and so too had the door to potential conversation. She smiled instead.

"Okay," she said, "I'm glad things are okay."

Gendry indicated that he had to leave. "Thanks for worrying about me, but you really don't have to. I'll catch you around, Arya. I've got to go."

"Bye, Gendry." Arya waved him off before slowly making her way down to the gate to wait for Robb and Rickon.

When Robb's familiar car arrived not long after, Arya smiled at her brothers and welcomed the distraction.

"Hey Arya," Robb greeted her, "Rickon's asking for cheese fries, where can we go to get some?"

"Trident's Bend," Arya replied as she buckled herself in. "I know just the place."
She had not been to *The Hollow* in quite a while, and she told herself they were going there just for their cheese fries, and nothing to do with her own sentimental reasons.

**Gendry**

He had to be impressed by how fast news had spread around school. It had barely been three hours since he’d accepted Myrcella's friend request on Facebook when Joffrey had accosted him. He'd been expecting a confrontation, but he hadn't bargained on Joffrey ambushing him in front of a crowded cafeteria. Neither of them had been particularly careful about what they were saying either. From Gossip Spyder's post that afternoon, he might as well have shouted *'I am Robert Baratheon's illegitimate son!'* over the school announcement system. Gendry wondered if he truly was ready for the world to know the truth because he really could care less that his and Joffrey's revealing words were now all over the internet.

He had an appointment that afternoon with the tailor who had called him to say that his suits were ready for a basted fitting, and Gendry had agreed to come in before his lesson with Mr. Cressen. Upon reaching the tailor's atelier, Gendry was made to stand on the podium in front of the large mirrors while James had him model each of the five suits, which were currently being held together with hand-stitched white basting thread. Even in their rough form, Gendry could see their beauty, and he had never been the type to appreciate formal wear.

"So, James," Gendry began, "how much will each of these suits cost?"

"Mr. Baratheon did not discuss this with you?" James responded mildly.

"No, he did not." Gendry shook his head.

"They all vary in price due to the fabrics used, but altogether the five suits come to twenty-five thousand, and with the addition of matching shirts and accessories that total comes to an even thirty."

"Thirty thousand," Gendry repeated, trying to grasp the fact that clothes could be so expensive. *Thirty fucking thousand dollars!* He exclaimed in his head. "Could you please send the invoice to my accountant?"

"Oh, that won't be necessary. Mr. Baratheon has already taken care of it."

Gendry raised his brows. "That was kind of him."

Gendry had no qualms allowing his uncle to pay for his clothing and footwear, because when it came down to it, the money sitting in the bank account with his name on it had come from another Baratheon to begin with. He was under no illusions about where his wealth had come from.

After the fitting, he made his way to Mr. Cressen's suite, and realized that his lessons with the old man were coming to an end. His six weeks of intensive deportment classes were almost over, and he had mixed feelings about it. He had no doubt that the skills he'd learnt would one day come in useful, but he couldn't help thinking that it was all such a farce. The people in his life that really mattered to him wouldn’t care if he used the wrong knife or fork, and it was all for the benefit of strangers that he was bothering to learn the proper way to eat shrimp and tell the difference between a wine glass and a champagne flute.

He arrived at Mr. Cressen's suite to yet another surprise that afternoon.

"Good afternoon, Gendry," said Mr. Cressen when he greeted him at the door. "You have guests waiting for you."
It turned out to be Stannis Baratheon, accompanied by Davos Seaworth, both of whom were currently sitting around the coffee table in Mr. Cressen's parlor sipping on cups of coffee.

"Hello, Gendry," Davos greeted him, "how did your fitting at the atelier go?"

"Fine," Gendry replied, nodding at Stannis in acknowledgement. "James says his team will have the suits completed by Friday."

"That's just as well," Stannis said, "because you'll be requiring a suit this Saturday."

"Oh?" Gendry looked at him questioningly. "I'm guessing you're here to talk about the plan you mentioned last time we met."

"Correct." Stannis nodded.

The man then gave him an odd glance, seemingly studying him from head to toe, prompting Gendry to shift his stance when the stare continued overlong.

"Well?" Gendry raised his brow.

"I've decided," Stannis declared, "that you're going to attend the Valentine's Day Bachelor Auction, at the invitation of my family."

Gendry's glance turned skeptical. "This is your great plan?"

Before Stannis could respond, there was a knock at the front door that caused them all to halt their conversation.

"That must be the consultant now, Stannis. I shan't be long." Mr. Cressen said, turning to answer the door.

He returned a moment later with a very good looking man who appeared to be in his late twenties by his side. Gendry could only describe the newcomer as swarthy, with his blue-black hair, tanned skin, man-scaped mustache and exotic air about him.

"This is Daario Naharis," Mr. Cressen said, "he is a model currently represented by the Second Sons Agency."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance." Daario nodded at each of them in turn as Mr. Cressen made the introductions.

"Likewise," Gendry said, still none the wiser and more confused than before. "Not to ask the obvious, but why is Daario here?"

Mr. Cressen smiled. "Daario is also a consultant, specializing in gait and posture analysis. This week you will be re-learning how to walk."

"Okay." Gendry's confusion only partially abated. He still didn't see the connection between learning how to walk, and Stannis' grand plan.

"Moreover," Daario Naharis now added, "in addition to correcting your current posture, I will also be teaching you how to walk like a runway model, so that you are comfortable walking on a stage in front of an audience."

"Runway? Stage? What are you…Oh, no." Gendry finally connected the dots, and saw Stannis' grand plan in its entirety. "You're not serious, are you?"
Stannis nodded at him gravely, while Davos wore a benign smile, clearly amused by Gendry's predicament.

"This is no joke, Gendry." Stannis told him. "All of King's Landing's most influential families will be in attendance at the auction on Saturday night. You will go up on that stage and offer your time and company in the name of charity as the sixteenth bachelor. In front of all of these people, you will stand and declare your presence, and your identity as Robert Baratheon's first born son."

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**Sansa**

Saturday had come around faster than usual, or so it seemed, but Sansa figured that Robb's presence at Chateau Maegor had a part to play in it, offering a break to their usual routine. Breakfast had been a lively affair that morning with Chef Martin preparing waffles as per Robb's special request. Her brother had sat down at the table, freshly showered after completing a workout session in the gym that their father had installed when they had first moved in, pumped with testosterone and ravenous. He had devoured three waffles in mere seconds.

"What's the point of working out that hard when you're going to eat like a pig?" Arya had asked him.

"These waffles are going straight to my biceps," Robb had replied playfully. "I've gotta make sure I have energy for tonight."

"Are you hoping to meet the woman of your dreams at the auction tonight?" Sansa had asked him teasingly.

Robb had shrugged. "You never know, so it can't hurt to be prepared."

"Speaking of preparedness," Catelyn had said, turning to her daughters. "Neither of you have told me what you're planning to do after the auction. I at least need to know where you'll be."

Sansa volunteered to go first. "We're probably just going into the city for dinner and then see a movie afterwards, or go and see that *Street of Lights* installation near Rosby Road."

Catelyn had nodded before glancing at Arya. "And you?"

"I'll be staying at the auction," Arya had sighed, "Jaqen has to work tonight."

"He's working tonight?" Sansa had given her sister a look of pity. "That sucks."

Arya had shrugged. "It's not a big deal. I'll be seeing him tomorrow anyway."

Their mother had seemed satisfied with their plans, and she once more turned to Robb. "Robb, have you decided which charity you'll be donating the proceeds of your auction to?"

"Yes, I'll be donating to the *Global Schools Fund*. I've already nominated them on the form you gave me to fill out."

"Excellent. Ned, how much should we donate tonight?"

"Hmm?" Ned had looked up from his hash browns and coffee. "Will one hundred and fifty thousand be sufficient?"

"That's fine," Catelyn had said approvingly. "Better not forget to bring your cheque book, okay?"

After breakfast Sansa had gone upstairs to paint her nails. The Bachelor Auction was only a small
portion of her evening, with the real event being her date with Sandor later that night. Sandor had sent her a message earlier that morning, just a simple 'Happy Valentine's Day' followed by a rose emoji. The use of the emoji had made her smile, because it was so uncharacteristic of him and the thought of what face he'd been making as he'd scrolled through the emojis to find the rose, then actually use it, had her amused long after she'd read the message.

She was excited about seeing him that night, not just because it was their first Valentine's together, but it was also her first Valentine's Day with a boyfriend. She was also slightly nervous, because she had sensed how nervous Sandor had been when he'd told her to leave all the planning up to him. Sansa had told herself to keep an open mind, also realizing that it was Sandor's first Valentine's Day with a girl and that he would be as nervous, if not more, than she was.

She had been doing her best to focus on happy thoughts and staying positive. Sandor had said that there wasn't any point thinking of and getting upset about something that was, according to him, a long time away. She had always known that Sandor would have to move away for college, but until that day when Arya had spelled it out to her in terms of hours away by plane and driving time, she'd never thought about the real implications that this would have or what it would mean for them as a couple. She'd lost sleep over it, agonizing about their inevitable physical separation, trying her best to prevent Sandor from seeing how upset it made her.

Sansa painted her nails a shade of pink that would match the Dior dress that was hanging on her closet door, and when the varnish had dried she went downstairs to have a light lunch, before she returned to her room to begin dressing up.

"It's only 1PM, Sansa," Arya said, "why are you getting dressed so early? We're not leaving until 4PM."

"That's only three hours to get my hair and makeup done," Sansa stated, "I don't want to rush so I'm leaving myself plenty of time in case something goes wrong"

"What could go wrong?"

"Do you know how hard it is to do a perfect winged eyeliner?"

"You're right."

Sansa gave her a look. "You should start getting ready too."

"Ehh…"

"I'll do your hair and makeup for you, but you have to at least be showered and dressed by half-past two."

"Yay!" Arya grinned at her. "Thanks, Sansa!"

The dress that her mother had bought for her was by far the most whimsical and magical creation her mother had ever chosen. It was pale pink, sheer and entirely bare on one shoulder. There were delicate Japanese cherry blossoms and branches embroidered over the skirt and bodice, along with a little feathery bird across the waist and another close to the hem. With a dress that was so intricate and detailed, Sansa decided to simply wear her hair half-up and half-down, and wore little in terms of jewelry and other accessories. On her feet, she chose to wear nude heels for added height. She also kept her makeup deceptively simple, using just a lick of nude-pink lipstick to bring her look together.

When Arya walked into her room at two-thirty, both of them gasped when they saw each other.
"Wow!" Exclaimed Arya, looking her up and down.

"I could say the same about you," Sansa returned. "Arya, you're beautiful."

Even without her hair or makeup done, Arya's transformation in the dress their mother had chosen for her was remarkable. The gown was olive green, gauzy and ethereal. The bodice was held up by fine straps and was embroidered in a tangle of vines, leaves and pearlescent beads that appeared like berries on the embroidered branches across the skirt and bodice. Arya looked more like a pixie than ever, and it was with this thought in mind that Sansa styled Arya's emerald tresses into a messy knot at the base of her head, allowing loose tendrils to fall about her face and nape of her neck. She then used luminous makeup and shimmery highlighter on Arya's cheeks so that her face glowed as though she was lit from within. When she was finished, Sansa was so impressed with her masterpiece that she convinced Arya to let her take photos with her.

"If you must." Arya shrugged.

Sansa giggled. "Smile and say 'selfie!'"

Arya obliged her, posing for selfies alongside her and cracking silly faces. When their mother came to check on them and found them both still posing with Sansa's phone held between them, she then insisted that the whole family take photos too. Jory Cassel, ever present at their father's side, was roped into playing photographer. Only when their mother was satisfied with the number of photos taken and how they all appeared in them, where they finally able to leave the house.

They took the limousine to the venue, and with Robb verbally psyching himself up, the ride was a lively journey. The Lion's Gate Hotel was another of King's Landing's grand old hotels, and the Acorn Ballroom was a magnificently preserved example of 1930's Art-deco architecture and design, with elaborately patterned parquetry flooring, marble columns topped with decorative fan motifs and all of it illuminated by geometric chandeliers and wall sconces. Currently, the ballroom also bore decorations in recognition of Valentine's Day in the form of soft pink lighting, billowing drapes hung from the ceiling that softened the sharpness of the Art-deco features, flickering candles in tiny glass holders, and masses upon masses of red roses in tall vases as table centerpieces. There were also rose petals scattered on the surface of the tables and along the walkways, with the combined effect being spectacular and utterly romantic.

Upon their arrival Robb had been whisked away by organizers of the event, to join the other bachelors in another room until the auction so as to avoid causing a frenzy among the guests and potential bidders.

"Girls have been known to get into...disagreements before the auction," Catelyn had told them when their father had asked why this was necessary. "And previous organizers have found the best way to prevent petty squabbles was to keep the bachelors away before the auction."

"I would have liked to see a girl fight," Arya had muttered, only loud enough for Sansa to hear.

Sansa and the rest of her family were immediately met by the Tyrells and the Baratheons shortly after. Rickon had been excited to see Shireen Baratheon again, and Bran had volunteered to watch him. Sansa, Margaery and with Arya tagging along so as to avoid getting stuck with listening to the adults converse, spent the time before the official start of the auction socializing with other people that they knew from school and the community.

Margaery was dressed in another cleavage baring number, which attracted looks from many young and not so young men in the room, but the older girl laughed it off when Sansa mentioned it.
"Admitted, some of those looks are because of me," Margaery said, completely unabashed by the statement. "But, I think both of you are getting your fair share of admiration too."

Sansa knew better than to look around, but she did feel a touch of self-consciousness after Margaery's words. Arya had no such qualms and was openly looking around her, returning the stares they were receiving.

"Is there anyone you're going to bid for tonight, Margaery?" Sansa asked her friend.

The older girl gave her a secretive little smile. "Maybe."

"Renly, perhaps?"

"Renly? No." Margaery shook her head. "I'll let someone else bid for him this year, and besides I'm one hundred percent sure that I'm not his type."

"Joffrey? Everyone is expecting it."

"Then they'll all be sadly disappointed. I'm in too good a mood to spend my time in his company tonight."

"Then who?"

"I don't know," Margaery replied, "maybe I'll bid for Robb. What do you think?"

"I don't mind. Do you, Arya?"

"Hmm? Bid for Robb…sure, no problem."

Margaery giggled. "Thanks for your support, but I feel Robb will be in great demand tonight."


"I heard that there's a late addition to the lineup tonight," Margaery told them, "there's going to be sixteen bachelors up for auction."

"Oh? Who's the late addition?"

"That, I don't know," Margaery replied, "but what I do know is that Selyse Baratheon is the one who nominated him."

"Could it be one of her nephews?" Sansa asked, vaguely remembering that Selyse had nephews on the Florent side of the family.

"We'll find out soon enough."

Everyone was soon requested to take their seats at their allocated tables, and Sansa joined her family at a table close to the front of the stage, with Margaery and her family at another table to their left. Cersei and Robert Baratheon were joined by Jaime and Tyrion Lannister, along with a host of blonde people that Sansa presumed were extended Lannister family members. At yet another table beside them were Stannis and Selyse Baratheon, along with some people that Sansa assumed were members of Selyse's extended family.

Sansa saw Arya staring blankly towards a table at the front of the room, and when Sansa followed the direction of her gaze she found the girl called Jazmine Choi seated beside an older, though no less exquisitely beautiful woman that could only be her mother. Jazmine was wearing a floor length
limited edition Alberta Ferreti dress made of carmine silk, with a deep neckline that accentuated her slim frame and complimented her pale skin and dark hair beautifully.

"She's gorgeous," Sansa murmured.

Arya cleared her throat. "Yeah, she is."

A woman then appeared on the stage and called for attention.

"A very happy Valentine's Day ladies and gentleman. My name is Ravella Smallwood, President of the King's Landing Women's Association, and I would like to warmly welcome all of you here tonight!"

There was a warm round of applause from the audience and Ravella continued to speak about the purpose of that evening's gathering, to raise money for the charities and causes close to each of the bachelors' heart, and reminding everyone that those not participating in the auction, or those who do not succeed in winning in the auction, may still make donations to any charity being sponsored that evening.

The rules of the auction were simple. When the auctioneer called for a bid, bidders were to raise their hand high above their head and speak clearly, either to confirm the amount of their bid or to raise the amount. As per all auctions, once the gavel comes down the bidding is over. Sansa could see that many of the girls in the room were eager for the auction to begin, and when Ravella Smallwood finally declared the start of the auction, the feminine squeals that erupted around the ballroom came close to deafening.

A man walked onto the stage and stepped behind the lectern, introducing himself as their auctioneer for the evening.

"Ladies and gentlemen, without further ado, let us begin tonight's proceedings by informing you that there will be sixteen bachelors whose company will be up for auction. There was a late addition to the lineup, however I have been told to keep his identity a mystery until the very end…I am sorry, but I cannot say who!" the auctioneer laughed as the news of an additional bachelor created a stir in the audience, before he took a breath. "Now, for our first bachelor of the evening…please welcome Harrold Hardyng!"

A loud round of applause followed his introduction and Sansa watched as a handsome young man with sandy hair walked out from the wings, wearing a broad smile as he sauntered to the centre of the stage, waving at the crowd.

"Harrold is a sophomore at Vale College. He enjoys playing polo, and ballroom dancing. Tonight he is representing The Waynwood Foundation, a charitable organization that assist homeless women and single mothers with finding safe and permanent accommodation, ongoing education and employment opportunities. Let's start the bidding at one thousand dollars! Do I have one thousand, ladies?" The auctioneer looked around the room vigilantly. "Yes, from the young lady in the white dress! Do I have two thousand?"

Sansa watched in amusement as the bidding began to get serious, with three clear bidders coming to the front once the amount reached the tens of thousands. Harrold Hardyng 'sold' at forty-two thousand dollars to a young woman who went by the name of Saffron, whose family ran a spice importing business. The next few bachelors were not guys that Sansa knew, but she still enjoyed watching the frenzy of the auction itself. Her interest piqued once more when a familiar name was called out.
"Our next bachelor is a senior at King's Landing Prep, who also happens to be the lead singer for the popular local band Brotherhood Without Banners. Please welcome Beric Dondarrion!" There were more deafening squeals following his introduction. "Beric is representing the Bountiful Books organization, whose aim is to provide kids from the most disadvantaged districts in the state with educational and recreational reading materials that would otherwise be too expensive to afford for many families…let's have an opening bid, shall we? One thousand dollars, from this young lady here!"

"Ten thousand!" came a shout from somewhere to the side of the ballroom.

Sansa turned to see Allyria Dayne standing up with her hand raised high in the air.

"A clear ten thousand from the young lady over here in the violet dress," the auctioneer called, "do we have twenty thousand?"

"Twenty thousand!" shouted a new voice.

"Twenty-five!" yet another voice cried.

"Thirty!"

"Fifty thousand dollars!" Allyria cried, her eyes shooting daggers at the girls who dared to bid on her boyfriend.

"A fast fifty thousand dollars from the lady in the violet dress once again!" the auctioneer smiled widely. "Is there anyone else willing to place a higher bid?"

There was none, and Allyria won a date with her own boyfriend for the night, which drew laughter from many who knew that Allyria and Beric were an item.

Edric Dayne was next, and Sansa was pleased to see Arya was finally showing signs of interest in the auction after watching Beric.

"Edric Dayne is a junior at King's Landing Prep and is the drummer for the Brotherhood Without Banners. Edric also enjoys talking long walks on the beach. Tonight he is raising money for the Home Away From Home Foundation, an organization that provides accommodation for sick children and their families who come from remote towns so that they can all stay together while their child receives hospital treatment here in the city. Once again, bidding starts at one thousand dollars!"

Edric eventually sold for a respectable forty-eight thousand dollars to a girl from an all-girl school, who looked shocked that she had actually won. Arya was grinning, and taking pictures of the blushing Edric on the stage, who waved shyly in her sister's direction as he walked off the stage.

"Next, we have Joffrey Baratheon, another junior from King's Landing Prep. Joffrey plays quarterback for the White Knights, this year's Championship winners. Tonight, Joffrey will be representing the Westeros Cancer Research Fund, which is one of the country's leading organizations researching childhood cancers. Could I please have an opening bid for one thousand dollars?"

Sansa looked around the audience, half expecting Margaery to make a bid for him, but Margaery stayed in her seat with her hands folded at her lap. There was an odd, awkward moment of silence where it seemed that no one was going to make a bid, and indeed someone tittered from somewhere at the back of the ballroom. Sansa bit her lip to keep from laughing.

" Anyone at all? Please remember that this is for charity and we would hate for this worthwhile
charity to miss out…and we have one thousand over there. Thank you, young lady." The auctioneer looked relieved. "Do we have any other bids?"

Sansa swiveled her head in the other direction to see who had made the first bid, and saw Lollys Stokeworth with her hand shyly held aloft above her head. Sansa remember her from that fateful riot, and for the girl's sake she sincerely hoped someone with a stronger constitution would outbid her.

"Five thousand," said a new voice from the rear of the room.

Sansa saw a girl, dark-haired and skinny with ferret-like features holding her hand in the air.

"Ten thousand dollars," another ferret-faced girl from the same table raised her hand.

"We have ten thousand," the auctioneer's look of relief became an outright smile now that Joffrey finally had a decent bid on him. "Will the young miss over there bid higher?"

Lollys Stokeworth shook her head, much to Sansa's relief, and the bidding intensified between the two ferret-faced girls.

"Fifteen thousand!" the first ferret-faced girl countered.

"Twenty thousand!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, it's now sister against sister, Miss Frey versus Miss Frey! Will the first Miss Frey bid thirty? Yes? Now thirty thousand, and do we have thirty-five? Thirty-five, yes? The second Miss Frey bids thirty-five!"

Sansa watched the wooden expression on Joffrey's face, and through his frozen smile she could see that he was less than pleased with how his auction was progressing. Sansa could no longer contain her smile, and from her seat beside Sansa, Arya physically had to cover her mouth with her hand to stop herself from laughing. Joffrey's less than stellar auction was going to be gossip fodder for Gossip Spyder for sure.

"Forty thousand going once…going twice…and sold to the first Miss Frey!"

The skinny Frey girl was laughing excitedly, jumping and down in her seat while Joffrey was looking distinctly uncomfortable. Clearly, he'd been expecting a different outcome, with a different girl and without the chatter that was starting to break out across the ballroom.

"I was starting to think no one was going to bid for him!"

"I'll bet he's relieved someone bid for him in the end…he'd never live it down if no one wanted him."

"At least that's forty thousand towards his chosen charity. It would have been a pity if the charity were to miss out."

"What a surprising outcome, though. I thought Joffrey was popular?"

Sansa smiled inwardly. The look of humiliation on Joffrey's normally smug face was priceless, and she quickly took a snap of it with her phone so that she could show Sandor.

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**Arya**

She was finding it hard to control her laughter, but with her mother sitting across the table from her Arya had to fight hard to keep a straight face. However, the mirth that threatened to bubble over was
causing her to quake in her seat.

"Are you okay?" Sansa asked, her face just as flushed from her own barely contained glee.

"I'm fine," she replied, "totally fine."

Joffrey's face when it appeared no one was going to make a bid had been precious, and for a moment Arya had hoped no one would bid at all. Then, when it eventuated that it would be a contest between the two Frey sisters she'd once witnessed trying to chat him up at the New Year's Eve party, Arya had nearly peed her panties from stifling her laughter. *If only Gendry could have seen this*, she thought as she recalled their conversation at the *Dragon Pit Steak House* from the week before.

The auction had started off quite tiresome for her, made even more tiresome when she had spotted Jazmine Choi across the ballroom looking as gorgeous as ever. Her less than chipper mood only began to lift when Beric and Edric had come onto the stage to be auctioned, but seeing Joffrey's total mortification had completely dispelled her gloom, at least for the moment.

The three Tyrell brothers were next to be auctioned, with all three earning respectable bids within the fifty to sixty thousand vicinity, while Renly Baratheon eventually sold for sixty-five thousand to a tall, athletic looking college sophomore named Brienne, who wore a structured pant suit combo that brought the actress Tilda Swinton to mind.

Finally, Robb was called to the stage and he walked out into the limelight amid wild female screaming.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I know that many of the girls here tonight have been waiting for this young man, am I right?" The auctioneer's question received an ear-piercing scream in response. "Robb Stark is studying Business Management at Winter Town University and his hobbies include horseback riding and skiing. Tonight he represents the *Global Schools Fund*, a worldwide initiative that aims to build schools and train teachers in the most remote parts of the world where many children often walk for hours to get to the nearest school. Do we have an opening –?"

"One thousand!"

"Ten thousand!"

"Twenty thousand!"

The auctioneer laughed at the enthusiasm of the bidders. "All right, that's the spirit! We have twenty here, do I hear thirty?"

"Thirty thousand!" proclaimed a pretty girl with brown curls.

Arya leaned in towards Sansa. "Who is that?"

"Something…Westerling…I think." Sansa replied.

"Something…Westerling…I think." Sansa replied.

"Something…Westerling…I think." Sansa replied.

Margaery Tyrell now raised her hand. "Fifty thousand."

Margaery's bid caused a commotion in the crowd as Margaery had not placed a bid on anyone else the entire night. The auctioneer was forced to ask for quiet.

"All right, let's give the ladies a chance to complete their bidding, ladies and gentlemen." The auctioneer raised his hand in a shushing motion. "Miss Tyrell has bid fifty thousand, do we have fifty-five, Miss Westerling?"
The brown haired girl nodded. "Fifty-five."

"Sixty." Margaery said.

"Seventy thousand," came the immediate counter-offer from the girl with the curls.

"And we have seventy thousand, the highest bid of the night so far! Do you wish to bid again Miss Tyrell?"

Margaery politely shook her head and smiled. The crowd cheered for the brown haired girl.

"Seventy thousand going once…going twice…and sold to Miss Jeyne Westerling!"

Arya, Sansa and the rest of their family applauded loudly while Robb smiled at the girl who would be his date that night, looking pleased at having achieved the highest bid so far. Arya was about to relax into her seat once more when the auctioneer's next words jolted her back to attention.

"And now, for our sixteenth and final bachelor of the evening, a last minute addition to the lineup he may be, but I'm sure he will be just as popular as our last bachelor…ladies and gentleman, please welcome Gendry Waters!"

Arya sat forward in her seat. What did he just say? For a moment she thought she heard the man say Gendry's name…but that can't be? Before the thought could form in her mind, a tall figure appeared at the side of the stage, dressed in an impeccably tailored suit. Gendry glided across the stage with a quiet confidence Arya had never seen before, looking extraordinarily handsome in a sleek monotone outfit which proved that there really was something sensual about the color grey. The suit was of a dark-grey shade, and he wore a black shirt underneath it paired with a silk tie in a complimenting shade of grey, making Arya wonder how Gendry would look in the other forty-eight shades, because the two out of the supposed fifty that he was wearing looked devastating on him.

"Gendry is a junior at King's Landing Prep, and the guitarist of the Brotherhood Without Banners. The charity that he will be representing is the River's Edge Children's Home, a place that is close to Gendry's heart. The children's home offers a safe and warm place for orphaned children to call home before they find placement with foster families or with adoptive families. The money raised tonight will go towards much needed refurbishment of the establishment, and to fund ongoing services such as counseling and enrichment programs like music and art classes." The auctioneer held his palm out towards Gendry. "Let's have an opening bid, ladies. Do I have –?"

"One thousand!"

"Five thousand!"

"Ten thousand!"

"Twenty thousand!"

"Thirty thousand!"

Arya had barely grasped the reality of the situation, but in the space of ten seconds, five different girls had raised Gendry's price to thirty thousand dollars. Gendry's placid smile remained in place, with his body language remaining relaxed under the bright stage lights. He'd done something different with his hair again, with the spikes tamed and combed into a sleek style with a side part. He looked taller too, but that was probably because he was no longer stooping his shoulders. How did this happen? Why is he up there?
Arya turned to Sansa, whose own face registered shock. "Do you really think Selyse Baratheon is the one who nominated him?"

"I don't know," Sansa shook her head. "Margaery's tips are usually always correct, though. Her grandmother hears everything."

Arya pondered that bit of information for a moment, before concluding that if Margaery's tip about Selyse was correct, then in fact it was Stannis Baratheon who was behind Gendry being included in the bachelor lineup. *What is that man up to?* Arya wondered, but she had no time to think about it, because Gendry's auction was still going on around her.

"We now have fifty thousand, ladies and gentlemen!" the auctioneer was grinning broadly once more. "Do we have sixty thousand?"

"Sixty thousand!" the unmistakable trill of Margaery Tyrell's voice answered in response, and once again the ballroom erupted into chatter.

"Seventy thousand!" another feminine voice cried, a new bidder coming from the front of the room.

Arya whipped her head around, and to her horror she saw Jazmine Choi's slender hand held high into the air.

"Welcome to the bidding, young lady in red," the auctioneer said, "is there anyone willing to bid higher than seventy thousand dollars? Bear in mind that our last bachelor maxed out at seventy."

"Eighty." Margaery smiled at the resulting buzz caused by her bid.

"Eighty thousand dollars! Young lady in red, will you make a counter-offer?"

Arya's palms grew sweaty as she watched Jazmine nod her head, and something inside her snapped at that moment, rupturing like a volcano...hot, red and furious. *She cannot win! She must not win!*

Arya reached her hand out to touch her father's arm, and the pressure of her grip caused him to look at her with some concern.

"What's the matter?" her father asked her.

"Father, I need to bid on Gendry." Arya stated through gritted teeth, her fingers biting into her father's arm through the fabric of his sleeve.

"Arya?" he looked at her curiously.

"Father, please." Arya's eyes bore into her father's, and he must have seen something that convinced him that she was serious.

The auctioneer's voice boomed around them. "Miss Tyrell has bid eighty-five, do we have ninety miss lady in red?"

"Ninety thousand," Jazmine Choi confirmed.

Arya made a desperate sort of noise, and suddenly her father was patting her hand. He gave her a reassuring, and encouraging smile.

"Stick to the limit, Arya."

She nodded tersely, then turned her head back towards the stage, her eyes locking onto Gendry's
figure. The ballroom was now abuzz with chatter and speculation, while others encouraged the two bidders to keep going.

"Ninety thousand, ladies and gentlemen! This is the highest bid of the night, and if Miss Tyrell would like to bid again, perhaps we may break a record tonight that has stood for twenty years!" The auctioneer turned to Margaery Tyrell. "Do we have one hundred thousand?"

Margaery opened her mouth to speak, but the voice that everyone heard did not belong to her.

"One hundred thousand!"

Suddenly, all eyes were on Arya, and she barely registered that she was on her feet with her hand held in the air.

"Oh my god! That's Arya Stark!"

"Arya Stark just bid on Gendry!"

"One hundred thousand..."

The auctioneer's composure cracked. "Well, I'll be damned! We have a new entrant, with Miss Stark making the bid! One hundred thousand dollars, everyone! Will anyone dare to bid higher?"

"One hundred and five!" Margaery shouted.

"One hundred and ten!" Jazmine countered.

"One hundred and twenty!" Arya cried.

She was going to try, with every dollar that her father had given her. She was not giving up Gendry to Jazmine or Margaery without a fight. The crowd was near hysterical now, in disbelief at what was taking place before their eyes.

"Is there anyone willing to go higher than one-twenty?" the auctioneer shouted over the din.

Arya turned to watch her opponents, and heaved a sigh when Margaery shook her head and graciously bowed of the race, giving Arya an encouraging smile. One down, Arya thought, one to go.

"One twenty-five." Jazmine Choi countered, this time with her eyes clearly on Arya.

Arya returned her stare without flinching. "One-thirty."

Arya was aware that her sister and mother were giving her curious glances, but she ignored them for the meantime. The fight wasn't over.

The pretty lady next to Jazmine, who appeared to be her mother, suddenly leaned in to whisper something into Jazmine's ear and for a few seconds there appeared to be a terse conversation between them. Whatever it was about, it caused a frown to form between Jazmine's brows.

"Young lady in red, will you bid higher?" the auctioneer asked her.

"One thirty-five." Jazmine replied.

"One-forty." Arya countered, now feeling her palms sweat anew. She was running out of money to spend, but she couldn't let Jazmine sense that.
"Miss Stark has bid one hundred and forty thousand! Do we have a counter offer, young lady in red?"

Jazmine didn't move for a moment, but Arya saw the line of her lipstick coated mouth turn thin, and that's when Arya knew that she had it.

"One-forty-one." Jazmine bit out.

*This is it, Arya thought, I have her now.* Jazmine was bidding in single thousands now, which meant she was running out of money too. Arya hazarded that Jazmine's mother had presumably told her to quit bidding at a certain point, which had to be close. Arya needed to make her think that she had an unlimited budget, and she could only do that by playing with all she had. *I'm all in.*

"One hundred and fifty thousand." Arya forced her smile to come out bright and full of confidence, as though she hadn't just reached her final limit.

"One hundred and fifty thousand dollars, ladies and gentlemen!" the auctioneer screeched. "We have a new record bid! Will there be any other bids?"

Jazmine's face and demeanor turned icy, but her hands remained on her lap, her fists clenched. She shook her head.

"One hundred and fifty thousand dollars going once…twice…and sold to Miss Arya Stark!" the auctioneer cried as cheers and applause erupted around the room.

Arya's smile split her face, and she glanced up towards the stage to find Gendry watching her with an unreadable expression on his face. They stared at each other for a moment lasting several heartbeats, before Gendry finally returned her smile.
Episode 35 "Valentine's Day"

Gossip Spyder

Attention! Attention! Breaking news!

A record held for twenty years by Jaime Lannister has been broken by Gendry Waters, who attracted an impressive $150,000 winning bid from none other than Arya Stark! Yes, you read that correctly! In a sequence of surprising events, Gendry was nominated as the sixteenth bachelor at the Valentine's Day Bachelor Auction which concluded just a moment ago, with Arya Stark making a late entry into the bidding war that had originally pit Margaery Tyrell against Jazmine Choi! Arya has outbid them both, and with her winning bid, Gendry now holds the record for the most expensive bid ever in the fifty-year history of the annual Bachelor Auction!

Gendry's entry into the auction, traditionally only ever including sons born into the cream of King's Landing society, can only mean one thing only! There is no word yet from the Baratheon camp, but I can reveal that Gendry's name was put forward by Selyse Baratheon, a longstanding member of the King's Landing Women's Association, and wife of Stannis Baratheon!

I'm beginning to add up all the clues leading up to this event…so watch this space for more news!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

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Gendry

"Sold, to Miss Arya Stark!"

The words were echoing in his ears as he continued to stand on the stage, his eyes fixed on the expression on Arya's face as the people around her clapped and cheered, congratulating her on her record breaking bid.

Arya bid for me. Arya won.

He was trying to make sense of the situation, but it was clearly evident that Arya looked unbelievably pleased with her win. He smiled at her. He couldn't help but smile, because the girl who'd consumed his heart and mind for so long had just paid a ridiculous amount of money to spend time with him.

"Ladies and gentlemen, with the conclusion of the auction, it's now time for our bachelors to share a first dance with the lovely young ladies who have won their company for the night," the auctioneer declared. "Bachelors, please approach the tables and lead your ladies out onto the dance floor. On that note, please welcome the Wildfire Jazz Band!"

Gendry made his way down the stage steps as the curtain behind him parted to reveal the jazz ensemble and the male singer who was dressed like a member of The Rat Pack. He was aware of Beric and Edric patting his shoulder as they walked past him, but his eyes remained focused on Arya. She was standing by the table where the rest of her family sat, and the broad grin she'd been wearing as she'd been declared the winner now morphed into an expression that he couldn't readily define. It was as though she too was stunned by what had just happened, and stunned by her own actions.
Gendry stopped in front of her and held out his hand, palm facing up. "May I?"

Without a word Arya placed her hand in his, and Gendry led her to a spot on the dance floor just as the jazz band began to play the opening bars to Frank Sinatra's 'The Way You Look Tonight'.

"Do you dance?" Gendry asked her as he gently pulled her to him in a close hold, placing his right hand flat against her bare back.

Arya shook her head. "Not very well. Do you?"

"A little," Gendry replied, but did not elaborate on how he had learned the basics of social dancing only days before.

_Someday, when I'm awfully low_

_When the world is cold_

_I will feel a glow just thinking of you_

_And the way you look tonight_

Gendry had an excellent sense of rhythm however, and what he lacked in dance skills he more than made up for with his timing and musicality. The tempo was easy to dance to, and he guided Arya into careful twists and spins, leading her effortlessly as their families, friends and strangers watched on in the audience.

_Yes, you're lovely, with your smile so warm_

_And your cheeks so soft_

_There is nothing for me but to love you_

_And the way you look tonight_

More than lovely, Gendry decided that Arya looked radiant that evening. The light reflecting against the pale olive green fabric of her gown and the wispy tendrils of emerald tresses that framed her softly made-up face made her appear almost ethereal. If he did not have the warmth of her skin beneath his hands and the scent of her filling his lungs with each breath, he might have thought he was imagining it all in his head.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Arya asked him abruptly.

"You look like you're glowing," he replied, saying the first thing that came to his mind.

"It's makeup," she said, "Sansa put something shimmery on my cheekbones."

Gendry smiled, because only Arya could make his effort at a compliment sound so pedestrian.

"You look nice though," he told her, trying again.

"I look like a tree." Arya indicated the leaves and vines embroidered on the bodice of her dress.

Gendry noticed then how sheer it was, and glimpsed the made-to-be-seen undergarments she wore beneath it to preserve her modesty.

"A very nice tree," he returned, his voice coming out lower than he meant to.
Lovely…never, never change
Keep that breathless charm
Won't you please arrange it? Cause I love you
Just the way you look tonight

The music peaked at an instrumental interlude and Gendry concentrated on keeping his feet moving and leading the dance, all while feeling the slight tremble of Arya's hands where they rested upon his shoulder and in the grasp of his hand. A flush had crept onto her luminous cheeks, and the color only added to her loveliness.

When the music died down and the dance came to an end, Gendry pulled Arya to his side and he bowed politely as their audience applauded. Arya followed his lead, bowing and acknowledging the people cheering for them.

"Thank you bachelors and bachelorettes!" Ravella Smallwood said, having returned to the stage. "And thank you to the Wildfire Jazz Band, we'll hear more of them later in the evening. Now, ladies and gentlemen please take a moment to greet and congratulate our bachelors and the ladies who have won their company for their generous contributions to charity this evening."

Arya's parents and siblings were among the first to greet him, with Eddard Stark getting up from his seat to shake his hand. Sansa gave him a hug while sparing a curious gaze for her sister. Robb and the girl called Jeyne Westerling briefly came to greet them and Robb's family, before they excused themselves to meet Jeyne's parents. The Tyrells were next, with Olenna Tyrell giving him an embrace that took him by surprise, and receiving a kiss on the cheek from Margaery which subsequently set tongues wagging.

Jazmine appeared behind Margaery and Gendry watched as she spoke first with Arya. He couldn't hear what was said between them, but it looked for a moment as though Arya's smile was forced. When Jazmine eventually turned to him she greeted him with a smile and kissed his cheek just as Margaery had done before.

"You've proven very much in demand tonight," she said to him.

"Very much to my surprise too," he said, returning her smile. "Thank you for bidding on me."

Jazmine inclined her head in acknowledgement of her unsuccessful bidding effort, before giving Arya a glance from the corner of her eyes.

"She plays a mean game. I may have underestimated her, but she hasn't won yet."

Jazmine returned to her table with her back straight and her head high, leaving Gendry wondering what game she was referring to.

There was a tap on his shoulder, and he turned to find Renly Baratheon holding his hand out for him to shake. The guy had played referee between him and Joffrey while they had been in the waiting room, tactfully defusing more than one outburst from Joffrey while Beric and Edric had stood beside Gendry, just in case.

"I suppose it's official now." Renly smiled as they shook hands. "Nice work, nephew. You had three of the most eligible young ladies in the city bidding for you, and of course you have your looks to thank for that. It must run in our blood, am I right?"
Aware that they were being watched, Gendry returned his smile. It was hard to deny their looks when he'd heard people likening them to identical twins.

"You're right, uncle," Gendry agreed, "there's definitely a strong family resemblance there, but it was still *my* face that sold for a new record high."

"You got my sense of humor though!" Renly chuckled as he walked back towards his date.

Stannis, Selyse and Shireen appeared in front of Gendry next and he and Arya spent a few moments chatting to them politely, as though they didn't have the entire ballroom full of people as an audience.

"Well done," Stannis said to him, patting his shoulder. Gendry saw that Stannis clearly referred to more than just his record breaking selling price. "And, congratulations to you, Miss Stark. Those final few moments during Gendry's auction certainly made for riveting viewing."

"All in the name of charity," Arya said, with a shrug of her shoulder.

"Your dress is beautiful, Arya," Shireen said. "You look like a princess!"

Arya responded to Shireen's praise as Selyse commended Gendry on his poise during the height of auction, and it was while Gendry was downplaying his efforts that a sudden hush descended around the ballroom. Gendry looked up to see none other than Robert Baratheon approaching them from the opposite side of the room. As he watched, Gendry became aware of Eddard Stark coming around the table to stand at his side, discreetly pulling Arya out of the way. Stannis, also seeing his brother's approach, casually positioned himself on Gendry's other side.

Dozens of eyes were on them, and from out of the corner of his eye Gendry saw Robert's wife and the extended Lannister clan all wearing terse expressions on their faces…except the dwarf Tyrion, who was sipping on wine with a thoroughly amused expression on his misshapen face. Joffrey glared at Gendry, even as he tried to low-key shrug off the Frey girl who insisted on clinging to his arm.

"No one wants a scene, Robert." Stannis stated in a hushed tone as Robert stopped in front of them.

"Hmm? You'd like to avoid a scene but you're all fine about making a spectacle of our entire family, Stannis?" Robert eyed his younger brother, his tone suggesting he knew perfectly well who had orchestrated Gendry's inclusion into the auction.

Robert continued to stare at his brother while Gendry looked on, holding his breath without realizing it. When Robert's finally turned his attention to him, Gendry stared right back, unflinching, keeping his back straight so that he stood his full height. It wasn't too hard to discern the thoughts going on behind his father's eyes.

Robert had crossed the ballroom, knowing he was being watched by everyone in the room, because he had a purpose in mind. Gendry's presence and involvement in the bachelor auction was Stannis' idea of declaring to all of King's Landing society that Gendry belonged among them, and that he had every right to be standing on the same stage as all of King's Landing's finest sons.

The audience had been surprised when his name had been called, and in all honesty Gendry had been expecting at least one objection, but there had been none. If Jazmine Choi's clear preference for him was an indication of his popularity, then Margaery's contending bid could be viewed as a definite sign of approval from an upper echelon family, as the Tyrells certainly were. Arya Stark's last minute entry and ultimate record breaking bid, financially backed by Eddard Stark at that, was the solidifying piece of evidence that convinced almost everyone that what they'd all been suspecting
was true.

Robert now raised a hand and placed it upon his shoulder. Gendry glanced at the large and heavy weight of Robert's hand on his shoulder, before looking back at the man's face.

"Congratulations," Robert said, "good for you. Twenty years Jaime has been bragging about that record, every year come the auction on Valentine's Day. He won't be so smug now that a son of mine, who happens to have my looks, has obliterated that record. You and Arya enjoy yourselves and have a good night."

With a pat on his shoulder, Robert turned and walked back to rejoin his stunned Lannister in-laws, and his wife who was as still and frozen as an ice sculpture. For certain, Robert had been forced into making his public acknowledgement, and it wasn't until the words had come out of his mouth did Gendry make a connection between the seemingly random and out of character actions that Stannis had displayed in the last few weeks. Stannis had been planning for this all along. Contrary to what his uncle may have told him, Gendry now did not believe his inclusion in the auction was a plan that Stannis Baratheon had come up with on the spur of the moment, as he had made it appear to be.

Gendry had no chance to mull over that realization because Ravella Smallwood was now calling on the bachelors and the auction winners to have their photograph taken by the professional photographer who had appeared beside her. With the potential crises now over, Eddard and Stannis returned to their seats, and Gendry led Arya with a hand at her back while they proceeded with the formalities of the evening and had their picture taken with the group.

At long last it was announced that the bachelors and their dates would now be leaving to enjoy the private dinner and city sights tour as part of the winner's prize, and Gendry finally led Arya out of the ballroom. A hotel staff member greeted them in the lobby and handed Gendry an envelope with a room number written on the front, before telling them that their dinner would be brought directly to their room.

It wasn't until Gendry was swiping the key into the reader that a sudden thought came to him. The lock beeped and when the light turned green Gendry pushed the door open, holding it aside so that he could let Arya enter before him.

"After you," he said politely.

Arya walked past him into the room, and Gendry followed after her.

_Why is she here with me...and not with Jaqen?_ It was Valentine's Day, and she was supposed to be with her boyfriend...not alone in a hotel room with him.

Gendry closed the door firmly behind him.

---

_Arya_

The suite was beautiful, Arya thought as she cast her eyes around the hotel room that was to be theirs for the next couple of hours. One entire wall was made of glass, and the curtains had been drawn aside to reveal the spectacular view of the King's Landing skyline. The darkness of the winter night was broken by the myriad of lights from the buildings, street lamps and the lines of cars on the streets below. A table had been set up in front of the window, draped in a white cloth and accented by a tasteful floral centerpiece and flickering candles. There were two place settings, with tableware laid out for a six-course formal French dinner, if the menu card on the table was anything to go by.
Gendry led her to the table and pulled the seat out for her, waiting until she had sat down and settled her flouncy skirt about her before taking his own seat across the table from her. He had a small frown between his brows, and she knew him well enough to know that something was on his mind.

There were butterflies doing somersaults in her belly, and they had been there from the moment Gendry had gazed at her across the dance floor when she'd been declared the winner. The fact they were now alone in a room merely sent the butterflies into a frenzy.

"So, um…" Arya reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, wanting to break the silence. "I guess this means it's public knowledge now, Robert Baratheon acknowledged you as his son."

Gendry inclined his head. "He has, and I'm expecting my face to be all over the media again tomorrow."

"Is that something you're prepared for?"

"I guess so," Gendry offered her a small smile. "Did you see the look on Joffrey's face?"

"I did! I thought he was gonna lose his shit for a moment…how did this happen? Why were you in the auction?"

"It's Stannis' doing." Gendry replied.

"I thought it might have been," Arya was suitably impressed by Margaery's connections on the information grapevine. "Why would he do this?"

Gendry looked to be considering his response for a moment. "It's a long story, and I don't know for sure if I'm right, but I think Stannis always meant to force Robert into making an admission."

There was a knock on the door at that moment and a waiter arrived pushing a room service trolley bearing their appetizers and non-alcoholic aperitif. While they dug into their poached baby artichoke hearts and porcini mushroom tarts, Gendry told her a little about his suspicions, in particular about how he believed Stannis might have been planning his public debut right from the very beginning.

"I don't know why or what his ultimate aim is, but my being included in the auction at the last minute seems too well thought out."

"Whatever his goal might be, your uncle has definitely succeeded with your public debut, as you put it," Arya agreed, realizing there were still so many unanswered questions.

The rumor about Stannis and Gendry being seen at that bar in Atelier's Lane seemed perfectly plausible now. Gendry had not said anything about how he and Stannis had gotten so close, but it was clear that his relationship with his uncle and his family had developed rapidly since their first meeting at Storm's End some two months before.

"And if people aren't interested in my paternity, then your generous contribution to charity will certainly get them talking." Gendry gave her a questioning look. "What made you bid for me, Arya?"

Arya glanced away from him, feeling a flush creep up into her cheeks. She should have expected the question, but she hadn't been thinking.

"I…I don't know," she told him, mentally kicking herself.

She couldn't very well tell him how the sight of Jazmine Choi and Margaery Tyrell both eagerly bidding for his time and company had set a light under her feet, or how the thought of Jazmine, who
looked as stunning as ever, spending time alone with Gendry irritated her beyond measure.

Jazmine's pleasant smile as she had greeted her had masked the shade in the words she had then uttered in Arya's ear.

"You outbid me tonight, so I'll congratulate you on that. But don't forget, those who covet all may end up losing it all."

"What do you mean?" Arya had asked her, not understanding the warning but recognizing it all the same.

Jazmine had given her a look that had made her feel as though she was being looked down on. "The story of The Dog and His Shadow, look it up."

The older girl's words were now making it difficult for her to relax in Gendry's presence.

"Why are you even here tonight?" Gendry asked, but his tone and the narrowing of his eyes on her face told her that the question he really meant to ask was; why aren't you with Jaqen?

"Plans changed," she answered simply, not meeting his eyes, "things didn't work out…so here I am."

Gendry continued to stare at her for a moment longer, but despite the curiosity still evident on his face Arya was relieved when he didn't pursue the issue. Arya chose to change the subject.

"Your suit is awesome," she offered, "grey looks good on you."

"Thanks." Gendry smiled, and the tension vanished. "I told you before, but you really do look nice in that dress tonight."

Arya looked down at the gauzy skirt that cascaded over her knees. "I look like a proper girl for once."

"You know, I never understood why you're always making a point about trying to look like a girl, or comparing yourself to your lady of a sister." Gendry's blue eyes swept over in a way that made her feel as though he'd physically touched her. "I've always seen you as a girl."

It was a simple statement, but Arya felt breathless at hearing his words. Gendry had always been looking at her. From the moment she had greeted him on the first day of school, before she had changed her hairstyle and clothes, Gendry had regarded her as a girl. Her confrontational behavior and often rough demeanor had not been enough to dissuade him from seeing her as someone desirable…or from falling for her.

The second course arrived and while Gendry kept up a surprisingly steady stream of conversation, Arya wondered how he appeared to be so composed when she was barely keeping it together. She still found it hard to believe that she was sitting there having a fancy dinner with Gendry, alone in a fancy hotel room with roses and candles on the table before them.

What the hell has gotten into me, and why won't my hands stop shaking?

Try as she might, Arya couldn't seem to shake her nervousness, but Gendry seemed oblivious to it, or he was doing a good job overlooking it so that by the time their main course arrived, she had at least managed to stop her hands from shaking.

Gendry really did look unbelievably handsome that night. His slicked back hair was styled to compliment the fine tailoring of his impeccably cut suit and the way he was holding himself, with his
back straight and shoulders squared somehow made him appear larger, more mature than his seventeen years. Arya wasn't certain what had happened to Gendry in the weeks since the start of the new year, but he had definitely undergone some kind of metamorphosis, and she didn't doubt that he was going to be ready for the fallout of Robert's public acknowledgement.

Yet beneath the splendid suit and his well-groomed countenance, she could still see the lanky, spiky-haired boy with the lost expression on his face that she'd first met at the school gate. *This is Gendry,* she told herself, *there's nothing to be nervous about.*

"Is the chicken not to your liking?" Gendry asked her.

"What?" Arya snapped out of her thoughts.

"You've stopped eating," Gendry pointed at her half-eaten chicken.

"I'm leaving room for dessert."

He raised his brow skeptically. "I thought you had a bottomless pit for a stomach. Since when did you have to leave room for dessert?"

"My dress is unforgiving," she replied, making a face. "I swear, this is the last time I let my mom pick out my clothes."

Gendry laughed, and Arya made a point of eating a few more bites before she posed a question for him.

"Have you ever heard of the story *The Dog and His Shadow*?"

He drew his brows together in thought. "That's one of Aesop's Fables, I think."

"What happens in the story?"

"I think I read this in one of Tabitha's bedtime story books...from memory, a butcher gives this dog a piece of meat, which the dog then carried in his mouth to bring home. He had to cross a narrow footbridge over a river, but as he walked across it he caught a glimpse of another dog below him, who was also carrying a chunk of meat that was bigger than his own. Wanting the meat for himself, he jumped off the bridge and dropped what he was carrying right into the rushing water. When he finally swam ashore, he realized he'd been a stupid dog because if he'd just stopped and thought about it he would have realized he was actually seeing his own reflection and not a real dog. So, now he'd lost a perfectly good chunk of meat because of his greed."

"Those who covet all, may lose it all," Arya murmured.

"Hmm?"

She shook her head. "It's nothing really."

"Why did you want to hear it?"

She shrugged. "Someone made a reference to it in conversation and I wasn't sure what it was about."

Jazmine clearly meant to tell her something, and Arya was incensed that she still didn't really understand what the girl was trying to say. Whatever it was, she had a nasty suspicion that she wouldn't like it.

There was another knock on the door shortly after and yet another trolley was wheeled in.
"The salad course," Gendry said, eyeing the delicate plate of dressed greens laid out before them.

They were four courses into their meal, and despite the calm face she was presenting, the butterflies in her belly were far from being settled. Somehow she made it through the final two courses without incident, even enjoying the crème brûlée that was served for dessert.

Finally they were called back down to the lobby where a chauffeur was waiting for them. Sitting in the back of the limousine with Gendry beside her, she couldn't help but smile when she saw the look of excitement on his face as he stretched his long legs out in front of him.

"First time in a limo?" she asked him.

He nodded. "I could get used to this."

Glancing once more at his suit and perfectly groomed hair, she also couldn't help but think that he was getting used to things faster than he might have realised.

The limousine ride around the city's sights started in the heart of King's Landing's CBD, not far from The Lion's Gate Hotel. Their first stop was King's Square, a forty-acre green oasis in the middle of the city that boasted sculptures from famous artists, fountains, a miniature hedge maze and paved walkways lit by old-fashioned lamps, that wound around manicured gardens and manmade lagoons. They had been told that every couple had a different sightseeing schedule so that no more than two or three couples would ever be at the same place at the same time.

King's Square was a large park, and Arya was grateful when they did not come across any other couple while they attempted to navigate their way to the centre of the dense, two-foot high hedge maze. Arya still wore her couture gown, now with a warm cape fastened about her shoulders as protection from the cold. Gendry had added a deep charcoal grey overcoat to his ensemble, and resplendent as they appeared in their finery, they obviously drew curious and admiring glances from passersby.

"This is trickier than I first thought," Arya said when she led them to another dead-end in the maze.

"It does look deceptively simple," Gendry commented, "although it is meant for children, so what does that say about you?"

Arya whacked his arm following the playful dig at her intelligence. "Then, you lead the way."

He did, and effortlessly at that, leading them to the centre of the maze with a smirk, before leading them just as effortlessly towards the exit. Eventually, Arya figured out that Gendry was more familiar with the maze than he had let on.

"That's not fair!" she whacked his arm again. "You made me think you've never been through the maze before."

Gendry laughed. "I was born in King's Landing and I've lived here all my life, Arya. Of course I know my way around this maze. You made that assumption on your own."

"Even more reason for you to have said something."

"Ah, but where's the fun in that?"

Their next stop was King's Gate Promontory, which featured as the backdrop for the majestic King's Gate Hotel nearby. The promontory had been developed as a tourist attraction, with sturdy railings surrounding cemented view points where people could stand and gaze out over Blackwater Beach.
and the Narrow Sea beyond the breakwater.

"You know, I never imagined I'd one day have a reason to be standing on this side of the bay," Gendry said as they came to stand at a relatively uncrowded section of the lookout.

Arya turned to look up at him, seeing a wistful expression on his face. "What do you mean?"

In response, Gendry bent his head down so that their faces were nearly touching, and indicating with the tip of his finger, he pointed towards a cluster of lights in the distance, far beyond the stretch of Blackwater Beach below them.

"See those lights? That's River's Edge." Gendry stared at the lights in the distance with a faraway look in his eyes. "My view of this bay had always been from over there."

Arya couldn't even begin to fathom the complexity of the thoughts and emotions Gendry had to be feeling, but she had often wondered if he regretted finding out the truth about his identity, and she had found herself asking him.

"If you could go back to how things were, would you?"

Gendry sighed. "That's a tough question. Things were definitely much simpler then, and sure I still had problems to deal with, but mostly they were problems that could be solved with money. I was always just waiting for the time I would be old enough to get a full-time job, which I thought would fix half my problems."

"What about the other half?"

He let out a self-deprecating laugh. "I had identity issues. The whole not knowing where I came from type of thing...in some ways maybe I was better off not knowing."

"So, you do regret finding out," Arya said, still trying to grasp his thoughts.

"No, that's not exactly correct either." Gendry turned to face her, leaning his back against the metal railing. "I've met a lot of really good people because Robert eventually stepped up and took responsibility for me, even in secret. I met you...and because of you I got to know Beric and the guys. I got to help out Ellen, Tobho and their kids, and I'm super thankful to be able to pay them back for what they've done for me over the past six years. I also got to meet Shireen, and if things work out, maybe I'll start to build a relationship with my half-sister too."

"Myrcella,"

"Yeah. I'm sure you know all about how Myrcella and I are now friends on Facebook and how she's following me on Instagram."

She nodded. "Yeah, I do know about that. Do you want to talk about it?"

Gendry shrugged. "There's not much to tell. I haven't heard anything from her since."

"Maybe, she's hesitating because she's afraid of how you might react. Maybe she's waiting for you to make the next move, after all she did sort of initiate first contact, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I see your point."

"What made you add her on social media anyway?"

"I don't know...maybe I was making a declaration of my own."
"Did you know you were going to be in the auction at that time?"

"No. I didn't find out until later that day, but by then almost everyone knew that Joffrey and I had argued, and why we were arguing in the first place. Joffrey hates that Myrcella is seeking me out. Even before Robert came out and said it, I'm betting lots of people in that ballroom tonight already knew the truth."

"You may be right," Arya agreed. "People were surprised when your name was called out, but no one looked surprised that you were included in the group, you know? Like, it was a foregone conclusion."

"Perhaps."

The third location on their sightseeing agenda was to be found at Iron Gate Road, also currently known as the Street of Lights, which ran near parallel to Rosby Road. The Street of Lights was so named for the enormous archways of bright, colorful lights that lined much of the street, over ten city blocks long. The incandescent archways were non-permanent installations that could be viewed only during the winter months beginning at Christmas, aimed at encouraging visitors outdoors, and providing a splash of color against the darkness of the winter night. The chauffeur had dropped them off at the head of the street, and Gendry and Arya were to make their way down the street as they viewed the lights, to be picked up at a rendezvous point several blocks away.

The Street of Lights was by far the most crowded of the locations they had visited. Given that it was Valentine's Day, almost everyone out that night were couples, holding hands and exchanging looks of adoration with their significant other. Many people were forgetting to watch where they were walking while they had their heads tilted upward to view the archways, and consequently Arya was constantly jostled and smacked in the face by people shouldering through.

Gendry noted what was happening when Arya had fallen out of step with him, and he resolved the problem by taking her hand and holding her behind him, shielding her from being buffeted further. Arya was startled by the contact, but as she had followed behind him the sight and feel of her hand in his, though unusual at first, soon seemed like the most natural thing for them to do.

"Are you okay now?" Gendry asked.

"I'm fine, thanks." Arya replied, her voice coming out raspy as though she was out of breath. "It's just... I'm not used to walking in heels and this dress is kind of hard to move around in with this crowd."

Gendry again glanced down at her, but Arya wasn't sure that he was really looking at the skirt of her dress swirling around her ankles. "I guess it would be."

He continued to hold her hand as they meandered through the crowded street, occasionally pausing to point at and admire some of the more unusual light displays as they went. Arya expected him to let go of her hand once they had passed the worst of the crowds...but he didn't. She knew that she really should have pulled her hand away...but she didn't. Instead, she returned the pressure of his grip, and did her best to ignore the warning voices in her head.

Arya grew quiet when they visited their next two sights –the oldest bridge in King's Landing, and the oldest church respectively– but she still somehow managed to pose next to Gendry and smile when he asked to take their photo.

"Ellen asked for photos of me and my date," Gendry said, "do you mind?"
"No problem."

Gendry stood behind her, close enough that her shoulders brushed his chest, and as he held the camera in front of them with the selfie-mode on, Arya glimpsed the two of them in the frame looking, for all intents and purposes, like a real couple.

Their final stop for the night was at Aegon's Well, an ancient well dating back to the 1600's reported to be built at the site first settled by the earliest colonizers of King's Landing. The water had long since dried up and a grate had been installed over the rim of the well for public safety, but the site retained its majesty and history. The original well, approximately ten feet in diameter and made from uneven rocks and stones from the area, had been restored by the city conservation project, and a round roof had been built over the structure in order to preserve it. The land around it had been paved at some point in history, using the same materials as the well. Later generations had added gardens and statues of dragons, said to be derived from the coat of arms of the family responsible for building the well, and subsequently contributing to the growth and wealth of the settlement.

Over time the well had become a symbol of prosperity, and visitors would throw a coin into the well while making a wish.

"Urban legends say all the wishes do come true eventually," Gendry said when they approached the well. "It could be an hour, or decades later, but they all come true."

"Really?" Arya peered over the edge, unable to see the bottom of it. "Have you ever made a wish here?"

"Once, when I was a kid."

"What did you wish for?"

"To find out who my father was." Gendry smiled then. "I guess the legend was true."

"That's coincidence." Arya narrowed her eyes skeptically.

"Is it?" Gendry raised his brow. "Do you want to find out?"

Arya could not refute him, especially when he'd just told her that his childhood wish had come true. There were many mysteries in the universe, and if this well truly had the power to grant a person's wish, then it would be foolish of her not to take the chance and make a wish of her own.

"Okay, let's find out."

Gendry laughed before pulling out two coins from his wallet. Arya took the coin he'd offered, but hesitated when she couldn't think of what to wish for.

"Don't over think it," Gendry advised her, "the first wish to come to your head is supposed to be your heart's true desire. When you know what you're going to wish for, throw your coin inside then say; wish me luck, Aegon."

"Seriously?"

Gendry pointed to some people making wishes across from them, and Arya saw that he had not been making it up. Everyone was calling on Aegon to bring them luck.

"I'll go first, shall I?" Gendry rubbed the coin between his palms, before throwing it through the metal grate into the well. "Wish me luck, Aegon."
Gendry's crooked smile and the playful tone of his voice as he'd thrown his coin into the well had caused something in her heart to flutter warmly, making Arya wish that she could somehow make this moment with Gendry last forever. However, she was aware that people were beginning to queue behind them and the only thing she could think to wish for was guidance so that she could sort through the muddle of emotions she was suddenly feeling, before she tossed her coin into the well.

"Wish me luck, Aegon."

Gendry smiled at her as they walked away from the well. "Keep your wish to yourself, but tell me about it when it comes true."

"Only, if you promise to do the same."

"Deal."

Shortly after that, Gendry guided her back to the limousine for the return ride back to The Lion's Gate Hotel. Now, as it dawned on her that her time with Gendry was nearly up, Arya began to feel restless. It was evident to her that she didn't want their date to end, but she could think of no reason why or how she could stay by his side even just a moment longer.

"Wish Ellen and Tobho a happy Valentine's for me, will you?" she said to Gendry as the limo brought them ever closer to their destination, hoping for at least one final conversation.

"Sure, I'll do that."

"You told me a little while ago that they bought a business, how's that working out?"

Gendry's expression took on a look of excitement at the mention of Tobho's new business. "Great. They're doing just great. They've officially taken over the running of the workshop and I've never seen Tobho look so excited to be going to work in the morning."

"What kind of business is it?"

"I didn't tell you?"

"Not yet,"

"Oh," Gendry then immediately set about correcting the issue, telling her about the steel fabrication company and how Tobho had retained all of the staff when he bought the business. "Tobho says the staff have been very welcoming and that they're excited about the direction he plans to take the business in. He's getting back to his creative roots too. I think he did something in industrial design long ago and he's combining that with metalworks, somehow."

"Like, metal furniture?" Arya wondered.

"Something like that," Gendry replied with a nod. "Also outdoor furniture, ornamental lamps, shop fittings and functional industrial art type stuff."

"That's awesome," Arya said, genuinely pleased for Gendry's foster-parents.

"The best part is that Tobho says he's willing to teach me a few things, and maybe give me a part-time job while I'm still studying."

"Really?"

"Not immediately, but definitely once everything settles down and the business is running smoothly,
according to Tobho.

"I can sort of picture you all sweaty and hammering away at an anvil." Arya had eyed his biceps. "You'd probably be good at it, too."

Gendry laughed. "That's what I told Tobho! You should see the workshop, Arya. The machines they have are so high-tech, but they've also got a workshop that looks like it belongs in the middle-ages. I think it's kinda cool and I wish I could show it to you."

"So, show it to me." Arya heard herself say. "I'd like to see it."

Surprised, Gendry gave her a look. "What, tonight?"

Arya shrugged. "Do you have other plans after this?"

"No," Gendry shook his head. "But, are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, if that's what you want to do. Let's go," Gendry's face split into a grin. "I know the security codes to get in."

The chauffeur delivered them at the front of the hotel moments later, but instead of heading inside, Arya called her parents to tell them that Gendry would be taking her home before curfew, while she followed him to his car.

Thirty minutes later Gendry was pulling up in front an enormous warehouse in one of King's Landing's industrial districts. There was a brand new sign hanging above the doorway emblazoned with Steel Street Fabricators across it. Gendry punched in the security code to disable the alarms, and punched in another code to open the door.

Arya was reminded of the workshops at Stark Industries, with the distinct smell of burnt metal lingering faintly in the air. Gendry switched on only enough lights to allow them to see where they were going, which left a great portion of the office and workshop still in darkness.

"Be careful where you walk." Gendry warned her as he led her through the corridor of offices. "Tobho hasn't had the chance to fix the flooring in the offices yet, and some of the carpet is lifting at the corners."

Gendry led her towards a doorway at the rear of the offices, where he picked up a clean smock for guests hanging from a hook and held it out for her to wear. Arya slipped it over her dress as best as she could, and once Gendry had helped her fasten it, they entered the workshop.

"This is pretty cool," Arya said as she looked around the bench tops and work surfaces. "Father never let us walk through the workshops at his company."

"It's probably because Stark Industries operates at a much larger scale than this, and they'd have strict safety procedures around the place. Come on, the workshop I want to show you is over this way."

Gendry had not been kidding when he'd told her that the workshop looked like it belonged in the middle-ages. The forge was large, taking up a good portion of the workshop, with old-fashioned bellows, anvils and hammers, as well as an array of different tools that Arya had never seen before. She noted that even in his dapper suit, Gendry did not look out of place next to the soot-blackened forge.
Gendry now turned towards her, holding a pair of blacksmith's tongs in his hand. "How do I look?"

For a second her mind played a crazy trick on her and she did see an image of a bare-chested Gendry standing in front of her, sweaty, smeared with soot, and glorious. Arya blinked, and the image was gone.

"You're the best dressed apprentice there ever was."

Gendry reached out towards her with the tongs, as though to pinch her face with it, but Arya swatted his hand away and laughed. She took a step backwards to move away from him, but her heel snagged on the rough cement floor, and she gasped when she felt herself falling.

"Watch out!" Gendry shouted.

Except she never hit the ground, and when she looked up she saw that she was in Gendry's arms, and he was looking down at her with a relieved look on his face.

"I got you," he said, then gently set her back onto her feet.

Her heart still pounding from her near miss, Arya swayed on her high-heel covered feet, and Gendry tightened his hold on her. Arya's heart began to pound harder, and she knew that this time it was because of how closely Gendry was holding her. She could smell him now. He was wearing a cologne she didn't recognize, but underneath that was the scent she was familiar with and would always know as his.

She looked up at him again, and saw a tiny frown between his brows caused by his concern for her. Seeing that look on his face, knowing that at that moment all his concern was about her, reawakened the butterflies that had been fluttering in her stomach all evening, and a crazy wanting…a crazy longing suddenly threatened to overcome her.

The frown between his brows disappeared as Arya continued to stand in his arms, and Arya had no way of knowing just what kind of expression she was making, or how Gendry was just moments away from losing his control. She saw only the flash of blue in his eyes a second before he lowered his head down to hers and pressed his lips against hers.

Arya leaned into his kiss, her hands reaching up to hold onto his arms in surprise. The warning voice in her head was screaming at her, telling her to pull away, but she hesitated and in that moment of hesitation Gendry made her lips to part for him, thrusting his tongue into her mouth when they did. She tasted him, and she was dismayed when she realized that she had never forgotten what he tasted like, or how his lips felt against hers even though their first and only kiss seemed like a lifetime ago.

She wanted to respond, desperately wanting to kiss him back, but the screams in her head was deafening, insisting that she break the kiss and push him away. Arya made a noise, a sob, and suddenly Gendry was pulling back, breaking the kiss. He looked stricken for a moment, before his eyes darkened and regret crossed his features.

"What am I doing…?" he rasped, and firmly put her back on her feet.

He let her go, and Arya felt the loss of his embrace far too keenly. Gendry only took a few seconds to regain his calm, and a moment later he looked just as poised as he had all evening.

"Let's go," he said to her, "it's time I took you home."

It took her much, much longer to calm the beating of her heart.
Sandor

He arrived at *The Lion's Gate Hotel* an hour before he was supposed to be there. Partly it was because he was excited about seeing Sansa that night, and also because he wanted to be there to meet her in case the auction ended early. He had tried to dress nicely too, buying a new shirt to wear for the evening. He and Sansa had planned to keep the evening casual and he'd brought along the duffel bag she had given to him in advance containing her change of clothes.

He'd told her to leave the planning to him, but seeing the opulence of the hotel and the well dressed people who'd been going in and out of the *Acorn Ballroom*, Sandor wondered if he'd been an idiot for thinking he could plan something as exciting for their Valentine's date. Sansa had continued to tell him that anything was fine, but he'd seen too many memes about what girls really meant when they said 'anything is fine', all with horrible outcomes.

Sandor had loitered in the gleaming lobby for some time, but after one too many wary glances from patrons and the concierge, he had gotten up from the plush lounge he'd been occupying and chosen to wait outside. The last thing he needed was to be thrown out of the premises by security. Luckily the front entrance was under cover, and the night air was not as cold as he'd been expecting. While he waited, he went over his plan again.

He had dinner reservations at two places, just in case Sansa had something fancier in mind than his first option. Had had also checked and re-checked movie session times in three different cinemas in case Sansa really wanted to see a movie. If not, then he'd also made alternative plans for them to tour city sights, although he would be driving his Mustang instead of them being driven around in a limousine. The city sights he was thinking of were probably not on the list that the *Bachelor Auction* winners would be seeing either. Lastly, he had hopes that he and Sansa would…wait, don't get ahead of yourself. Sandor curtailed his runaway thoughts, and his libido. *One step at a time.*

It was while he was killing time watching funny clips of sports fails on YouTube that he noticed a familiar figure approaching the entrance of the hotel. The guy had the hood of his jacket up, covering his hair and looking down, but Sandor recognized him regardless. The guy raised his head as he was about to enter the hotel, and only then did he notice that he was being watched. He paused, then walked over to join Sandor where he waited behind an ornate statue of a massive lion rearing on his hind legs.

"The auction is still underway, yes?" Jaqen H'ghar asked him.

Sandor nodded and moved over to allow the guy more space. "Yeah, but I don't think it will be much longer."

"Why do you wait out here?"

Sandor gave him a look. "I'm underdressed."

Jaqen scoffed, but he looked as though he understood. "Then, I also am underdressed." Jaqen indicated his denim jeans and hooded jacket. "You will not mind if I wait out here with you?"

Sandor shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Jaqen leaned against the statue and settled in for the wait. "Your Sansa is expecting you tonight?"

"It's Valentine's Day," Sandor replied, "where else would I be?"

"Of course, of course…silly question."
"Isn't that why you're here? Arya's expecting you too, isn't she?"

Jaqen shook his head slowly. "She does not know that I am coming. I am supposed to be working tonight, but I managed to excuse myself for a few hours. I must still perform at the House later this evening."

"She'll be happy that you came," Sandor said, "even if only for a couple of hours."

"I hope so," Jaqen said quietly.

Sandor wasn't particularly interested at first, but the inflection of something –insecurity perhaps, or uncertainty– in Jaqen's voice piqued his curiosity.

"Are the two of you having issues?" Sandor asked, straightforward as ever.

Jaqen let out a chuckle. "You and I have never had the opportunity to talk, have we Hound?"

"We've never had a reason to," Sandor responded, "and there was a time you hated my guts."

"Ah, yes." Jaqen nodded, remembering the time he believed that Sandor was dating Arya. "It seemed completely bizarre at the time that Arya would choose to date you. I see now that you could never be her type."

"Why? Because I'm not pretty enough for her?" Sandor raised his brow. "Fuck you, you damned Faceless punk."

Jaqen chuckled again, because there had been no animosity in Sandor's tone. "No, it is because the two of you are much too alike."

"The fuck?" Sandor frowned. "How am I similar to the little bitch?"

Jaqen didn't flinch at the insult-slash-nickname that Sandor used to refer to his girlfriend. "Only that you both have fire in your veins, which makes you both very hot-tempered and impulsive people. That is not a bad thing, but I believe there should be balance in a relationship. If one is fire, the other must be ice. You understand?"

"I get what you're saying," Sandor grunted. "So if Arya is fire, then you're ice?"

"That is what I thought." Jaqen shrugged. "But, perhaps there is more fire in me than I realized."

"Which brings me back to my original question...are the two of you having issues?"

Jaqen sighed and ran a hand over his face. "I do not know anymore."

Sandor saw immediately that there was a ton of shit going on, and he saw the weight of it in the stoop of Jaqen's shoulders. He was the last person to be giving out advice, and he was certain Arya would not want him knowing about any of it, so he didn't ask the guy to elaborate. It was none of his business, in any case.

"Things will work out," was all Sandor thought to say.

"Yeah," Jaqen agreed in a flat voice. "What time is it? The auction must be over soon."

Sandor glanced at his phone and checked the time. "It's fifteen to seven. Sansa said seven the latest. They should be out soon."
Great.

Sandor's phone beeped and he excused himself to check the notification in case it was from Sansa. The notification turned out to be from Gossip Spyder, which he was about to ignore until he saw the name Gendry Waters in the headline. Sandor read the first line once, blinked, then read it again to see that he was not seeing things.

A record held for twenty years by Jaime Lannister has been broken by Gendry Waters, who attracted an impressive $150,000 winning bid from none other than Arya Stark!

Several thoughts ran through Sandor's mind at that moment, but the only thing he did was to turn and stare at the guy standing next to him.

"What is it?" Jaqen asked, noticing his stare.

"The auction just finished." Sandor put his phone back into his pocket.

"Not much longer to wait, in that case."

Sandor grunted in agreement and suddenly wished to be someplace else. What the fuck is Gendry doing in the auction? What the fuck is Arya thinking by bidding on him? What the fuck is she doing winning a date with another guy, when her fucking boyfriend is out here waiting for her?

Sandor's phone beeped again, and this time it was a text from Sansa asking where he was.

"I'm already here. Come out when you're ready." Sandor wrote back.

He saw no point in telling Sansa who was waiting outside the hotel with him, because there was nothing Sansa could do either. Arya was just going to have to deal with the mess she created on her own.

Fifteen minutes went by, and in those fifteen minutes Sandor debated telling Jaqen about Gossip Spyder's post, knowing what awaited the guy when the doors to the Acorn Ballroom eventually open, and what he would no doubt see. Fuck it. This has nothing to do with me! In the end, Sandor remained silent and chose to let the scene unfold however Fate intended it to.

It was like watching a bad daytime drama, Sandor thought when the scene finally played out in front of him. From the hotel entrance, both he and Jaqen watched through the polished glass as the large wooden doors to the Acorn Ballroom were pulled open by hotel staff. They first saw Joffrey, looking sour-faced as a grinning ferret-like girl clung to his arm. Sandor then recognized Beric Dondarrion and his girlfriend Allyria Dayne, followed shortly by Edric Dayne leading an unknown girl by her elbow. Robb Stark came through the doors next, smiling down at a pretty brown-haired girl. All of them were collecting envelopes from a member of the hotel staff and making their way to the elevators at the other end of the lobby.

The Tyrell brothers and their dates were next to come through the doors, followed by more people Sandor did not recognize. He thought he saw Gendry at first when a tall black-haired figure came through the door, and he held his breath with something like anticipation, but it turned out to be Renly Baratheon who was leading a very tall and muscular blonde in a pant-suit. Where the hell is Gendry and Arya?

"I think I might send Arya a message to let her know that I am here," Jaqen said, pulling out his phone from his pocket.

Sandor stopped him, holding the guy's arm.
"What is the matter?" Jaqen asked him.

Sandor pointed towards the lobby in silence.

Gendry and Arya had just walked out of the ballroom. Sandor saw that Arya's hand was tucked into the crook of Gendry's arm. She looked beautiful, she really did, and Sandor realized that he meant it. Gendry looked handsome, and every inch the dashing Baratheon he truly was. Both of them were smiling, completely oblivious to the eyes of Arya's boyfriend watching them. Completely oblivious to the pain, rage and disbelief that was suddenly clouding Jaqen's features.

Jaqen took a step towards the lobby, but Sandor tightened his grip on the guy's arm, preventing him from moving forward.

"Don't do it," Sandor grunted.

"You expect me to stand here and do nothing while my girlfriend walks away with another guy?" Jaqen hissed.

"Yes," Sandor replied, "that's exactly what you're going to do, and then you're going to walk away too."

"Walk away?" Jaqen looked at him as though he had two heads. "Walk away from this?"

"Yes," Sandor said again.

Jaqen's eyes narrowed. "Did you know?"


Jaqen swore then, in German, but Sandor didn't need to understand German to know what Jaqen was saying. It was awkward for both of them, but Sandor knew it was better for everyone if Jaqen just walked away. If nothing else, he had stopped Jaqen from starting a brutal confrontation with Gendry. Jaqen would have enough to deal with. He didn't need a public scene on top of it.

"You can let go. I am not going to do anything." Jaqen shrugged him off, perhaps realizing that Sandor spoke sense.

Sandor released him cautiously, and when he was satisfied that Jaqen wasn't going to move Sandor turned back to the lobby. He watched as Gendry and Arya stepped inside an elevator, and as the doors slid shut hiding them from view, Sandor heard the ragged breath that Jaqen released. His forehead creased into a frown as he turned his attention back to Arya's boyfriend, unsure what to do next. Jaqen continued to stare at the bank of elevators for a moment, his expression deceptively calm, before he eventually gathered himself together.

Jaqen turned to Sandor. "Do not tell her that I was here."

Sandor nodded, and without another word Jaqen turned and walked away, raising his hood back up over his head against the chill. Sandor noted that Jaqen's shoulders, broad as they were, looked far wearier than they had earlier. He felt a second of pity for the poor bastard.

A second later, his thoughts and concerns about Jaqen and Arya vanished into the night when his phone rang and Sansa's name flashed across his screen.

"Where are you?" Sansa asked him when he answered.
Sandor pushed through the hotel doors. "I'm walking into the lobby right now…"

His voice faded away when he came face to face with Sansa. She was standing in the lobby, her hand and phone still raised to her ear. Her mouth split into a broad grin when her blue eyes met his. Stunning, was the word that came to him. Sansa, in her frothy and diaphanous pink gown, had never looked so heavenly, and for several heartbeats all he could do was stare at the wondrous creature that was his girlfriend.

"Hi," Sansa greeted him when he finally dared to approach her. "I hope you weren't waiting too long."

"No, not too long." Sandor lowered his head to accept the kiss Sansa placed on his cheek.

"Good." Sansa held out her hand towards the bag he was still holding. "Could I have the bag, please? I need to get changed."

"Take your time," Sandor said as he handed her the duffel bag, thinking it a shame that he wouldn't get to enjoy seeing her in the pink dress for longer.

"I'll be quick."

Sansa returned from the powder room ten minutes later changed into a black, body hugging knit dress that clung to all her curves, ending at her knees. Over that, she wore an oversized grey sweater in a fuzzy fabric, and a pink scarf wound loosely about her neck. She had also swapped her high-heels for sleek black ankle boots. Sandor revised his earlier opinion, concluding that Sansa was stunning no matter what she was wearing.

"Are you ready?" Sandor asked as he took the duffel bag and the garment bag that now contained her pink gown within.

Sansa nodded. "Let's go. I've got so much to tell you!"

Sandor did not doubt it, and on their way to his car he listened as Sansa began to tell him about the biggest shock of the evening.

"I couldn't believe it when Gendry's name was called out, but then Arya went crazy and ended up bidding the entire sum that father had set aside for donations tonight. I swear, Arya would be dead a hundred times over if the looks Jazmine Choi was glaring her way could kill! Anyway, Robert Baratheon came over to speak with Gendry, and father and Stannis looked so worried…everyone was watching because it looked like Robert was going to be angry, but guess what he did?"

"What did he do?"

"He admitted in front of everyone that Gendry really is his son!"

"That's intense."

"It is," Sansa agreed, "and Arya…I don't know what got into her. She was looking so bored earlier this evening. Jaqen had to work tonight so she was going to stick around with our parents and brothers, but then Margaery and Jazmine got into this fierce bidding duel over Gendry and when it looked like Jazmine was in it for real, Arya just snapped or something…"

Sandor said nothing, and Sansa continued her rundown of the auction highlights. When they reached his car he carefully stowed her dress inside the trunk, before doing the gentlemanly thing and opening the passenger side door for Sansa, gently closing it after she was safely inside his Mustang.
He got in behind the steering wheel, and soon they were driving out of the city.

"Where are we going?" Sansa asked in between tales.

"Dinner," he said. "You get to choose, Italian or French?"

"Italian," Sansa replied, before continuing her stories.

Sandor heard about Joffrey's nearly disastrous auction and Sansa showed him the photo she had taken of Joffrey's expression when he realized who had won his company for the night. Sandor laughed far too loudly and far too long after seeing the photo. Animatedly, Sansa also described the first dance between the bachelors and winners, while Sandor made appropriate noises and comments when she asked for his opinion, glad to see that she was enjoying herself. She was talking non-stop and he didn't think she was paying attention to where they were going until he took an exit off the Kingsroad Expressway.

"Are we going to Flea Bottom?" Sansa asked suddenly.

"Ahuh."

"Are we going to Mama and Antonio's Trattoria?"

"Yeah, they do the best Italian food that I know."

"Yay!" Sansa clapped her hands in excitement. "We haven't been back there in so long. I can't wait!"

Sandor breathed a sigh of relief, pleased that the first part of his plan was on track. Sansa's excitement was palpable, and she practically jumped out of his car when he pulled to a stop at the undercover garage he always frequented. He couldn't help but be caught up in her enthusiasm when she grabbed his arm, practically bouncing as she walked beside him.

Serpentine Alley was crowded with couples. There were couples of all ages lining up outside the many restaurants and cafes, and holding hands as they climbed the steep narrow stairs that wound up into the cliffs. It felt so surreal to him that he was there, as part of a couple too.

Antonio was manning the door as usual and he greeted them with the warmth that Sandor had come to know.

"Buona sera!" Antonio opened his arms in a gesture of welcome. "Happy Valentine's!"

"Happy Valentine's, Antonio!" Sansa greeted the man.

"It's good to see you again, bella." Antonio said to her. "Sandor, why didn't you bring her back sooner?"

"We're here now." Sandor shrugged, aware of the all too knowing look in the man's eyes.

Antonio laughed and waved them inside. "In that case you chose a very special day to come for dinner. Come along, I have your table ready."

The cave-like interior, normally unadorned and simply furnished, had been transformed to reflect the occasion. There were roses on every table, and candles in silver holders. The usual white napkins had been replaced with red ones, and red table runners had been used as accents across the white tablecloth. It was all very romantic, and it had the desired effect on the ladies in the room, Sansa was no exception. His girlfriend's expression softened at the sight.
"This is beautiful," Sansa said, touching the petals of the roses on the table between them. "Thank you for bringing me back here, Sandor."

He nodded, staying silent because he was unsure what to say in return. Luckily, Mama arrived with a basket of bread and a plate of oil and balsamic vinegar, just as she had the first time he had brought Sansa there. Mama never usually came out of the kitchen, so Sandor strongly suspected that Mama came out specifically to observe Sansa, using the bread as an excuse.

"Buona sera," Sansa greeted the woman.

"Good evening! Good evening!" Mama grinned at them both, patting Sandor's shoulder firstly, then patting Sansa's shoulder in turn. "I am very happy you have come here for your date tonight! This old woman is very glad to see you together here again, especially on this special day."

"Yes, we're very happy to be here too." Sansa smiled back at the old woman.

"Now, I have special menu tonight. You must eat plenty, okay?"

"Yes, of course!" Sansa grinned, and Sandor nodded obligingly.

"Good, good!" Mama patted Sandor's shoulder once more, before she walked back towards her kitchen, muttering and chuckling to herself. "L'ho sempre saputo...sapevo fin dall'inizio..."

"What do you think she's muttering to herself?" Sandor wondered.

"No idea." Sansa smiled broadly, her eyes shifting sideways in a way that told Sandor that she was lying.

"You understand her, right? Or partly, anyway."

Sansa's nose wrinkled, caught out. "She's saying she knew all along that we were together."

"Hmm." Sandor was wondering what had given the old woman that idea, because he and Sansa were definitely not a couple the first time he had brought her there.

"Mama muttered something about how she could see it in the way I looked at you." Sansa turned pink in the cheeks. "I guess she must have seen it, even before we did, huh?"

Sandor fought the urge to reach over and run his thumb over her cheeks. Sansa looked unbelievably inviting. He recalled her telling him that she had been attracted to him for a long time, and he wondered if she'd been aware of that attraction that day.

"I guess so," he replied.

Antonio brought out starters of seared scallops on pea puree, and baby squid lightly fried and drizzled with herb oil. For their main they had crumbed veal with mushrooms, followed by a dessert of tiramisu. As per usual, Sansa did most of the talking while he sat and listened, but this...was them, and he was quite content with that.

They ended up lingering over their food longer than Sandor had planned for, and by the time they were ready to leave he was doubtful that they would make it in time to see any of the movies they preferred. Not if he still expected to have time to sit around and cuddle after the movie, he thought to himself honestly.

"No," Sansa replied when he asked her if she still wanted to see a movie, "I don't really feel like
spending the rest of Valentine's Day in a dark room full of other people."

"I'm glad you said that," Sandor said, then he got up from the table. "Let's go somewhere else."

Sandor paid for their meal as Sansa waved at Mama, who was watching them from the kitchen hatch. He then took hold of Sansa's hand and together they made their way back down Serpentine Alley, back to his car.

Sandor drove them through narrow riverside lanes that wound through River's Edge, eventually taking a turn into a street that began at the base of a mountain. The road gradually began to incline, getting steeper as they drove, weaving and winding through passages that had cut into the cliff. The higher they climbed, the fewer the houses became, and the further they seemed to get from civilization. After a point, they left behind the last of the streetlights and Sandor had to navigate the winding road just by the headlights of his car. The only noise around them was the rumble of the Mustang's engine and the music playing in the car.

The road leveled out and the land around them began to look wilder, with plants and trees growing unchecked along the side of the road. Some of the trees were so large and overgrown that they formed tunnels over the laneway where the branches of one tree entangled with another on the opposite side of the road.

"Where are we going, Sandor?" Sansa asked, looking out of her window and seeing only dense vegetation.

There was nothing around them at all to indicate what surprise he had in store.

"Somewhere I think you'll like," he replied cryptically.

Eventually, Sandor was forced to slow down when the paved road gave way to gravel and dirt, continuing some few hundred feet before they came upon an old gate. Sandor stopped the car and put the brakes on.

"Wait here," Sandor told her, then got out of the car and pushed the gate aside wide enough to fit his car through.

"Sandor?" Sansa asked after he had jumped back into the car.

"Almost there."

They cleared the gate, and Sandor once more got out of the car to shut the gate behind them.

"I'm really curious now," Sansa gave him a querying look as he continued to drive them along the gravel road.

The trees and grasses were thicker on this side of the gate, and Sandor proceeded slowly in the darkness. He had checked the place out a couple of nights before to make sure that it was safe, but he still drove slowly as a precaution. Sansa's gasp when they finally broke through the trees was worth all the effort.

"Oh, Sandor…" Sansa gushed as she sat up in her seat to see more of the view before them. "This is magical!"

They were on a headland overlooking the entire city of King's Landing, with a sheer drop of some three hundred feet below them. Sandor stopped the car a good distance from the edge of the cliff and triple checked that the brakes were engaged before he finally allowed himself to look at Sansa's face.
She was in complete awe of their surroundings.

Sansa was straining to peer over the hood of the car, one hand on the dashboard for balance and her lips partly opened as she took in the sweeping vista below.

"Do you want to take a closer look?" he asked her.

"Definitely!" Sansa nodded, quickly unbuckling her seatbelt and pulling the latch on the door.

Sandor swiftly came around to her side of the car and held open a throw blanket he'd bought just for this occasion.

"Wrap this around you, it's cold up here," he rasped, draping the woolen blanket about her shoulders.

"Thank you," Sansa smiled up at him as he tucked the ends of the fabric under her chin.

Taking her hand in his, they carefully walked towards the edge of the cliff, feeling the wind and the chill it carried against their faces and blowing their hair about their head. Below to their left was a sea of glittering lights, with the suburb of River's Edge sitting at the mouth of the river. The cliff and the lookout at the top of Serpentine Alley was also visible a hundred feet below. King's Landing's city centre, with its skyscrapers and highways glowed brightly in the distance. On the right was Blackwater Bay, with the sandy stretch of Blackwater Beach shining white under the moonlight further along the coastline. Further still, where there was another concentration of lights and buildings, was the expensive and ritzy district where the King's Gate Hotel could be found, and where the Baratheon residence, The Red Keep, was also located. Beyond the breakwater which was built to protect the beach, was the Narrow Sea.

"It really is pretty from up here," Sansa squeezed his hand as they got closer to the edge. "What is this place?"

"Rush Headland," Sandor replied. "The river spilling out into the bay is Blackwater Rush. As far as I know, this land we're on is private property."

"So, we're trespassing right now?"

He nodded, unconcerned. "Don't worry. I don't think anyone's been here in a long time. The lock on the gate pretty much crumbled when I touched it, so it's safe to say that no one checks on the place."

"How did you find out about this property?"

He shrugged. "I've always been curious about what was up here. You can see this cliff and the trees from the top of Serpentine Alley. I always wondered why it was so dark, when the headland across the bay is so built up. I took a chance and drove out here the other night because I had a hunch that the view would be…well, you can see that for yourself."

Sansa held his hand tighter as they finally stopped at the edge, as far as they dared. At some point in time there was once a wooden railing along the edge, but all that was left of it now were a handful of stumps in the ground, half hidden by long grass. Sandor stepped behind Sansa and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her securely to his chest.

For a time all they did was stare at the scenery in silence, watching the lights of the city and the waves lapping at the shore. Sandor couldn't remember a time where he had ever felt more comfortable in the presence of another human being, let alone a girl. He had been worried that his Valentine's date plans were not going to be enough to please her, but it looked like he needn't have worried.
"I'm really glad you brought me here," Sansa whispered, her breath misting in the cool air as she spoke. "I guess you know by now that I like pretty views. In all probability, we might be the first people to have seen this view from this very spot in a long time. I think there's something wondrous about that."

"Is that so?" he rasped above her head.

Sansa nodded, the movement causing her hair to flutter under his nose, and he caught the familiar citrusy sweetness of her shampoo. "Don't laugh, but it's like rediscovering Tutankhamun's tomb—"

Sandor snorted with laughter, which promptly earned him an elbow to the ribcage.

"–I'm serious, Sandor." Sansa continued with a giggle. "Okay, so that example may have been overkill, but you get what I'm trying to say, right?"

"Yeah, little bird." Sandor gave her a gentle squeeze. "I know what you mean."

The lonely cliff they stood on had been forgotten and neglected for so long that people no longer remembered that it had such breathtaking views over the city and the bay. Maybe they really were the first ones to visit in a long time, but Sandor had another thought in mind, which was no less wondrous.

He was sharing this moment with her. Together.

The wind picked up, carrying with it the scent of the ocean. Sansa shivered in his arms, despite the blanket, and Sandor knew it would only get colder as the night grew later.

"Let's go back into the car, you'll be warmer there."

Sansa did not protest and shortly the two of them were seated in the backseat of his Mustang. All it took was one look from Sansa, and Sandor was pulling her onto his lap. She shivered again as his mouth came down on hers, and it had nothing to do with the cold.

"Touch me," Sansa murmured against his lips, and he didn't need to be told twice.

It was more than cozy in the confines of his car's backseat, and Sandor was careful as he repositioned Sansa on his lap so that she straddled him, her knees on either side of his thighs. Face to face again, he resumed kissing her while his hands slowly unwound her scarf from her neck and shoulders. When her shoulders were exposed he wasted no time in covering them with kisses, from the spot behind her ear to the dip in her collarbone.

Sansa's fingers curled into his hair at the nape of his neck, and she let out a soft moan when he caught her earlobe between his teeth. He found her lips again and Sansa shifted on his lap, causing the fabric of her knitted dress to hitch higher up her thighs. Sandor's hands pushed them the rest of the way, bunching the skirt around her waist and exposing the length of her legs to his exploring hands. He caught a slim ankle in his palm, and with deft fingers he worked her boot off, before repeating the process with her other foot. Sansa wriggled closer once her feet were bare, kneeling above him so that she could remove her sweater, then coming back down onto his lap, grinding her hips into his.

It was his turn to let out a moan then, and his hands found their way up along her thighs, before cupping her buttocks, flexing his fingers over the lace covering her skin as he lifted his hips upwards,
making her aware of the growing hardness of his arousal. Sansa responded as she had done numerous occasions before, moving her lower half to accommodate him, her torso undulating under his caress and pressing her breasts to his chest. They had done this before, but both of them were aware that something was different that night, and vividly so.

There had always been an invisible line drawn when it came to how intimate they dared to be, and at times they had come close to crossing that line, but one of them always held back. At that moment, Sandor wasn't sure either of them wanted to hold back.

"Sansa…" Sandor eased his mouth from her lips. "Are you sure about this?"

"I'm sure," she said, kissing his neck.

"If we do this, there's no going back."

"I know."

Sandor tried to ignore the feel of her lips against his skin, and he desperately tried to reign in his hormones, just in case Sansa changed her mind.

"Have you really thought it through?" he asked, giving her another chance to change her mind because he really didn't want her to regret her decision.

Sansa pulled back, her chest heaving as she gazed at him with serious eyes. "I have, Sandor. I've thought about this over, and over again, and I really want to do this with you."

"Sansa–"

"Why are you hesitating, Sandor? I know you're not a virgin." Sansa stated abruptly, catching him by surprise. "I know you're not."

They had never talked about this topic before, and he didn't know how to respond, unsure of the direction of her thoughts, but he didn't deny it.

"No," he said, confirming her statement. "I'm not."

Sandor was not a virgin, much to his own surprise. He'd been on the school varsity team since he was fifteen and had been to many of the ritual, post-game parties that were held at the houses of various teammates. His first time had been at one such event when he had been a sophomore. Some girl—an older relative, a sister or cousin he couldn't recall, of a former teammate who'd been visiting from out of town—had thrown herself at an intoxicated Sandor, and then dragged him into an empty bedroom. Rendered speechless at the older girl's boldness, he'd managed to ignore the fact she'd never looked him in the face the entire time she'd used him.

To his much greater surprise, that girl would not be the only one. Other girls had followed and he suspected that his notoriety was what drew them. That, or they were just too drunk to care. He'd never bothered to ask. He couldn't remember what any of them looked like, anyhow. None of them had cared to look at his face.

Sansa dipped her head, still straddling him, and she seemed to be working up the nerve to ask him something. Her hands slipped from around his neck, down to his chest where she started playing with the buttons on his shirt. When she did start speaking, he could almost see the words above her head like a cartoon bubble.

"And, um...how...?" *How many girls have you been with?*
"Not as many as you think."

"Did you use...?" *Protection?*

"Every time."

"When was...?" *When was the last time you hooked up with someone?*

"Long before I met you."

"How many...?" *HOW MANY GIRLS HAVE YOU BEEN WITH?*

"Single digits," Sandor rasped, uncomfortable under her scrutiny but determined to answer her. "But, before you ask for details just remember that I won't lie to you, so don't ask if you think you won't like my answer. I don't want you mad at me for stuff that happened way before I met you."

Sansa undid and redid his buttons for the third time. Her mouth was a thin line and tight as she fought the thoughts inside her head.

"Did you care about them?" she finally managed.

She's jealous! He suddenly realized, and something warm and fuzzy began to unfurl in his chest, threatening to ruin his composure. At the same time, his discomfort increased with her line of questioning, so he decided he would lay it all out on the table, however awful the truth was.

"They were one night deals," he stated bluntly. "I didn't care about them, and they probably felt the same about me. They used me, I used them. I don't even remember their names."

"Were they girls from school?" Sansa looked stricken at the thought.

He grimaced. "No fucking way. Other schools, college girls even, but never from KL Prep. Don't shit where you eat, you know?"

Her hands stilled on his chest. "You really don't do the whole dating thing, then?"

Sandor's fingers flexed where they gripped her hips. "No, I don't do relationships...I never did, before you."

There was a moment of silence after his words, and Sandor found himself holding his breath, fearing he'd killed the mood, and he readied himself for whatever happened next. There was a frown between Sansa's brows as she considered the things that Sandor had just told her, and he knew that she was probably having an internal argument with herself.

At last Sansa raised her head to look at him again, and Sandor saw that her expression had cleared, the frown had vanished and that she was wearing a little smile that made him go all warm in his chest again. And then she slipped her arms around his neck and hugged him, burying her face into the crook of his neck.

"I'm your first," she murmured into his neck, "I'm your first girlfriend."

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**Sansa**

Sansa drew herself closer against Sandor's chest possessively. *Mine now,* she thought. Jealousy had rippled through her, unexpected, gut clenching and foul tasting when he'd told her about the girls he'd been with. This was a different kind of jealousy to what she'd experienced when she'd thought
he was dating Arya. This jealousy was much more primal, coming from a place deep within her, and unlike anything she'd ever felt before. She'd seen images of faceless girls in his arms, and she'd felt such malevolence towards these girls she'd never met from Sandor's past. Hated them for having him first, for having kissed him, for knowing him in ways she still did not.

Yet he was right, she couldn't get mad at him for his past. She had been prepared to hear the worst, in any case. She'd heard the rumors about him at school, and even though she knew better than to put too much faith in rumors and gossip, she knew that Sandor was still a red-blooded male with very human needs. Despite what she knew Sandor to be capable of, nothing could change how she felt about him.

She accepted him for who he was, his history included.

*He's here with me, now.* That was the really important thing. *He's here with me, and he's crazy about me.* Sansa lifted her head and smiled at him again.

"I still want you," she said softly.

The uncertainty that had taken over Sandor's features and clouded his eyes lifted at her words. Sandor shifted beneath her, and he cleared his throat.

"Are you sure?" he asked, and Sansa heard several questions in his words.

*Are you sure you really want to be here with me? Are you sure you still want me, after hearing the truth about me? Are you sure you want me to be your first?*

"Yes," she replied, "I'm absolutely, one hundred percent certain. I want you, Sandor. I want your… to be your… to have your… *everything.*"

She didn't care if her last sentence was bordering on incoherent and ineloquent, because Sandor understood her nonetheless. Sandor drew back and clenched the back of her head in his palm, tilting her face up to his so he could look into her eyes. His expression was a mix of amusement and shock.

"You don't want much, do you?"

Sansa laughed. "No, not much at all."

Sandor pressed a kiss to her forehead. "It's all yours, Sansa. Everything I have."

Sansa pulled his face down to hers, and once again she was kissing him deeply, but with a fierceness that was new to both of them. Her hands were roaming over his chest and shoulders again, then tugging at his jacket until he relented and removed it at her insistence, throwing it to the floor. She attacked the buttons on his shirt next, her fingers fumbling as her excitement and nervousness began to build. Undoing the final button, she unclasped his arms from around her with some urging, and she fingered the lapels of his shirt before she started tugging them aside.

"Sansa…" Sandor pulled back from the kiss when she made a noise of impatience, seeing her attempting to undress him.

"I want it off," she said, succeeding in getting his shirt supremely stuck around his shoulders. "Now!"

He obliged and pulled it off his shoulders, tossing it to join his jacket on the floor of the car. Sansa took in the planes and shadowed grooves of his chest and abdominal muscles and bit into the bottom of her lip. She'd admired his physique for months, and yet she didn't think she'd ever get tired of
seeing him without a shirt.

Her fingers stroked across his collarbone, down his sternum and down the groove that separated his six-pack. A pulse at the base of his neck caught her attention, and she gave in to the urge to lick it.

"Fuck!" Sandor groaned when her tongue flicked over the sensitive skin on his neck. "Sansa."

She'd started to suck on his skin, and he knew she'd give him a hickey if he didn't stop her, but he made no move to do so. Instead, he encouraged her by cupping her ass cheeks and giving her a firm squeeze.

"Sandor…" Sansa whimpered when she finally released his neck. "Sandor, I…"

"Are you sure you want to do this here? You really want your first time to be in the backseat of my car?"

"Yes, Sandor." Sansa kissed his bare chest. "I want to do it here, and now."

"As you wish."

Sandor then reached for another blanket that he'd tucked under the seat and with some maneuvering he spread it out over the seat.

"Leather's cold," he said when she gave him a knowing glance.

He dropped his head and kissed her again, and Sansa pushed herself up to deepen the kiss, reaching up with her free arm to grasp the back of his neck. She felt as Sandor reached for the zipper on the back of her dress, and felt him pulling the tab downwards. As the fabric of her dress parted, the cool air touched her skin causing her to shiver. Sandor urged her to lift up her arms so that he could pull it up and over her head, leaving her in nothing but a lacy, strapless bra and panties. He brushed his hands over her breasts, cupping them lightly, and though she could feel the heat of his hand through the lace, she didn't want anything getting in his way.

"Take it off me," she whispered.

He made short work of unclasping her bra, and soon she was sitting on his lap half naked.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he rasped, his large hands again at her breasts, kneading them and rolling her nipples under his thumb one at a time.

Sansa wished she didn't blush so easily, and felt her cheeks warm at the gruffness in his voice. His eyes were raking over her body. He shifted them so that Sansa leaned backwards slightly, supported by his arms, and she watched as he bent his head so that he could take one of her breasts in his mouth. With no one around to hear her, Sansa moaned loudly as his warm tongue flicked over her pebbled nipple. The contrast between the scarred and unscarred texture of his lips against the sensitive skin of her breast caused heat and pleasure to shoot throughout her body, making her acutely aware of the moisture forming between her legs.

Sandor eased her down so that she lay on her back along the blanket. Sansa watched him, breathing heavily as he ran his hands over her thighs, gasping when his fingers dipped into the valley between her thighs, rubbing his fingers over the lace that covered her there, his fingers creating a sizzling buzz along her skin wherever he touched her. She knew what he was going to do, and she began to shiver with anticipation. His fingers hooked into the waistband of her underwear.

"Lift your hips a second."
She did as he told her, and Sandor eased her panties down her legs, tossing it on top of her discarded dress. She had never been this naked in front of him before, but the shyness she was expecting never came.

"Cold?" he asked when she shivered.

"No," she replied, she was the exact opposite.

The hand on her thigh pried her legs apart, exposing her to his eyes, and the hunger she saw on his face only made her bolder. Sansa spread her knees wider, and she nudged his elbow with her toes.

"I believe we have unfinished business..." Sansa smiled up at him wickedly.

With a raspy chuckle, Sandor reached between her thighs and stroked her lips with gentle fingers, finding her already damp. He manoeuvred his large frame within the limited space so that he could kneel between legs, his knees on the car floor while bracing himself with his elbow against the seat. Sandor began to stroke her with his fingers, finding the sensitive button amid her folds and flicking his thumb over it again and again, eliciting soft moans from her throat.

Sansa's eyes had fluttered shut despite her desire to watch what he was doing to her, feeling something warm uncurling in the pit of stomach as she focussed on the sensation of his fingers running down, over and along her. She felt the seat shake as Sandor moved, and her eyes flew open when she felt a searing warmth over her sex.

"Sandor!" she gasped, her hand reaching out to grasp his shoulder.

His head was between her thighs and for the first time she experienced the delicious heat caused by his mouth and tongue as he tasted and teased her into deliriousness. Her eyes fluttered shut again, and her fingers tightened on his shoulders as the pressure in her belly continued to build. Inanely, she wondered why she had waited so long to have Sandor repay her this favour. Momentarily, she felt an intrusion at the entrance of her sex, and she inhaled as Sandor carefully began to ease the tip of his longest finger inside her. Instinctively, she squirmed against the invasion.


Her eyes opened, and he met her stare. He continued to push his finger inside of her, watching her face for signs of discomfort, easing off when he sensed she was in pain.

"Don't stop!" Sansa begged him.

He pushed his finger as far as it would go, cupping his palm over her mound. Slowly, he began to move his finger in and out of her, and when she thought she was getting used to the sensation, he lowered his mouth to lap at her once again. Sansa bucked against him, unsure how much more she could take. The combined sensations of his mouth and hands were proving almost too much, and Sandor did not let up the barrage on her senses until her trembling became dangerously uncontrollable.

He stopped, and she whimpered, but quietened when she saw him unbuckling his belt. Sansa watched as he shucked off his pants and underwear, and as he retrieved a condom from a pocket in his jacket. She watched him tear into the foil and as he rolled the condom over himself, before he carefully lay himself between her legs, moving as best as he could in the confined space.

He was watching her face, once more looking for any sign of hesitation on her part, but all Sansa did was to reach up and wind her arms about his neck.
"Tell me if it hurts," he rasped, before he took himself in hand and began to guide himself inside her.

Sansa felt the solid hardness of him at her womanhood, making her jump at the unfamiliar contact. Sandor's eyes never left her face, and she returned his stare, wanting him to watch her expressions as she gave him her virginity.

Slowly, he lowered himself and thrust into her. Sansa gasped as the head of his erection entered her, biting her lip against the sudden discomfort. Sandor frowned when he saw the pain on her face, but he did not let up. He continued to push inside her, pulling her against him when she cried out, holding her when he was completely inside her.

Sandor looked down at her, his elbows braced against the seat on either side of her head. For a time all he did was hold her, and gradually he noted that the look of pain on her features began to diminish as her body became accustomed to his.

"That wasn't as bad as I thought it would be," she said, and a look of relief flooded Sandor's eyes.

He lowered his head and began to kiss her again, and after a moment he began to move his hips. Sansa sighed as he drew back from her, gasping as he came into her again, all the while recognising that pleasure was beginning to overtake whatever pain and discomfort she had felt when he'd first come inside her. He was taking care to be really gentle with her, never dropping his full weight onto her in case he hurt her, and listening to the sounds she made as he learned how deep and how fast she liked it.

Soon however, Sansa could tell that the position was difficult for him.

"Change positions, Sandor," she told him, "however you want."

Looking grateful, he pulled out of her momentarily before scooping her up in his arms, shifting their positions so that he sat in the middle of the back seat with Sansa astride him once more, facing each other. Instinctively knowing what to do, Sansa raised herself to her knees and reached between them to grasp Sandor's erection, before carefully impaling herself down on him.

Sandor groaned as her weight settled on his hips, before he wrapped his hands on either side of her waist as he began to thrust upwards into her warmth. Sansa met him with downward strokes of her own, grinding her hips against his. The sensation was different again in this new position, and Sansa found that she liked being able to return the pressure of Sandor's thrusts in this way.

Sandor was able to place kisses along her neck and shoulders this way too, which he did, causing her to writhe against him. It wasn't long before she felt the heat burning her belly, and the pressure building in her groin where Sandor's body connected with hers.

"Don't hold back," he told her, "when you feel it, don't hold back."

Her hips stopped moving, and Sandor seemed to know that she wasn't far. She felt her internal muscles begin to tighten around his length, and he wrapped his arms around her back and waist before he increased the speed and strength of his movements. The sensation was intense and Sansa whimpered against him, seeing stars forming behind her eyes.

"Sandor...I'm..."

Sansa felt fireworks igniting from deep inside her body and her head rolled back, shuddering against him as she was overcome by the sensation.

With a grunt, Sandor tightened his arms around her back and hips, pulling her down to meet his
rough upward thrusts, burying his face into her hair as he finally came undone inside her. Sansa felt his teeth against her neck as he continued to shudder against her, his movements creating little shocks of bliss throughout her body, the friction of their bodies enough to prolong the buzz of her climax.

They held each other in that position until their racing pulse had returned to normal, and until the cold air began to bite at their naked, perspiration flecked skin. Sansa pulled back from Sandor at his urging so that he could grab the other blanket to wrap around her shoulders before he cleaned up and began to reach for their clothes.

He smiled at her, and she saw that he looked exhausted, and happily so. There was a defencelessness about him them, and he looked more unguarded than ever. She was fairly certain that no one had ever seen this expression on his face before, or witnessed him in this state.

Sansa returned his smile. In other ways, she had been Sandor's first too.
Episode 36 "Growing Pains"

Chapter Notes

We're on the final arc guys...! There's heartache ahead (there always is in this fic!), but we're on the home stretch, and SS Gendrya will soon be sailing off into the sunset!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Gossip Spyder

OMG! OMG! OMG!

Where do I even begin to start! The Bachelor Auction just gave us one surprise after another…my mind is still reeling!

Let's start with the biggest and most obvious one – Gendry Waters is 100% the son of Robert Baratheon! If the man himself coming out and admitting it in front of everyone present at the Acorn Ballroom last night doesn't convince you, then nothing will! Of course, many keen-eyed observers have written to me in the last twelve hours saying that there were signs pointing to this conclusion all along and if we'd all just paid a little closer attention we would have made the connection sooner. I agree!

There was that leaked recording of the Tyrells speaking to Gendry, sightings of Gendry with his cousin Shireen Baratheon, then sightings of him in the company of his uncle Stannis, and those very telling arguments with half-brother Joffrey about Gendry connecting with half-sister Myrcella on social media…it all fits, and oh my goodness have you seen the articles in this morning's news and media outlets? I'll post links for those wanting to read about them…all I can say is that Gendry's life will never be the same again – anonymity be gone! Still, the question remains as to who leaked Gendry's birth certificate to the media in the first place. Perhaps, we'll never know.

I'll repeat my news from last night about Gendry's record breaking $150,000 selling price to Arya Stark, and while it is very admirable of her and her family to be donating such a huge sum of money to charity, I wonder how Arya's boyfriend Jaqen H'ghar feels about her spending her evening with another guy, especially on Valentine's Day? I'd heard that Arya and Gendry were close friends, but this might be a step too far…hmmm…it certainly makes you wonder!

In other news, the second highest selling price of the night went to Robb Stark, who was purchased by Jeyne Westerling – daughter of Gawen Westerling, CEO of the Westerling Gold Trading Ltd. In what came as a shock for many, including the guy himself, the lowest selling price for the night went to Joffrey Baratheon, who at first appeared to fail at attracting an opening bid. It could have ended very badly for him, but luckily for his chosen charity, he eventually sold to Miss Frey One (seriously, I don't know her name there are that many Frey granddaughters around!) for forty thousand dollars.

All in all, over $2 Million was raised at the auction last night, which is a fantastic outcome for all sixteen charities that were represented. Congratulations to all the winning bidders last night, I hope you had fun ladies! Bachelors, thank you for donating your time – and I'll say that some of my faith in humanity has been restored when I think of the people and children that will benefit from the generosity of everyone who contributed towards that $2 Million. Have a blessed day to you all!
The photos I took on the night have been posted in my gallery, so take a peek if you're curious and don't forget to stay tuned for more gossip, delivered to you fresh as they unfold!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

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**Arya**

Her stomach had been in knots all morning as a result of the sleepless night she'd had, coupled with the guilt that had been gnawing at her conscience from the moment Gendry's lips had touched hers.

*Stop lying to yourself:* Arya bit her lip. She'd had hours now to reflect on her actions, and hours to come to terms with the emotions she'd been trying to ignore for so many weeks.

She had feelings for Gendry, and this time there was no mistaking it for what it was. She was attracted to him, and her feelings went beyond friendship. What she felt for him now made the budding attraction she'd had months earlier seem like a drop in the ocean. She couldn't explain why she suddenly felt this way about him, and all she could do was think and contemplate. Perhaps she had always felt that way about him but never realized it. Perhaps there was always the potential for her to feel this way for him, but she never gave it a chance. *Perhaps it was always supposed to be Gendry all along.*

And then she would be overcome by guilt so intense she felt as though she was being suffocated. *What about Jaqen? What have I been feeling for him all this time? Is it possible to have feelings for two guys at once? Feelings like this?* The answer seemed like an obvious and overwhelming yes, but Arya was aware of the differences between her feelings for Gendry and Jaqen. All those months ago, the differences had seemed so small, almost imperceptible to her, but she couldn't ignore them now. It hurt her, coming to realize her feelings at this moment, because she also came to understand how much pain she had caused…and continued to cause the two guys who'd been nothing but upfront with her about their own feelings.

Arya looked at the clock on her table, and as though on auto-pilot, she got ready to meet Jaqen. He had texted her early that morning, and his message had filled her with dread, compounding her guilt.

"We must talk." Jaqen had written, asking her to text him back with a time and that he would pick her up when she was ready.

She knew that Jaqen was aware of how she had placed the highest winning bid in the history of the Valentine's Day Bachelor Auction on Gendry. She knew too that Jaqen was aware of how she'd spent the evening in Gendry's company. Even if Gossip Spyder hadn't broadcast it, Jaqen would have seen it posted all over social media, or printed in every newspaper in King's Landing, Braavos and Essos City. Arya knew very well what Jaqen wanted to talk about, and Arya's heartstrings were just as knotted as her stomach.

She heard the crunching of gravel outside her window when Jaqen pulled up in his Jeep. Arya gave herself a final look in her mirror, noting the shadows beneath her eyes, and took a deep breath. Jaqen deserved answers, and most of all, he deserved her honesty.

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**Jaqen**

He had not slept. He was too tense, too wound up and his mind was far too agitated for him to sleep.
Somehow, after he'd walked away from The Lion's Gate Hotel, he'd made it back to the House of Black & White in time to play their set, and even managed to go around speaking to guests for a time. However, something about his behavior must have been strange because Uncle Otto had asked Ky to see him home not long after.

Ky had known. Brea had told him about Gossip Spyder's post.

"Are you going to be okay?" had been the only question Ky had asked him.

"I will handle it," Jaqen had told his friend.

"I can't believe she'd do something—"

"She has her reasons." Jaqen had spoken over him, not wanting to hear anyone speak badly about her.

Ky had understood. "Okay, man. Call if you need anything."

Jaqen had lain on top of his bed for most of the night staring at his ceiling, seeing nothing but the unfamiliar smile that Arya had been wearing for Gendry Waters. She had looked beautiful, far lovelier than any girl he had ever met, and the sight of her as she'd walked away on the arms of someone else had felt like a thousand knives piercing his heart all at once.

The longer he had stared at the ceiling, the clearer his thoughts had become, and as the pieces of his fractured relationship with Arya began to fit together, he came to realize that he'd been trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle in the way he'd wanted it to be. He had never really seen the picture for what it was. What he'd been trying to build, was very different to the picture he now saw.

The knives in his chest had lodged deeper into his heart, and by the time he'd pulled his jeep up to the gates of Chateau Maegor he'd found it near impossible to breath. Arya looked as drawn and wan as he felt, and with barely a nod at each other he began to drive with no particular destination in mind.

Jaqen glanced at her from the corner of his eyes, seeing her fists clenched at her thighs. He wondered if events at the auction had been different, if Arya had never raised her hand, how long would he and Arya have continued to pretend that the fractures in their relationship did not exist. They were supposed to be going on a date that day, but instead they were heading towards an inevitability that he didn't want to face.

However, both of them knew that they could not avoid this conversation, and when Jaqen neared Trident's Bend, he pulled the jeep to a stop at a park beside the river. He indicated for Arya to follow him as he got out of the vehicle, and in silence they walked for a time along the picturesque path that ran beside the river. They came to a wooden platform looking out over the water, and Jaqen took a seat on a bench nearby. Arya sat beside him, yet it was a while longer before either of them spoke.

"I'm sorry, Jaqen," Arya said after a time, her voice sounding flat.

Jaqen sighed slowly, looking out over the water. "I am sorry too."

"Why are you apologizing?" she asked him, "I'm the one at fault."

"It is not as simple as that, Arya. It is not as simple as laying the blame at someone's feet."

"What are you talking about?" Arya's brows knit together in confusion. "We're sitting here having this conversation because I messed up, and I've hurt you…and I've embarrassed you on top of
"I do not care about Gossip Spyder's post," he declared. "What I care about is what happens to us now. I now finally understand what it is that frightened me so much…why I did not want to leave you here and go to New York."

"You were frightened about leaving me?"

"I was." Jaqen nodded. "I hated the thought of leaving you here, because I knew how close you already were with him. I was afraid that without me being here, you would spend more and more time with him…and I was afraid that you would eventually come to realize how you truly felt for him."

"Jaqen, I…"

"And, you did." Jaqen's voice came out low and hollow and empty. "I have known it for some time now, Arya. Even before you knew it yourself."

"How?" Arya gazed at him with bewildered eyes. "How did you see it, when I didn't?"

"The signs were always there," Jaqen replied in the same hollow tone. "Right from the start it was always a competition between him and I. That is why I fought so hard for your attention…why I tried so hard to make you look at me more than you looked at him. I knew he was your friend, and I could always see that he was special to you, and for a while I had succeeded in fooling myself that your concern for him, how his moods influenced your own, and your willingness to rush to his side the moment he needed you—even though you had chosen me—were all actions of friendship. But I cannot continue to fool myself."

"Please, don't say anymore," Arya rasped, "I know what I've done. You don't need to say anymore."

"But I do," he insisted, "because I do not think you understand how things really are as they stand right at this moment."

"Jaqen, please…"

"I saw the changes in you, even before last night." Jaqen looked down at her face. "Did you know, you smile at him in a way you never have for me?"

Arya's eyes widened at his words, and Jaqen realized that the truest face she had ever worn was the one she wore when she was around her family…and Gendry Waters.

"I don't know what I can say to you," Arya whispered.

"Just tell me that we are through," he said roughly, "because I need to hear you say it." The line of Arya's mouth thinned, and he could see that she was distressed by his request. The corner of his mouth lifted cynically. "It is too late to worry about sparing my feelings, don't you think?"

Her gaze faltered at the harshness of his tone, but she recovered, and when she spoke her voice bore the barest of trembles.

"You already know it. Why are you asking me to –?"

"Say it,"

"It's over," Arya bit out, her eyes turning away from him. "I'm so sorry, Jaqen…I never meant to hurt
you."

He believed her, but at that moment her words counted for little when his heart was shattering inside his chest. Jaqen stood up and leaned heavily against the railing, staring at his reflection in the water below. He'd been through breakups before, had even written songs about it, but he now realized that he had never understood the pain…never experienced the absolute feeling of helplessness that overcame him, knowing that the girl he loved was in love with someone else.

Fate was not on their side this time. What he often chose to ignore about Fate was that she was also the bearer of unpleasant tidings. If things were meant to come to an end…they ended.

It hurt so, so much, and it was a long moment before he could bring himself to turn back around to look at her. When he did, he saw that Arya was sitting perfectly still, but because he knew her, because he'd observed her every expression from the day he'd first met her, he could see that she was splintering, splitting at the seams just as he was.

"I loved you," he heard Arya whisper. "In my own way, I know that I loved you."

Jaqen ran his hand through his hair and turned away from her again so that she wouldn't see the tears smarting at his eyes. "That is the first time you have ever said that you loved me."

"I'm so sorry…that's all I can say."

The tears did not fall, because he didn't let them. "I know…I know. For what it is worth, I felt the same for you."

"You never told me."

"But, you knew," Jaqen said softly.

Arya nodded. Jaqen regretted never having said the words to her during happier times. Even though it was in his every action, his every touch and kiss, and in the songs he'd written for her, they did not replace the significance of speaking those three little words out aloud. I love you. They were words he could not say now, not without the risk of completely falling apart.

"Why didn't you break up with me?" Arya asked him. "When you saw that I'd changed, why didn't you say anything?"

"Because I did not want what we had to end," he replied, "I chose to see only what I wanted to see, but in the end the truth refused to be ignored."

"Maybe it would have been better if we'd never –"

"Do not say it." Jaqen interrupted her. "Do not speak those words out aloud."

Maybe it would have been better if we'd never got together. He would not allow her to negate everything they'd ever experienced by even thinking about it.

"This hurts, Jaqen." Arya sobbed. "I hate that I'm making you feel like this, and it sucks, but if we never…you wouldn't…we wouldn't be like this."

"Are you saying that you and I were a mistake?" he asked her.

"Aren't we?"

"You and I were not a mistake, Arya," Jaqen said.
"Then what would you call…this?" she indicated the two of them, though she meant far more than that. She meant for him to understand that she was referring to the breaking down of what they were, what they had been.

"We were not a mistake," he said again, "we were perfect, for a time. We were laughter, and passion…tears, too. I do not care what you call us, but it is not a mistake that I came to care for you, and that you became so special to me. What you felt for me was not a mistake. Call it an experience, call it a short-lived romance…call me your first love…but we were not a mistake."

Arya wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. "I'm sorry that I couldn't be what you wanted me to be."

He smiled at her wistfully. She was everything he wanted her to be. He would not change a thing about her…including her heart. He had chosen to pursue her despite knowing that her heart –her affections– had been divided right from the start. To some extent he'd even been prepared for rejection when his rivalry with Gendry had been at its peak. When Arya had chosen him over Gendry, he'd been so happy he did not have words to describe it.

Arya had always been ruled by her heart, and it was because he'd admired how freely she seemed to follow her emotions that he came to love the freedom of her spirit too. Arya's heart had never belonged to him, not the way he wanted. He knew this, yet he still did not want to change that part of her which he admired the most.

She was not meant for him. Not at that moment.

In the long hours that he'd lain awake, he'd also come to understand why Arya's heart had never truly been his. Arya had loved him, she'd said as much, but her affections for him were borne from a first crush…adoration. He'd experienced many crushes of his own to know that they didn't last, and like most crushes, her crush on him had fizzled out in the wake of another. He had wanted more. He was not asking for a declaration of undying love, but he wanted far more than the adoration of a girl's first serious crush. What Arya had felt for him, was simply not enough.

He reminded himself that she was only fourteen, and he'd be nineteen in a few weeks. He'd never believed that the difference in their ages had mattered before, but now it was a fact that he couldn't ignore. Arya had only started to become aware of what her heart was capable of feeling. She wasn't ready for what he wanted.

*Not yet. Not now.*

"It will be a long time before I get over you," he told her.

"But, you will." Arya stated. "You're Jaqen H'ghar."

Her little statement confirmed to him what he had painfully suspected. *You're Jaqen H'ghar.* Arya had said that to him once before in a voice filled with awe and wonder…and adoration. Suddenly, being near her became almost unbearable, and he wanted this moment to end so that he could find someplace to lick his wounds in private.

"Let me take you home," he said, "I think we have said all that needs to be said."

Arya shook her head. "Go without me."

"I cannot just leave you here,"

"Trident's Bend is just around the corner, I can make my own way home from here."
"Arya…"

"Just go, Jaqen." Arya looked up at him, and he could see that her eyes, her doe-like eyes that had captivated him the first moment he'd looked into them, were brimming with tears. "Just go."

She was hurting too.

"I'll go," he said softly, taking a step away from her. "Goodbye, lovely girl."

"Goodbye, Jaqen."

Arya wiped at her eyes again with her knuckles, and Jaqen turned so that he wouldn't have to see anymore of her tears.

He walked away without looking back. Once inside his jeep, he checked the rearview mirror as he prepared to reverse from the parking bay and saw Arya still sitting at the bench where he'd left her. Arya was wiping at her eyes, and it hurt him to see her cry, but he steeled himself against the pain.

In the end, Fate had always intended for them to take separate paths.

Arya

She'd had no idea that she could feel this way. Her chest ached as thought her ribs were caving in around her heart, while the rest of her was numb, as thought she'd been exposed to the cold too long. She had meant it when she'd told Jaqen that she had loved him, but it was not the kind of love he wanted from her. She had realized too late, that what she felt for Jaqen was not the same as what he felt for her. The look on his face had broken her. Jaqen did not deserve the pain and anguish that she was putting him through. He deserved so much better, and she was hurting because she had failed him so miserably.

She had known that there was no way they would recover from what she'd done. She'd known that they were over before a word had even been said between them. She had not been prepared for her own heart to be broken too. Even if her love for him was different, it had been real, and so too was the pain and grief that overcame her when the reality of their break-up began to sink in. She had not expected that the loss of what she and Jaqen had shared would hit her so hard.

She'd told Jaqen to leave without her because she did not want him to see her falling apart, and she did not want to make him endure more of her company when she could tell that all he wanted was to be alone.

"Goodbye, lovely girl." Jaqen had said, and the sound of the endearment on his lips had brought fresh tears to her eyes because she would never be able to hear those words again without thinking of him.

She was still sitting in the same spot an hour after Jaqen had left, staring out over the river and listening to the sound of the water as it rushed and burbled over the rocks in its path, contemplating the utter mess she'd made of her relationships with both Gendry and Jaqen. She wondered how much pain she could have saved everyone from, if only she'd opened her eyes sooner.

Jaqen had pointed out that she smiled differently at Gendry, and that he had always been aware of how closely she'd kept Gendry in her affections. It was easy to see now that Gendry had always been in her heart, but she'd somehow been blinded from recognizing that the tenderness she felt towards him was due to far more than friendship.
Gendry, for all his outward appearance of toughness and despite growing up in King's Landing's toughest neighborhood, possessed a calm demeanor that belied his true nature. She'd thought him shy when they'd first met, and she recalled calling him stupid a few times, but she'd soon realized that he was not shy, merely reserved. He was also far from stupid, and instead he was careful with his thoughts. It was she who was always saying and doing stupid things.

Gendry was down-to-earth. He was thoughtful, hardworking and gentle. He was loyal to his family and friends and he took responsibility seriously. Just as the earth hid a core of fire, Gendry too had a hidden fire that saw him burn with a fierce fury when his passions were provoked. All of these qualities had endeared him to her, quietly and unassumingly, just like Gendry himself.

Later, when she came to learn who Gendry's father turned out to be and of how he'd spent years dealing with the uncertainty of his identity, Arya had come to suspect that Gendry's reserve came from his insecurities, and that he used it like a shield to protect himself. For years Gendry had believed he was an orphan, and before coming to live with the Motts, he'd spent five years being shifted from one foster home to another. It was understandable that as a six year old boy, living with strangers who didn't necessarily care for him, he would have developed a way to protect his thoughts and emotions. Gendry had learned to exist alone in a world of strangers, by burying that fire deep inside.

It was easy to see how Gendry's reservedness could be overshadowed by the dazzling brightness and rock-star appeal that Jaqen exuded. Arya had been fascinated by him from the moment she'd met him. His way of speaking, his undeniable musical genius and his intensity had piqued her interest and imagination. Her crush on him had formed instantaneously, and it had been so easy to be swept up into his world. Even after Gendry had confessed his feelings for her, even after that first electrifying kiss they'd shared at the Battle of The Bands, Arya had chosen Jaqen because she had not believed that her feelings for Gendry were stronger than her feelings for Jaqen.

She knew better now. Far from fading into the background, even after she'd gotten together with Jaqen, Gendry had stayed at the forefront of her thoughts, and without her realizing it she'd been reacting to his moods, being influenced by almost everything he did ever since.

Still waters ran deep. She understood these words more than she ever had before, not only because it described Gendry's true nature, but also because they described the depth of her feelings for him. The surface may be calm and placid, but beneath it the river was flowing swift, true and deep. If this river was love—if what she felt for Gendry was love—the kind of love she couldn't feel for someone else, then she was drowning in it.

Gendry had grown less reserved in the last few months, just as his confidence had grown as he'd come to terms with his true identity. His performances on stage with the *Brotherhood Without Banners* had benefited from it, as had his popularity with the girls. It had taken seeing him through the eyes of someone else, how Jazmine would see him to be exact, for her to realize just what had been in front of her all along.

*But, am I too late?*

Arya wiped at her face with her hands again. Her head was too messed up, and she was in no state of mind to analyze the expression that had been on Gendry's face after he'd broken their kiss and pulled away from her. She needed time to herself, and she needed time to think. Most of all, she needed time to heal from her first break-up.

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**Gendry**
He looked and felt far calmer than he thought he would be. He'd woken up after three hours of sleep to find his name and face on the front page of every newspaper in King's Landing. He'd also been mentioned in a handful of papers in neighboring Essos City and Volantis City, as well as in two of the most respected newspapers in the country. He knew all of this because Gossip Spyder had thoughtfully provided links to all the websites on the blog.

The Baratheons, much like the Starks, were part of an elite assembly of old money dynasties. Their names were synonymous with names like Rothschild, Rockefeller and Vanderbilt, dynasties that had built indescribable wealth in the industrial and banking sectors, with their influence spanning decades, if not centuries. One did not always recognize their faces, but you certainly recognized their name.

Robert Baratheon admitting to fathering another illegitimate son almost eighteen years ago was counted as monumental news, because it brought about questions regarding his considerable fortune, and what portion of it Gendry was entitled to. Robert had already admitted to fathering one other son outside of his marriage to Cersei Lannister, and one article had questioned what would be left for Robert's three so-called 'legitimate' children to inherit. The article had gone on to point out that legitimacy laws of old no longer had a place in today's society, and provided that paternity is properly established as in Gendry's case, the 'illegitimate' child's rights to inheritance are not subordinate to those of any 'legitimate' children. Gendry had made a point to note that particular detail, not because he particularly wanted anymore of his father's money, but because it interested him to know that if he so wanted to make a claim, it would be his legal right to do so.

Donald Luwin had made a house call early that morning, having been foretold about Gendry's involvement in the auction. The attorney had stayed for most of the morning, coaching Tobho as he answered the phone calls that came in, and also to stand at Ellen's side when the local reporters eventually came knocking on their front door.

This time, they were ready. Everyone kept their cool, and this explained in part, why Gendry felt so calm. Pycelle & Associates in talks with Donald Luwin, had advised that Robert would be issuing a statement about Gendry later in the day and Luwin advised them that Gendry's foster-parents would also make one on his behalf. Both parties had come to an agreement about what would be released to the media. They would maintain that while Gendry's paternity had been long acknowledged, both families had opted for secrecy in order to protect their privacy and Gendry's anonymity. However, once details of Gendry's birth certificate had been made public, keeping his parentage a secret became impossible in the long run. It was agreed that the Bachelor Auction would be the perfect event for his official debut, and that Robert had given Stannis and Selyse his blessing to include Gendry in the lineup.

In was a neat and tidy story to feed the masses, and Gendry agreed that even if it wasn't entirely accurate, it was a simple way to deal with the media. Stannis had given him a brief call early in the afternoon, sounding stern as usual, but also pleased with the outcome of his plans.

"We cannot have hoped for a better result," the man said, "everything is going according to plan."

"It seems that way." Gendry agreed. "You've done your duty by me, if that's what you were hoping for."

"To you, yes." Stannis sounded weary.

"Why do I keep getting the feeling that you're keeping something from me?" Gendry demanded. "This whole plan of yours and your talk about duty and responsibility… I don't buy it, Stannis. Not entirely."
"Would you be offended if I said that you were a means to an end?"

"Offended?" Gendry's mind had whirred, thinking about everything he'd been through and realized that nothing could surprise him anymore. "You have some other, greater ultimate goal in mind, don't you? And, you needed my participation to make it work."

"I needed you to fulfill a role." Stannis stated. "At the start, all I needed was your blood."

"Well, you've got it."

"I also needed for you to be obedient."

"Haven't I been very obedient?"

"And...you've proven to be quite amusing... I also never counted on how Shireen would come to grow so attached to you. You've brought that little girl back to life, you have."

"That's touching, Stannis" Gendry said, meaning it. "Is that your way of telling me that despite setting out to use me as a pawn in your scheming, you've actually come to like me?"

"Someone should have beaten that insolence out of you when you were younger," Stannis grunted. Gendry laughed, realizing he would never actually get Stannis to verbally admit it. "So, what is it you're really planning?"

"I can't tell you that," Stannis replied, "but if it all works out then I will also be doing my duty to my daughter, and our family name. And, who knows, there may be more benefits to you down the track."

Gendry didn't really understand what Shireen had to do with anything, but Stannis believed he still had unfinished business and Gendry was going to stay out of it. As far as he was concerned, his part was done.

"Whatever you say, Uncle Stannis."

"Hmm," Stannis grunted once more at Gendry's use of the title. "Do be mindful of Joffrey at school, will you? I heard he destroyed every room in one of the guest houses at The Red Keep after he got home last night."

"Was he that mad about me getting the highest bid at the auction?" Gendry asked sardonically.

"Among other things," Stannis answered, his tone carrying more than a note of distaste. "I'm sure you're more than familiar with that boy's temperament, but he may decide to seek you out to exact his brand of retribution for the wrongs he perceives have been done to him."

"Thanks for the heads-up."

Stannis had hung up with a clipped goodbye, and once the commotion about Gendry's public debut had quieted down around the house, he found himself alone in his room with nothing to do but dwell on his thoughts.

_Arya._

For a while, he sat in front of his laptop scrolling through the photos that Gossip Spyder had posted, his eyes automatically seeking all the shots with Arya in them. It had been a huge shock to him when Arya had outbid both Jazmine and Margaery during the auction. He'd been beyond ecstatic when
he'd realized that he would be spending the evening in her company, on Valentine's Day.

When he had questioned her about why she wasn't spending the evening with her boyfriend, and why she had bid such a high amount for his company, Gendry had been willing to take her answers at face value, not bothering to delve deeper into her reasons. Instead, he'd allowed himself to believe that Arya's only reason was because she wanted to be with him. So, he'd admired her and how she had looked in her translucent gown as though he had every right to. Observed her far too keenly, and let his gaze linger far longer than he ought to. He'd danced with her, holding her closer than he had to, and enjoyed seeing her laugh at her own clumsiness while he had twirled her about the dance floor.

At dinner, seated across from one another at a table set for two with the scent of roses drifting around them and candlelight casting a soft golden glow about Arya's face, he'd pretended that the trembling of her fingers against the stem of her glass, and the way she would turn her gaze whenever he felt his eyes upon her face was due to her nervousness, and being alone with him. He pretended that she was as conscious of him, as he was of her.

During the limo tour he had found himself truly having fun, and the familiar city sights had seemed new again, when he imagined them through Arya's eyes. He'd held her hand when the crowd at the Street of Lights threatened to engulf her, because it felt like the natural thing for them to do. He'd taken a couple-selfie too, and even though Ellen really did ask for pictures, he'd taken them as much for himself as they had been for his foster-mom.

At Aegon's Well he'd made a wish, a foolish and nonsensical wish, although he had never really believed in that urban legend about all those wishes coming true. He'd wished that he would somehow get the chance to kiss Arya once more, because he couldn't forget how she had tasted, and how her lips had felt beneath his…and he just had to be able to kiss her again.

He didn't question her too hard when she said she wanted to see the blacksmith's forge out of the blue. He'd jumped at the excuse to spend more time with her, in fact. Then, when he'd found himself holding Arya in his arms, looking at him with eyes full of expectation, he'd made his wish come true by kissing her. She'd tasted as sweet and her lips had felt as soft as he remembered, and for a moment he'd felt really happy…but then Arya had made a noise, and he'd realized that she wasn't kissing him back. And he could no longer keep pretending.

He'd broken the kiss, seen the anguished look on Arya's face, and questioned his actions. Arya was not his. He'd taken her home in silence, and they had shared an awkward goodbye when he'd delivered her to her front door.

"Thank you for tonight, Arya. The kids at the home will really benefit from your donation." He'd spoken, because he couldn't stand the thought of parting without saying anything.

"I'm happy to help." Arya had responded.

"Goodnight, Arya."

She'd nodded, and he'd driven away, feeling chilled to the bone despite the heat inside his car. Once he had reached home, he'd taken off the fancy suit, and lain awake for hours afterwards as he'd replayed and re-lived the night's events in his mind. He had questioned Arya's behavior, and why she had fought so hard and bid so much to spend time with him, and dutifully his brain had come up with possible answers, each more terrible than the last, and none really addressing Arya's apparent enthusiasm during the auction.

"Plans changed…things didn't work out…so here I am." Arya had said.
She was using him as a substitute while her boyfriend couldn't be with her. She was bored and needed a distraction, or the worst by far, Arya harbored feelings for him and secretly longed to be with him. In the end, nothing changed the fact that Arya was not his, and pretending even for one evening, had done him no good.

Gendry picked up his phone and scrolled through his photo gallery until he came across the picture he had taken of him and Arya. He was standing behind her in the photo, his chest pressed against her back as they'd squeezed together to fit inside the frame. Both of them were smiling, looking for all the world like a happy couple, but it was just pretend.

They had not been on a real date. Arya had paid for his time, and if not for the charity auction, they would never have been together that night. They had never been on a real date. Ever.

"Enough," Gendry rasped, speaking to himself. "It's enough."

No more pretending.

Gendry deleted the photo.

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Sandor

"I'm going to slide it in now, okay?" Sandor told her. "Are you ready?"

"I'm ready," Sansa said below him.

Sandor lowered his hips slowly.

"Wait, wait!" Sansa gasped, making him pause hastily. "It's too low…higher and to the left a little."

Sandor readjusted his feet on the floor and tried again. "Is that better?"

"Yes, that's it," Sansa said encouragingly, "keep going just a little more."

"Sansa, that's as far as I can go."

"Make it fit."

"It's already a tight fit," he protested, "it'll break if I force it in."

"It's not going to break," she told him, looking up from where she was kneeling. "Push it in harder."

"Fine." Sandor gave in despite his protests and he gave another push, using more force than he was comfortable with, given the delicateness of what they were doing.

"Yes!" Sansa cried.

And Sandor felt the heavy pantry shelf slide neatly over the brackets on the wall. With a sigh of relief he released his grip on the panel of wood and took a step back to see that the floating shelf was perfectly aligned, good as new.

"Nice spotting, little bird."

"You just need to secure it with screws, right?" Sansa asked him.

He nodded. "Once it's secured all the food can go back on the shelf."
"I'll help you." Sansa offered as she stood up from the floor.

Sandor got down on the spot where Sansa had previously knelt and ducked under the newly installed shelf to screw the anchors to the shelf. His housekeeper had told him about the loose pantry shelf that morning, and once he'd inspected it he'd found that all it needed was a new bracket and anchors. He'd been at the hardware store when Sansa had called him. He'd offered to pick her up once he was done with his chore, but Sansa had volunteered to come over and help him instead. He'd agreed to it with much amusement because he would bet his Mustang that she'd never held a carpentry tool in her life.

He was right, confirming his suspicious when he'd asked her to hand him the Phillips-head screwdriver and she'd looked at him blankly. After he'd adapted his instructions, she'd proven to be an efficient assistant in the end, albeit a distracting one dressed as she was in skintight jeans and a figure hugging blouse. Sandor had made the mistake of looking in her direction as she'd bent over the toolbox on the kitchen floor to look for the spirit level he'd asked for. He'd found himself checking out the curve of her ass, thinking about what he'd been doing with that ass the night before. His fingers had tightened reflexively, forgetting about the power-drill he'd been holding, narrowly avoiding a serious mishap.

"Done." Sandor stood up and dusted his knees before again stepping back to admire his handy work, pleased with the result.

"It looks good," Sansa said, "you're quite the handyman, aren't you?"

Sandor shrugged. "Living alone, you pick up a few things. Come on, I'll clean up and put the tools away while you get the food back in the pantry, okay?"

"Sure thing."

Sansa picked up cans of diced tomatoes and boxes of dried pasta and began to restock the pantry shelf as Sandor packed up the toolbox. By the time he'd returned from the garage and washed his hands, Sansa had completed her task too.

"Hungry?" he asked her.

"A little," she replied, "let's just get takeout from that café nearby, okay?"

"I'll get my keys."  

They returned to the house a short while later carrying a paper bag filled with turkey and focaccia sandwiches, lemon cakes for Sansa, and holding giant cups of fresh juices. They ate in the living room as they habitually did, while watching a re-run of an old classic film. After they had eaten, Sansa curled herself up beside him on the couch. Sandor half expected her to start purring like the contented cat she resembled.

Less than twenty-fours had passed, and in that time his relationship with Sansa had moved to another level. Sex had never meant much to him before, but as he knew it would be, it was different with Sansa. Everything, was different with Sansa. Outwardly, nothing appeared to have changed at all, but he would bet his Mustang again that Sansa felt just as changed as he did from the experience they had shared the night before.

He felt full, though it had nothing to do with any physical hunger. He'd never felt this way before, and he had nothing to compare it to. Whatever it was, he never wanted this feeling to go away. All he knew was that he was happier than he had ever been, and she was at the center of...well,
"I'm thinking about going on the pill." Sansa stated.

Sandor hastily swallowed the drink he'd just gulped and wiped his chin.

"Give a guy some warning, why don't you?" he grumbled, recovering from his shock.

"Why did that surprise you?" Sansa asked, lifting her face to look at him.

"It didn't," he rasped, "just wasn't expecting that to be the first thing you'd say. I mean, you're not usually that straight to the point."

"It's important, so I just wanted to talk about it with you."

"Um…it's your body, Sansa. I won't push you into anything you don't want to. I'm totally fine to keep using condoms."

Sansa regarded him with an approving glance. "You sound like you've already thought this through."

He shifted in his seat. "I saw the box of pills you have…months ago, when they fell out of your bag."

Her eyes widened. "You knew what they were?"

He shook his head. "I looked them up."

"Why?"

"Because I thought you might be sick."

"You worried about me, even then?"

"From day one, little bird."

Sansa squeezed his waist. "I never opened the box. It's still in my medicine cabinet."

"I'm glad you never thought of using them with him."

"He was never going to be my first," she said with some vehemence.

"He was your first kiss though."

"No, he wasn't." Sansa snorted. "And, thank the gods for that!"

Sandor frowned. "Joffrey wasn't your first kiss?"

Sansa's eyes widened when she realized her slip. "Um…"

"Who was he?" Sandor narrowed his eyes on her lips.

"Um…"

"Do I know him?"

"Well, you see…"
Yeah, it was someone he knew. Her face said as much.

"Someone from school?"

"No, it happened before we came to King's Landing."

"Didn't you go to an all-girls school up North?"

"I did."

"Was it another girl?"

"No. But, would it matter?"

"No. So, who was it?"

"Are you sure you want to know? Because I won't lie to you and I don't want you mad at me for something that happened before I met you." Sansa repeated his own words back to him.

He wasn't mad, he acknowledged. But, he was jealous.

"I want to know," he said, "so I can obliterate all memory of that punk's kiss from your mind."

Sansa sighed before giving him an answer. "It was Theon."

"Greyjoy?" Sandor growled. "How the—?"

"It was a mistake and he apologized. He was intoxicated."

"But you still prefer him over Joffrey?"

"Only because the idea of kissing Joffrey now makes my skin crawl, and the thought of him being my first kiss is just too depressing. At least with Theon, even though it was a mistake, the memory doesn't bring bile to my mouth."

"Hmm." Sandor's temper waned when faced with her reasoning. "In that case, I'll let the guy live."

Despite his jealousy, he was kind of glad that at least her first kiss had not been an unpleasant experience for her. All he remembered from his own first kiss was the taste of cheap beer and lipstick.

"You can still try though," she said.

"Try, what?"

"Try to obliterate Theon's kiss from my mind." Sansa smiled up at him. "How did you plan to do that exactly?"

Sandor chuckled, and a second later he was lowering his head down to hers. He kissed her possessively, pulling her against him and making her tilt her neck so that he could deepen their kiss, twining his tongue around hers with strokes that alternated between soft and giving, to hard and demanding.

His hands too began to stroke her, lifting the hem of her blouse so that he could feel the warm smoothness of the skin on her abdomen. His other hand curved over the rise of her ass which had so distracted him earlier. Sansa's knees parted, a clear invitation, and Sandor thought it would be rude to
decline so he stroked there too, caressing her from the inside of her knee to the warm junction between her thighs. Sansa moaned when he used the pads of his fingers to rub her over her jeans, but he paused for a moment when a concerning thought came to him.

"How do you feel...you know?"

"Hmm?"

"Did I hurt you?" Sandor rubbed her again, gentler than before.

"Oh." Sansa blushed. "I'm fine, a little tender but I'm fine."

Sandor was hopeful, but he didn't want to push her. "Maybe we shouldn't."

"If it hurts, we can stop and do something else," Sansa said, deciding for both of them.

Sandor chuckled again. "Whatever you say."

He led her to his bedroom, and feeling surreal, he pushed her to the bed and began to undress her. He'd undressed her on his bed before, but never completely, and never with the knowledge that he would get to...his hand paused on the snap of her jeans.

"What is it, Sandor?" Sansa asked. "What are you thinking about?"

Sandor unzipped her jeans and swiftly pulled them down her legs. Her panties came next, and he stared for a moment between her legs, the sight of her trimmed and nearly bare exciting him more than he could have imagined. He glanced back at her face.

"Just say it," Sansa urged him.

Sandor's fingers flexed, and his voice came out rough when he spoke. "I'm about to fuck you...on my bed."

"Yeah," she nodded, "you are."

They spoke little after that, speaking only to give each other encouragement as they learned more about each other's body. His bedroom blinds were shut, but enough light made it into the room to make them both conscious of their nakedness. Sandor did have apprehensions about how his scars would appear to her in daylight, when his face would become lined with the exertions of sex, but he needn't have worried.

Sansa now saw past all that, and she had looked right into his eyes as he'd entered her body, her own eyes widening when his entire length was inside her. He was grateful for the light at that moment because he now saw details he had missed, like how much bluer her eyes became when she was aroused, in the dark confines of his car the night before.

"Does it hurt?" he asked her.

"No." Sansa smiled. "But, go slow."

He did as she asked and started to thrust his hips slowly, watching as her breath caught in her throat with his every move. She was incredibly warm around him, and with her ankles crossed behind his back, she was also unbelievably tight. Her hands were around his shoulders and he shivered when she touched a spot on his neck. Sansa's smile returned when she realized she was looking at the hickey she'd marked him with the previous night, and Sandor pushed into her just that bit harder.
Sansa had said that she was feeling tender, and he didn't want to risk hurting her more. They would have many more chances to experiment later. Right then, he didn't want to disrupt the mood they had going, and on his king size bed with plenty of room for him to move, missionary position had never felt more incredible.

Sansa wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his head down so she could kiss him, and while he drove his body into hers, she did the same to him with her tongue. He'd never kissed anyone like this while having sex, and the connection he felt with Sansa sent blood rushing to his groin, making him harder inside her.

He soon forgot that she'd asked him to go slow, but even as his movements became rougher and bolder, there were no objections coming from Sansa. Instead, she had to break their kiss so that she could moan her approval. So encouraged, he continued eagerly. Soon he felt her unmistakably tightening around him and he began to let go of some of the control he'd been wielding over his own release.

"Are you close?" he asked for confirmation.

"Yeah…" she gasped, "I want to come together."

He was still a little way off. "I'll try."

"I'm really close."

"Then go ahead."

"Sandor…"

"Yeah?"

"When I'm on the pill, I want to do it without a condom."

"Oh…shit!"

The words she'd uttered became an image inside his head, turning them into a much more raw and explicit picture until he could clearly see himself between her pale, creamy thighs, fucking her senseless with no barrier between them…nothing separating him from her at all.

And, that's when he lost control completely.

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**Sansa**

Sansa cried out and gripped onto his shoulders as her pleasure crashed over her, feeling Sandor's arms tighten around her as he tensed between her legs, carried away by his own climax. When his grunts had subsided, she began to giggle. Sandor pinched her butt and her giggles became a squeal.

"You're a witch," he rasped, "your red hair should have been a dead giveaway."

"Well…"

"You knew what you were doing," he said to her accusingly.

"I said the naughtiest thing I could think of."
"That was the naughtiest thing you could come up with?"

"It worked, didn't it?" she blushed again.

Sandor laughed. "Better work on your repertoire in that case. I think I like you talking dirty to me, little bird."

Sandor began to pull away from her, but as he did Sansa winced when she felt him slip from her.

"Maybe we shouldn't have done it again so soon," Sandor said, seeing her wince.

"I'll be okay," she assured him. "It's a nice kind of pain."

"Masochist, are you?"

Sansa shoved him away and stood up to begin re-dressing. However, as she walked to his bathroom feeling an ache between her legs, she decided they were going to wait a few days before they tried this again.

Her phone was ringing when they both re-emerged from his bedroom into the living room. Sansa picked it up to see Robb's name on the screen.

"Hi, Robb. What's up?"

"Hey, have you spoken with Arya today?"

"Not since this morning. Why?"

"I just got home--"

"From seeing Jeyne Westerling?"

"Yes, from seeing Jeyne." Robb's voice carried his smile. Robb had returned home the previous night totally smitten with the girl who'd won him at the auction, so much so that he'd agreed to meet her again that day. "Anyway, I just got home and I found Arya in the gym punching the boxing bag like she had a grudge against it."

"That's odd," Sansa frowned.

"Mom said that her boyfriend picked her up earlier today, but she came home on her own. When mom asked about her boyfriend, Arya replied that she didn't have one."

"What?" Sansa grew concerned.

"Mom suspects a break-up," Robb said.

Sansa sighed. Arya had been unusually subdued that morning, and Sansa had briefly thought about what Jaqen's reaction to the news of Arya and Gendry might have been, given that it was all over social media.

"Is she crying?" Sansa asked her brother.

"No," Robb replied, "but mom said she's been punching that bag for hours."

"I'll come home soon," Sansa told her brother. "I'll go and talk to her."
"I think that's a good idea." Robb agreed. "I've never seen her like this, and it would be good for her to talk to someone. She's never really had a lot of friends and frankly, I think she internalizes a lot of things."

"I'll be home soon. Give me thirty minutes."

"Sure. I'll try and get her to stop punching the bag in the meantime. I'm scared she's torn her knuckles."

"See you soon, Robb."

Sandor had deduced what the conversation was about. "Arya?"

Sansa nodded. "It seems she and Jaqen broke up."

"That's not surprising." Sandor grunted. "The guy did see his girlfriend making eyes at someone else right in front of him."

"Huh?"

"Jaqen was at the hotel last night," Sandor replied, and Sansa heard all about Jaqen being there to witness Arya walking into an elevator on Gendry's arm.

"This is terrible." Sansa shook her head. "What an absolute, sad mess."

"The little bitch sure knows how to get herself into them, that's for sure."

Sansa sighed again. "Could you take me home please?"

Sandor delivered her to her front door not long after, and offered her a piece of advice about how to approach Arya.

"I don't know if you've ever noticed, but Arya's feelings for Gendry were always there. The Faceless punk and all the hype about him probably just blinded her."

Sansa gave him a questioning glance. "How do you know this?"

"I watched her and The Bull tiptoe around each other for weeks," Sandor rasped, "it was impossible not to see it."

"You're saying that Arya liked Gendry all this time, just as he liked her?"

"Looks that way." Sandor put his car back into gear as Sansa got out of the car. "Keep that in mind when you speak to her, and maybe the little bitch won't bite you for sticking your nose into her business."

"Thanks, Sandor." Sansa shut the car door. "I'll call you later tonight."

Robb was coming out of Arya's room when Sansa reached the landing at the top of the stairs. Her brother greeted her with a nod.

"You're back."

"How is she? Did she say anything?"

Robb shook his head. "I didn't ask her anything about Jaqen. I just told her to be careful of her
hands. She's torn the skin on her right hand, even though she was wearing gloves."

"What is she doing now?"

"Taking a shower and calming herself down." Robb frowned. "Arya's never been like this. Jon would know what to do if he were here."

"Are you going to tell him?"

Robb shook his head. "I think Arya's uncomfortable as it is with just us knowing. She'll probably think we're making a big deal out of it if we tell Jon. She should be the one to tell him, if she wants."

"Then, maybe I'll wait until she's had a chance to calm down before I go and talk to her."

"Okay. Then I'll see you at dinner. Father wanted to discuss something with me."

Sansa headed to her own room as Robb headed down the stairs. As she took the opportunity to shower and change her own clothes, she thought about how her relationship with her only sister had changed and evolved over the last few months. When they'd still been in the North she could never have imagined having a conversation with Arya about boys and relationships. Arya had never had that much patience for Sansa's daydreams about dating cute boys and finding a Prince Charming, while Sansa had been impatient for Arya to grow up and stop behaving like a tomboy.

Even though they had cared about each other, neither of them could ever claim to be close confidantes. But, moving to King's Landing had been a catalyst for so many events and conflicts for them both, ultimately leading them to where they were now.

They had begun confiding in each other in recent weeks, particularly after the heart to heart they'd had in Sandor's living room where each of them had gained a better understanding of the other. Sansa recalled Arya running after her when she'd had her public break-up with Joffrey, concerned for her wellbeing. Sansa could now genuinely say that she was concerned about how Arya's break-up with Jaqen was affecting her, and at the very least, even if Arya wasn't ready, Sansa wanted her to know that she was there if she wanted to talk.

It was a bit of a surprise for her then, when she came out of the bathroom to find Arya in her room, sitting on her bed with her knees drawn up to her chest.

"Hi Sansa," her sister greeted her.

"Hey," Sansa tried not to be alarmed by Arya's puffy eyes, or by the bandage on her right hand.

"Robb told you, right?" Arya glanced up at her.

Sansa nodded. "Only what little he does know."

"It's true," Arya told her, "Jaqen and I broke up."

"I'm so sorry..."

"You wanna know why we broke up?"

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to,"

"We broke up because all this time I've had feelings for Gendry, and Jaqen figured it out before I did."
"Oh, Arya…"

"I'm a horrible person, Sansa."

"What? No!"

"I am! I am!" Arya wailed. "I've been so stupid! I never think things through before I do them, and I've hurt so many people. I've really hurt the people I'm supposed to care about, and it's not only Jaqen either. I've hurt Gendry, I've hurt you…Mycah got beat up because I attacked Joffrey, and I even dragged Sandor into my mess without even thinking about his feelings."

"Arya…"

"I've been so blind, and so selfish and…and now everything I've done…every bit of hurt I've inflicted on someone else is coming back to me. Everything is my fault!"

Sansa was taken aback by the emotion in Arya's voice. Arya sounded as though she really believed what she was saying.

"Arya, you can't blame yourself for everything," Sansa said softly.

"Why not?" Arya challenged. "Every person who comes into contact with me has ended up getting hurt somehow."

"So, you think that karma is coming back to teach you a lesson?"

"Yeah," Arya laughed humorlessly. "Karma, and her sister Fate."

Sansa could see that this was going to be tricky. "Let's say, even if there was some truth in what you're thinking, what are you going to do about it?"

"Learn my lesson, obviously," Arya replied, "and stop making the mistakes I keep making."

"That's sometimes easier said than done."

"But, I have to try, right?" Arya sighed. "It was so easy for me to judge you when you were fawning over Joffrey. I mean, I couldn't understand why you couldn't see what was so obvious to me and everyone else, and I was so frustrated with you for being so blind…but it turns out that I could be just as blind too. I was just as oblivious about Gendry…about Jaqen."

"Hmm. You were right to be frustrated with me back then. Joffrey is a raging psycho after all…but, I think you're being too hard on yourself. Jaqen and Gendry are nothing at all like Joffrey… I don't blame you for not realizing your feelings sooner."

Arya cracked a tiny smile. "Okay, I phrased that incorrectly. I didn't mean to make it sound like I was likening them to Joffrey, which they definitely are not…but, you get what I mean, right?"

Sansa nodded. "I do, Arya. The hardest truths to see are often the ones that affect us the most. Sometimes we are the last to see what should have been so obvious."

"Was it obvious to you?" Arya asked. "Could you see how I felt about Gendry?"

Sansa tilted her head and told her the truth as she had seen it. "I didn't realize you felt that way about him, but I always saw that the way you looked at him and the way you smiled at him was different to how you were with Jaqen."
Arya's face fell. "Jaqen said something similar...he said he could see it right from the start, but he ignored it. It must have hurt him so much!"

"If he could see it, why did he still choose to go after you? Surely, he should have known that there was always the chance that your feelings would change?"

"I'm sure he did," Arya said sadly as her face fell further, "but he took that chance anyway. He liked me that much."

"I'm sorry this is happening to you, Arya. I really am."

"I hate the thought that my last words to Jaqen were to tell him that we were through. I hate that he's going to leave for New York and we're parting in such a terrible way."

"What would you say to him if you could speak to him now?"

"I'm not sure what I'd say...wouldn't it all be meaningless to say more?"

"If you have something to say, then you should say it," Sansa advised her, "only Jaqen can say what value it may have to him."

Arya sighed again. "Maybe you're right."

"What are you going to do about Gendry?"

Arya shook her head. "I don't know. Nothing right now, I guess. Even if I do like him, I'm not ready to be with anyone at this moment...and I don't know that Gendry still likes me, after what I've put him through."

Sansa frowned. "Did something happen between the two of you last night?"

Arya nodded briefly. "He kissed me."

"He did?" Sansa's eyes widened.

"But he looked like he regretted it so badly afterwards."

"He could be just as confused as you are?" Sansa guessed. "He probably never expected that you would bid for him, let alone win. I'm sure he must have been surprised."

"I don't know how to deal with this, Sansa." Arya admitted. "I always act like I know everything, but in reality, I don't know much at all."

"Isn't this part of growing up?" Sansa posed the question. "We make mistakes and we learn from them. It's part of developing character, or something like that. We're not supposed to have all the answers now."

Arya gave her a look. "Sandor told me something similar once."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Arya nodded. "He saw me freak out this one time, when I knew I had to make a choice, and he told me that no one would blame me for being unsure. Maybe it was obvious to Sandor back then too?"

Sansa nodded. "He suspected it."
Arya dropped her legs to the floor and studied her toes. "The two of you have more in common than I thought…anyway, do you have any advice for me?"

"The only thing I can tell you, is to be as honest with yourself as you can, and really think about what you really want after all is said and done. If there is something you can do that is within your power to try and make it happen, you should go for it. If not, then you take things day by day and deal with things as they come."

"Until the pain goes away?"

"If that may be the case,"

"Does it ever get easier?" Arya wondered. "Does it get easier to make decisions and to recognize feelings and all that when we get older?"

"Let's compare notes on that in ten years, okay?" Sansa sat next to Arya on the bed. "I'm still learning my lessons too."

Arya dragged a hand through her emerald green locks and gave her a look that conveyed so many things, but in that one look, Sansa clearly saw that her little sister had changed. Arya had become aware of how her actions affected those around her, and from the expression in her eyes Sansa saw that Arya had also just come to realize the emotions her heart could contain. Sansa had seen the changes coming little by little, but now there was no mistaking it. The fact that they were sitting there side by side having this type of conversation was proof of it.

"So," Arya said as she took a breath. "This is growing up, huh?"

"Part of it," Sansa replied, "but it's not all about pain and heartache. Growing up is about learning what makes us happy too."

"Really?"

Sansa smiled as Sandor's image came to her mind. Growing up brought with it changes, be it physically, mentally, and emotionally. Sometimes it meant pain, but at other times it meant pleasure. What she and Sandor had shared on a physical level had definitely been intense, but what they shared emotionally was infinitely far more so. She felt closer to Sandor in a way she never knew was possible to feel for another human being. This revelation to her, was far more significant than the act of physical intimacy, although that was important too.

"I know it might not be easy to see that now," Sansa told her, "but growing up isn't all bad. Trust me."

Chapter End Notes

Jaqen's POV was inspired by the song 'Make It Easy On Yourself'- Hal & Bacharach. This is an old classic, and my favorite version of the song is by Dionne Warwick, but the recording by The Walker Brothers is considered by many to be the definitive version.

While the above are great, I thought they were too polished for something as raw and intimate as a breakup, so I was so happy to find this modern cover on YouTube by
Sivu. Please check it out. This song had me in tears while I played it on repeat as I was writing Jaqen's POV. Copy and paste the below :)

Sivu - Make It Easy On Yourself / Mahogany x Wilderness
Good morning all!

It's another beautiful day here in King's Landing and most of us are still in shock from the events of the weekend. Robert Baratheon's lawyers have issued a statement regarding Gendry Waters which is now being circulated by all the local media outlets and also by a few national news sources. The Baratheons are kind of a big deal and the interest in Gendry appears to stem not just from its scandalous nature, but also from Robert Baratheon's critics who have raised questions about Robert's character, the state of his marriage to Cersei Lannister, and what it might mean for Robert's numerous business ventures. Joffrey's grandfather, Tywin Lannister, is apparently one of Robert's biggest investors. However, with yet another living proof of Robert's infidelity now in the public light, critics have referred to rumors that Robert is fast losing favor with his father-in-law.

If the statement released by Robert Baratheon is to be believed, then Joffrey and Gendry knew all along that they were half-brothers. Gendry transferred to KL Prep at the beginning of the school year and in all this time the brothers have shown no signs of bonding. In fact, all we've seen from them has been nothing but aggression. I wonder what else we might expect to see now that the truth is out in the open?

I also have to wonder what Joffrey's thoughts are on the fact that Margaery failed to bid on him at the auction while she instead bid first for Robb Stark, and then for Gendry? Interestingly enough, I heard a rumor on the grapevine that the reason no one bothered to bid for Joffrey was because everyone had expected Margaery Tyrell to bid for him, but even after it became clear that Margaery would not be bidding for him, no one dared to bid anyway just in case they incurred Margaery's wrath…and no one wants to be on Margaery's bad side, right? Apparently, Margaery had been overheard saying that she would be bidding only for the guy who 'has all the qualities of a King' all week at school prior to the Bachelor Auction. If this is true, then it's fair to say that Margaery no longer considers Joffrey as fitting this description. Interesting times ahead…

I received a tip late last night that Arya Stark and Jaqen H'ghar were witnessed having a somber discussion at a park near Trident's Bend late Sunday morning. It's highly likely they were discussing the fact Arya had spent Valentine's evening with Gendry Waters instead of being with Jaqen, even if it had been for charity. Being the inquisitive person that I am, I checked the House of Black & White's website and found that the Faceless Men were playing a gig that night, which would explain why Arya did not spend the evening with her own boyfriend. If I were Jaqen, it would still suck to see photos of my girlfriend in the company of another guy on a night dedicated to lovers. I hope you guys work it out!

Spring is also just days away, and I know many of you have been looking forward to ditching your winter coats and jackets. The warmer weather also ushers in the season of outdoor festivals, school dances, proms and celebrations. We have a busy few months ahead, beginning with the outdoor music extravaganza that is the Tourney Fields Festival in March. King's Landing plays host to this annual event, simply referred to as the Tourney, which features some of the biggest names in music as well as local and indie bands fortunate enough to be invited to perform. Tickets are still on sale, so get your silk ribbons and flower wreaths ready!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder
Of course, she and Jaqen had been spotted near Trident's Bend. The park they'd visited formed part of the riverside walk that Trident's Bend was known for, and they had not made the effort to make themselves discreet. As far as anyone could tell she and Jaqen had just been talking. No one was aware they had broken up. *People will find out soon enough,* she thought.

Hot Pie, ever loyal Hot Pie, had contacted her early that morning almost as soon as Gossip Spyder's update had gone live.

"Are you okay, Arya?" Hot Pie had asked over the phone. "Is everything okay?"

When Arya had taken too long to respond, her friend had offered to pick her up on his way to school that morning and during the drive Arya had told him the truth about that conversation with Jaqen.

"We broke up," Arya had confessed as she'd sunk into the passenger seat.

"Oh…I'm sorry to hear that," Hot Pie had said, "was it because you bid on Gendry? To be honest, I was surprised when I read that it was you who'd won Gendry at the auction. I did wonder what Jaqen would say about it."

Arya had not been prepared to bare her soul entirely, but Hot Pie needed to hear an honest response. "He said it was a clear sign to him that things weren't working out between us. I agreed, so we ended it."

"I really am sorry," Hot Pie had said again, "I know I was never totally sold on your relationship with him, but I thought you were happy with him. Now, I'm just sorry you have to go through something like this."

"Don't be," Arya had assured her friend. "It was the right thing for both of us."

Arya's voice had been flat, which had caused Hot Pie to glance at her, unconvinced.

"Are you sure it was for the best?" he had asked.

She had nodded. "He's going away to New York soon. I guess it's better this happened now instead of letting things drag on as they were."

"New York?"

"It hasn't been made public yet, but his band is getting signed and they have to move to New York," Arya had told him.

"That's great for his band, but not so much for you two."

"Yeah," Arya had sighed.

"Arya, can I ask…why did you bid for Gendry anyway?" Hot Pie had glanced at her again.

Arya had shrugged. "It was for charity, and I never expected I'd actually win."

"Seriously?"

It was partly true, Arya had realized. She had wanted to win, otherwise she never would have begged her father to give her the money to enter the auction. However, she never expected that
Margaery Tyrell, whose pockets went far deeper than hers, would bow out so suddenly. Perhaps she'd been expecting Jazmine Choi to fight harder, but the most likely scenario was that they both had the same max limit, and Arya had simply just beaten her to it. If Jazmine had been the first to make the offer of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, Arya would have been forced to bow out.

"Yeah…" Arya had replied with a sigh. But, luck had been on my side.

Hot Pie had let her sit in silence the rest of the ride to school, but after he'd parked his car he'd turned back to her with a worried look on his face.

"Are you going to tell Gendry?"

Arya had hesitated. One way or another, Gendry was going to find out, but telling him herself was a hundred kinds of awkward.

"You can tell him, if you want." Arya decided in the end that if Gendry was going to find out it may as well be from a credible source.

"Is there anything you don't want me to tell him?" Hot Pie had frowned.

Arya had shaken her head. She hadn't elaborated on what had transpired and Hot Pie could repeat whatever he liked.

"Tell him just what I told you," she'd said.

"Okay." Hot Pie's look had softened. "Are you sure you're going to be okay at school today? There's going to be a lot of people talking."

"I'm used to it," Arya had said in a tired manner. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

"Then I'll see you at the cafeteria later, okay?"

Hot Pie headed towards his home room while Arya took another hallway towards hers. People were talking just as Hot Pie said they would be. From what she could gather people were beginning to wonder about how close a friendship she really had with Gendry and whether Jaqen had reason to be worried. You're all too late, Arya thought, you can stop speculating because we've already broken up. She said nothing of course, but for the rest of the morning she found herself hyper-aware of anyone mentioning Gendry's name around her. While Gendry himself remained elusive, Arya heard plenty from people who had seen him that day.

"I saw him at the parking lot this morning and he looked as though butter wouldn't melt in his mouth."

"For someone whose face is all over social media, he looks way too relaxed about it all."

"Is it me, or did he just get even hotter? I never noticed until I saw those photos, but damn the boy looks fine in a suit!"

Arya was curious and anxious to see him. She didn't know what she wanted to say to him, she just knew that she had to speak to him. She had to know where they stood with each other at least, especially after the kiss they'd shared in the forge that night. She wanted to see it as a positive sign as Gendry had made the first move, after all. But he had also been the first one to pull away and Arya could not forget the look on his face and in his eyes when he'd broken the kiss.

Gendry was conflicted, and this made her nervous.
Gendry

It was barely midday and already he'd had one too many shocks to his system. He'd woken up to yet more articles about himself on social media, as well as a picture of Joffrey next to his own in a blatant comparison not just of their appearance, but also of characteristics they possessed and achievements each of them had attained. Other than the easily verifiable facts, such as Joffrey being a quarterback and Gendry's involvement with the Brotherhood Without Banners, the author had got very little else about him correct. He'd been expecting the comparison of course, Donald Luwin and his foster-parents had warned him that it would happen, but seeing the words on the screen had been jarring and infuriating.

The second shock had come in the form of a short message from Myrcella Baratheon, directly sent via Messenger telling him that she wished him the strength to get through the media circus once again, and that she one day hoped to meet him when he was ready. He'd replied to her, noting that it was his first real exchange with his half-sister, thanking her for her thoughts and expressing his wish to meet her too when the time was right.

At school he'd been surprised when Margaery Tyrell had greeted him warmly in the hall as he'd walked towards his homeroom. He'd played it cool for all the eyes that were on them, greeting her like he knew her, though he was just as surprised as when she had bid for him at the auction. Ever since the incident with her grandmother they would nod at each other in passing, but that was the extent of their interaction. Her sudden interest in him now had him nonplussed.

The biggest shock however, was the news that Hot Pie threw at him almost as soon as he'd sat down in their shared homeroom class. Hot Pie had greeted him, before he'd motioned for Gendry to lean in so that he could whisper something into his ear.

"Arya and Jaqen broke up."

Gendry had stared at his friend. "What?"

"I know you heard me." Hot Pie had given him a look and continued to tell him what had happened. "Gossip Spyder said that they'd been seen near Trident's Bend yesterday and Arya confirmed it."

"They broke up yesterday?"

"Yeah." Hot Pie had nodded. "She said I could tell you. I guess she wanted you to hear it from me first."

"How?" Gendry had frowned. "Why?"

Hot Pie mirrored his frown then. "Apparently, things weren't working out between them and Jaqen said that Arya winning you at the auction was a sign. She said she was glad they broke up now before he moves to New York, and that it was the best thing for them."

"New York?"

"The Faceless Men got signed and that was a condition, apparently."

"Did Jaqen really say that Arya winning me at the auction was a sign?"

"That's what Arya told me," Hot Pie had said. "Dude, I know you and Jaqen had this huge rivalry going on, but it looks like you were still a sore point between them."
"She chose him," Gendry had pointed out.

Hot Pie had shrugged. "Wounds heal, but the scar never really goes away, you know?"

"That's messed up," Gendry had shaken his head. "If they were having problems because he's about to move to New York, they should have left me out of it instead of using me as a reason to break up."

"You see it that way too?"

"Isn't that how you saw it?"

Hot Pie had nodded. "She didn't say it in so many words, but to me it sounded like they'd been having problems for a while because he has to move away, and you were an easy excuse."

"Why the hell would they need an excuse?"

"Sometimes, it's easier to put the blame on some external factor rather than have to deal with the real internal conflicts."

"Fuck," Gendry had sworn, not just because Hot Pie's words had sounded profound, but also because he now had an explanation for some of Arya's odd behavior on the night of the auction. "What would have happened if she hadn't won that night?"

"She said things would probably have dragged on, but it sounded like they would have broken up eventually."

"Her winning the auction just sped things up." Gendry had frowned. "How convenient for them."

"To be fair to her I don't think she meant for that to happen," Hot Pie had said, "it seemed like she genuinely wanted to bid for you because it was for charity, but she never expected to win."

"She said that?"

"Yep." Hot Pie had nodded. "And, I can understand why she would think that. I mean, she was up against Jazmine Choi who's made it really obvious she likes you, and Margaery Tyrell who is just about the richest girl in this school."

"She won because of luck," Gendry had stated.

"Or fate, depending on how you look at it."

"It still sucks that they made me their excuse to break up."

"Hey man, this is probably too soon to ask but...what are you going to do?"

"Do about what?"

Hot Pie had given him another look. "Dude...she's single again."

"Too soon, Hot Pie." Gendry had shaken his head. "Way too fucking soon."

"Thought as much."

"And, for the record," Gendry had said with a pause for effect, "I won't be doing anything. She's got issues she has to deal with, and in case you forgot I wasn't her first choice. Besides...I'm done, man."
"Done?"

"Yeah," Gendry had sighed. "I'm done pining for a girl who's only ever had me in second place, you know? It's unhealthy."

Hot Pie had eyed him skeptically, but Gendry had made up his mind. He was going to do whatever it took to get over Arya Stark, for good.

Throughout his classes that morning he'd once more thought about Arya's actions that night. With the knowledge he'd just learned from Hot Pie, he could now see how her state of mind perhaps influenced the decisions she'd made. He'd heard plenty about how the Faceless Men had been in talks with a major recording label –Beric had been super envious and had bemoaned the unfairness of it frequently in recent weeks– but he hadn't heard about them moving to New York. He could see how this forced separation would put a strain on any relationship.

He'd read Gossip Spyder's post about how the Faceless Men had been performing a show the same night as the auction, which explained Arya's 'things didn't work out' statement. If Jaqen had to move away because of his band, and Arya had ended up alone on Valentine's Day because of his commitment to his band, Gendry could understand why Arya had so inexplicably entered the auction. She was probably looking for a distraction from her thoughts and the state of her relationship…what better way to do that than by entering a bid at the bachelor auction? It was just like her to do something so irrational, and perhaps she'd got more than she was bargaining for.

Unknowingly, he'd given her more to be distracted about when he'd agreed to take her to see the old forge. At the time, he'd been all too happy and more than willing to go along with her whims. He'd allowed himself to get carried away, and whatever Arya's reasons for being with him, kissing her had been due to him giving in to his own crazy whim entirely.

I kissed her.

With a measure of guilt, he wondered whether Arya had told Jaqen about the kiss and whether it had any influence on Jaqen's decision. But if what Arya had told Hot Pie was the truth, then his kissing her would have made no difference. It did not mean anything to her anyhow. Arya had not kissed him back, and he would never forget the distressed expression on her face when he'd pulled away. Perhaps she had regretted coming to the forge with him, because before he'd brought her there and kissed her they'd been having a really good time, more or less.

Would he have done anything differently if he'd had an inkling of Arya's state of mind? Perhaps he could have put some distance between them, acting as he would have done if it had been someone else who'd won the auction. He might have insisted on ending the night after the city sights tour, and certainly he would not have kissed her.

Was he happy that Arya and Jaqen had broken up? He would have been lying if he said he wasn't glad that Jaqen was out of the picture – he'd never liked the guy. Yet at the same time he was sorry that Arya had to go through a breakup at all. Part of him would always believe that he would have suited her far better than Jaqen H'ghar. But, they were never meant to be.

I shouldn't have kissed her, it didn't matter the circumstances. He knew he had to apologize to Arya for his behavior. She never wanted that from him, and he'd basically forced it on her. He had to tell her that he would never behave that way with her again. At the very least, with everything else going on around her, she wouldn't have to worry about further unwanted advances from him.

He got his chance to speak with her sooner than he expected when they both approached the cafeteria entrance at the same moment. He acknowledged her with a small nod as they came to a stop
right in front of each other. Arya's features were tight and he noticed that she was wearing makeup, which was something he knew she rarely took the trouble to do for school. It made him wonder if she was trying to conceal dark circles beneath her eyes.

"Hey, Arya," Gendry greeted her quietly.

"Hi, Gendry." Arya attempted to smile at him, but the way her eyes darted about told him that she was nervous.

"Could we talk?" he asked her.


"Let's find somewhere quieter," Gendry said before he indicated for her to follow him away from the cafeteria.

They attracted looks from people as they walked side by side, but though they saw the hastily concealed whispers, they heard nothing as they walked by the onlookers. Gendry led her to a small courtyard outside the science building, and when he was certain no one would overhear them he turned to look at her. Arya continued to avoid his eyes. He ignored his unease and bit the bullet. There was no avoiding this conversation.

"Um…I heard from Hot Pie," he began, breaking the silence. "He told me about you and Jaqen."

"I thought you might have." Arya sighed. "It's true though. We broke up."

"I am sorry to hear that," he told her, "and I mean it. It doesn't matter what I thought about him…breakups suck."

Arya was quiet for a moment as she appeared to weigh the sincerity of his words, but eventually she gave him a resigned sort of look.

"It was for the best," she said, "but if you don't mind, I'd rather not talk about it."

"It's not what I wanted to talk about anyway," he said, "I wanted to talk to you about what happened between us that night."

Arya finally met his gaze, her grey eyes widening when she understood what he really meant to discuss.

"Gendry, I–"

"I shouldn't have kissed you, Arya. And, I apologize for forcing myself on you like that. I promise you, it'll never happen again."

"What?" Arya's expression showed what he thought might be confusion.

"Kissing you was my mistake," he told her, feeling his chest ache. "I never meant to get carried away like that and I knew almost immediately that it should never have happened."

"A mistake?" Arya's confusion was unmistakable now.

"Friends don't kiss their friends like that." Gendry offered his explanation. "I've been doing a lot of thinking about us, and I've realized that I want us to stay friends. I wanted to tell you that from now on it will be strictly platonic between us."
Arya's confusion now morphed into an expression he couldn't read.

"Is that really what you want?" Arya asked in a whisper.

"Yeah," he said, "it is."

It has to be. Friendship was the only thing Arya had ever wanted from him, and now he was finally ready to accept it. He hoped that the words he'd said to her were enough to convince her that he was sincere, and that she had nothing to worry about where he was concerned. He would not be pursuing her, in a romantic sense, just because she was single again. They could try and go back to the relationship they had back when they had first met.

"Okay," Arya said quietly, and she averted her eyes once again.

He was having difficulty getting a clear read on her facial expressions, but he decided he couldn't get caught up in over-analyzing everything she did any longer. Distance yourself, he reminded himself. He gave himself a mental shake and cleared his throat. "Were you about to have lunch?"

She shook her head. "I was just going to meet Hot Pie."

"Then, I'll catch you later." Gendry took a step away from her. "Beric's waiting for me."

"Weren't you heading to the cafeteria?"

"I was only going there to look for you," he told her, "Beric wants to speak to me about a gig we have coming up. We've been invited to play at the Tourney."

"Oh. That's great." Arya offered him a small smile. "Then I'll see you around, I guess."

Gendry nodded once more, before turning on his heel and walking away. This is for the best.

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Arya

She watched as Gendry walked away, knowing that he took with him any chance that they would have had to be together.

"I shouldn't have kissed you..."

"Kissing you was my mistake...it should never have happened."

"Friends don't kiss their friends like that...I've realized I want us to stay friends."

Gendry had, quite abruptly and in such a way that there could be no misunderstanding him, told her that he was no longer interested in her romantically. There was a sense of fait accompli about the way things had suddenly turned out. It seemed that even before she had come to terms with her own feelings for him, Gendry had already decided that he was through with her, and now it appeared that she had no choice but to accept his decision.

It hurt, and for the second time in less than forty-eight hours, Arya felt as though her ribs really would collapse around her heart. The pain however, was almost more than she could bear this time. Of course, Gendry could not have known the full impact of his words, and she'd fought hard to stay in control of her emotions as she'd stood in front of him while her heart was breaking.

She stayed in the courtyard for some time after Gendry had left, mulling about the timing of everything, and thinking it all horribly ironic. Maybe I deserve to be feeling like this, she thought. If
"This is even half of the pain that I caused Gendry to feel all this time, then maybe I deserve to feel like this too." With a ragged breath, Arya finally made her way back to the cafeteria and found Hot Pie finishing off his lunch at a table by a window.

"I was beginning to think you weren't coming," Hot Pie said, "is everything okay?"

Arya nodded. "Everything is…how it's supposed to be."

It was clear from his expression that Hot Pie didn't believe her, but he chose not to say anything about it. She didn't know how she made it through the rest of the day, or even how she got home after school had ended. She recalled sitting down at the dinner table with her family later in the evening, but couldn't recall what she had eaten. She'd eventually excused herself from the table and shut herself in her room for the rest of the night, where she allowed her composure to slip, and she allowed herself to cry.

She was far too new at the game of love, and even though she had acknowledged her feelings for Gendry, she had not dared to envision herself by his side. She'd never been prone to daydreams like Sansa, yet there had been a small spark of hope in her heart that had imagined Gendry reaching out to her with opened arms and a smile that would light up his entire face. To then hear Gendry tell her that he no longer wanted her, after the way he'd kissed her at the forge, was gut-wrenching.

She never even got the chance to tell him how she felt, not that she was anywhere near ready to confess or start a new relationship. *It's just as well,* she thought. Telling Gendry how she felt would have only complicated things, and caused them both unnecessary embarrassment. She knew that it would be best to forget about that spark of hope in her heart, and quit daydreaming of something that could never happen now, but even as she had wiped at her eyes, Arya couldn't bring herself to extinguish that spark just yet.

Over the next few days Arya tried to keep her mind away from her problems by keeping herself busy. Watching TV wasn't cutting it because her mind easily tuned out from whatever she tried to watch, so she switched to doing her homework and getting ahead on her readings. She had never been particularly studious, so her behavior was raising eyebrows around the house.

"At least she's not moping," she'd heard her mother remark one evening when her parents had thought they were alone.

"Is she going to be okay?" her father had asked.

"She'll be fine, Ned." Catelyn had assured him. "Just give it some time."

"She's moodier than usual,"

"She's just experienced her first breakup, and this is a normal response to such an event."

"It's different from when Sansa broke up with Joffrey."

"That and this *are* different," her mother had pointed out, "though of course I'd rather neither of them ever had to experience heartache, but when you consider all the factors, Arya's situation is… healthier."

"That's an odd choice of word,"

"Sansa's situation with Joffrey was toxic, and if we hadn't discovered that bruise on her arm I hate to think how much worse things could have escalated."
"Sansa has changed so much since then," her father had sighed, "but I really wish she'd never set eyes on Joffrey Baratheon."

"Robert has him under control now, I believe."

"For now, but he's not going to be able to use the threat of sending him to military school forever." Arya heard her father shifting in his armchair. "I understand what you mean about Arya's situation. First love and first heartbreak are youthful rites of passage, I suppose."

"That's one way to look at it," her mother had agreed, "and you can expect that Arya will be slightly changed from the experience too."

"Has she spoken to you about it?"

"Not in so many words," her mother had said with a note of wistfulness in her voice, "but she knows I'm here if she needs motherly advice."

Arya had always been vocal about her thoughts and feelings in the past, but what she was experiencing now was all so unfamiliar to her, and the thought of baring her soul more than she already had left her feeling uncomfortably vulnerable. Still, it was reassuring and comforting to know that her parents were there to listen to her if she needed them.

Arya also took to working out in the gym by the pool house later in the evenings. Robb, who was completing his final week of interning at *Stark Industries*, had taken to joining her at those times. Arya's hand had only been mildly scraped as a result of the time she'd taken her frustrations out on the punching bag, and she knew better than to repeat that action in front of Robb. As it was, she knew that her brother, in his own way, was showing her that he cared. It had been awkward at first, but Robb spoke to her mainly about sports and the MMA fights that he'd been following and soon Arya had come to enjoy having his presence around. Had it not been for him, it would have been easy for her to slip into self-pity mode had she been alone, and she had a feeling that Robb had been aware of that.

Even Bran had tried to cheer her up, in his own way.

"I know you've asked me for advice in the past," Bran had said, "I don't know if I can help you with what you're going through, but if you need help with math homework just ask, okay?"

"Thanks, Bran." Arya had smiled at him, grateful that he had tried.

She knew that her siblings were concerned about her behavior, but after that emotionally charged moment in Sansa's room she'd found herself unable to talk about what was going through her head and heart. Even though her siblings wanted to help her, Arya realized that there wasn't much they could do. Problems of the heart, in this case her own, was something only she could fix.

Apart from dealing with her breakup with Jaqen and Gendry's unequivocal rejection, she also began to notice a change in the dynamics within the power-cliques that hung around the quad at school. In the past the utmost authority had always been Joffrey Baratheon. Sansa had wielded her own quiet influence for a time, but Margaery Tyrell had become the undisputed Queen of the Quad within a very short amount of time since her arrival at King's Landing Prep. Her association with Joffrey had been unquestioned and together they set the trends and socially accepted norms in the school. However, since Gendry Waters came to be confirmed as Joffrey's older, illegitimate brother, there had been a perceptible change amongst the influencers within the school, and allegiances were beginning to shift.
Margaery suddenly began to appear at Gendry's side more and more, in addition to Jazmine Choi's continued presence. By now, Jazmine's interest in Gendry was clear for all to see and the girl was not embarrassed to admit it to anyone who asked. Margaery, with her ability to ingratiate herself and fit into any social setting soon appeared quite comfortable amongst the Performing Arts cliques. In fact, she'd been seen seated on the steps of the Performing Arts building with Gendry, Beric, Edric and Allyria on a number of occasions.

"Gendry said that Margaery's trying to convince Beric to have the Brotherhood perform at the Spring Fling in April."

"Spring what?" Arya had frowned.

"The annual Spring Fling," Hot Pie had repeated, "is the only school dance open to the entire student body. After Spring Fling is Senior Prom which is invite only, so the Spring Fling is a huge deal because everyone goes."

"And, Margaery is on the organizing committee, I take it?"

"Correct."

"So, why is she following Gendry around instead of Beric?"

Hot Pie had shrugged. "Gendry's opinion matters to Beric. If Margaery can convince Gendry, then Gendry can convince Beric."

Arya had doubts about Margaery's intentions. She'd come to learn that Margaery rarely acted without a hidden agenda, and getting Gendry to convince Beric to perform at a school dance seemed like a flimsy excuse. Margaery should not have had any difficulty convincing Beric on her own. Arya believed that Margaery was more of a threat than Jazmine ever was. Gendry's appeal had skyrocketed since his big reveal at the auction, and Arya had more than a strong suspicion that it was his Baratheon blood that had suddenly made him such a commodity. Legitimate or otherwise, his connection to old money, not to mention his good looks and undeniable street cred made him ridiculously alluring.

Crowds now parted whenever Gendry walked by, girls openly flirted with him, and in a matter of mere days there were numerous guys around school imitating his hair and clothing style. Arya had been trying to put some distance between them, trying her best not to think of him, but with his name being uttered nearly everywhere she went and with so many lookalikes wherever she turned, it seemed to her that Karma and her sister Fate were having a joke at her expense.

The change around Gendry was impossible to miss, and of course Joffrey Baratheon had noticed too. Seeing Gendry and Joffrey glaring, hissing and spitting at each other like two stray cats in an alley had become an increasingly normal sight. In fact, it had become a daily occurrence, given that Gendry and Joffrey shared a class together, and even if Arya had not been there to witness these encounters, she heard about them soon enough. It worried her, not because Gendry couldn't defend himself, but because it seemed like it was just a matter of time before their verbal assault became physical, and she feared the consequences Gendry might have to face.

With heaviness still in her heart, Arya found herself still thinking of Jaqen every day. She'd heard nothing from him since that day by the river, not that she expected anything. However, the words they'd exchanged and the dark expressions on his face continued to cause her guilt and sadness late at night when the memory would creep back into her mind. Gossip Spyder had reported nothing further about them, and the fact that news of their breakup had not yet broken meant that Jaqen was keeping his silence as much as she was. As it always was, Arya knew that it was only a matter of
Sansa

Robb was completing his internship at Stark Industries that day and to celebrate their parents had planned on taking the whole family to dinner that Friday night. Sansa had thought that Robb would have been more excited about going back North, but instead her brother had lamented that his stay in King's Landing had been so short.

"I thought you were looking forward to going back to your apartment with Jon and Theon," Sansa had said to him that morning. "Just last week you were complaining about how strict mom's house rules are, now that you're used to having so much freedom."

"Yes, well..." Robb had grinned sheepishly. "That was before I met Jeyne Westerling."

Sansa had grinned back. "So, she's the reason I've seen you smiling at your phone so often. Is she your new girlfriend?"

"Don't be silly," Robb had said, "neither of us is ready for a long-distance relationship, so we decided to stay friends for now."

"Ah! But, you have discussed it with her."

Robb's smile had widened. "It's gonna happen, trust me. Spring break is the next time I'll have time off, and there's a good chance I'll be back!"

"Spring break?" Sansa had frowned.

"I know that the change in seasons is not so obvious here in the south, but winter is nearly over. Spring is eleven days away, and if I counted right, Spring Break will be in six weeks. Expect to see me back in April!"

Time had been passing, and while she had made note of dates in terms of when assignments were due and counting days until the weekend so that she could hang out with Sandor, in the back of her mind was always the knowledge that another deadline was looming. She'd done her best over the last two months not to stress about it, like Sandor had told her to do, but with the month of March just days away, and with Robb calling attention to that fact, all of the stress and worry reappeared all at once. Sandor would soon find out whether he'd been accepted to The University of Valyria. If he was rejected, he would decide between the other colleges he'd already received offers from. Senior Prom was to be held in May, and by June he would be graduating from high school. By the end of August he would be far away from her.

The months were passing faster than she expected, and the thought that she and Sandor would have only six months left before they were forced to separate caused her some distress. Even with her best attempt at hiding it Sandor had sensed that something was bothering her when he had picked her up for school that morning.

"What's on your mind?" he'd asked when she'd been less than her talkative self.

"Oh, nothing," Sansa had said with a shake of her head. "Robb's internship ends today and father's taking us all out for dinner tonight. Also, I won't be able to see you until tomorrow afternoon."

"That's fine." Sandor had nodded. "But, that's not the real reason you're being unusually quiet, is it?"
"Robb's also leaving tomorrow morning," Sansa had said, "it's been nice having him around these past two weeks."

"Oh," Sandor had said, seeming to accept her reason. "You'll see him again soon, though."

"He said he'd be back for Spring Break, though it's more for Jeyne Westerling than anything."

Sandor had chuckled. "Funny how the bachelor auction brings people together like that."

Sansa had clucked her tongue. "I even joked with him about meeting the woman of his dreams at the auction."

The change in topic had taken Sandor's focus away from her blue mood, but her melancholy persisted throughout the day, prompting her friends to ask about it during lunch.

"It's nothing," Sansa told them, "I'm just realizing how quickly the year seems to be passing."

"I know what will cheer you up," Randa said, "the Tourney is coming up, and I think we should all go."

"Oh, yeah!" Mya grinned. "The Tourney Fields Festival! It's that time of year already?"

"Is it that good? Is it worth going?" Sansa wondered, interested in the idea of live music.

"We went last year and it was awesome! It's definitely worth going. Let me check who's gonna be performing this year..." Randa took out her phone and a moment later she had the full list of artists at her fingertips, and she recited some of them out aloud. "...In addition to the big names, there's a bunch of local acts that have been invited too. Oh! Look, the Brotherhood Without Banners is in the lineup."

"That's awesome," Sansa said, nodding her head and getting excited at the idea.

"We should all definitely go," Randa said again, "it'll be one of the last times we'll all get to hang out as high-schoolers. Us seniors are graduating soon."

"Sounds like a great idea," Jeyne said, "count me in!"

"Let's ask the boys when they get here," Mya said excitedly.

Sansa and Sandor had recently begun to sit with Sansa's friends during lunch, a few days a week. Sandor seemed to prefer her to himself during the breaks, but he knew that she liked spending time with her friends too, and for her sake he had quietly followed her. Luckily for him, Mya's boyfriend Lothor Brune had also come to sit with them. Sandor and Lothor had been on the football team together, and had been part of Joffrey's crowd before Sansa and Joffrey's breakup had effectively split up the group. If not for Lothor's presence, Sansa was sure Sandor would not have been comfortable being the only male in the group.

Sandor and Lothor both arrived at the same time, each carrying a tray piled high with food. While Lothor was not as tall as Sandor, he was just as broad, stocky and muscular. Sansa had always thought him on the plain side, but he looked at Mya with genuine affection and it was obvious to all that they were mad about each other. Lothor sat down next to Mya, and Sandor quickly occupied the spot that Sansa made for him beside her on the bench.

"How do you two guys feel about going to the Tourney?" Randa asked them when they had settled down to their food.
"Can we still get tickets to that?" Lothor asked. "It's only a week away, isn't it?"

"I have connections," Randa grinned. "So, how about it? Let's make memories of our senior year while we can. It's probably the last time we'll all get a chance to hang out like this before final exams and all that."

Sandor looked at Sansa, who grinned at him expectantly. "Guess I'll have to go, if you go."

"Yay!" Sansa clapped her hands like a kid.

"All right, I'm in too." Lothor shrugged and smiled at Mya. "Just don't make me wear a flower wreath on my head, okay?"

"Great!" Randa whooped. "Leave the tickets to me, and we can talk about how we're all going to get to Tourney Fields later. Right now, we have more important things to discuss. Ladies, what are we going to wear?"

Sansa had to admit that she was grateful for the distraction, and while she and the girls discussed the outfits they might wear, Sandor and Lothor talked about the basketball games they'd been following on TV since football season had ended. It was nice, Sansa thought, to be able to share small moments like this with Sandor and her friends while they had the chance. Her friendship with Jeyne Poole had begun because of their shared interest in the choir, and while she'd initially been flattered by the attention she'd received from Randa and Mya, she had never expected them to become real friends, given that they were seniors, popular cheerleaders, and originally part of Joffrey's crowd. They were three of her best friends now, and she would miss Randa and Mya when they graduated. Of the six of them seated around the table at that moment, only she and Jeyne would be returning after the summer holidays. She was suddenly very much looking forward to the Tourney Fields Festival.

That evening, Sansa dressed in smart black trousers which she paired with a soft cashmere sweater and dainty ankle boots in preparation for dinner with her family. Arya had come out of her bedroom as Sansa was making her way downstairs, and Sansa couldn't help but notice how down her sister still looked. She could understand however, that breaking up with someone, even if the breakup was something you wanted, did not necessarily mean you came out of the relationship unscathed.

Arya too was wearing black trousers, one with a wide-leg style and a high waist that she'd matched with a black high-collared blouse. Her hair contrasted brightly with her somber ensemble, as did the bright red lipstick she had painted over her lips and the kohl she'd smudged along her eyes. Arya looked edgy, but the makeup did not fool Sansa.

"You look great," Sansa said to her nonetheless.

Arya smiled as she normally did. "Thanks."

"How has your week been?" Sansa asked in what she hoped was a casual tone as they walked down the stairs together.

Arya shrugged. "Okay, I guess. Just taking it day by day, like you said to do."

"Do your friends know?" Sansa asked quietly, and the look Arya gave her meant she understood exactly who she was referring to.

"Yeah." Arya nodded. "My friends know."

There had been a micro-expression on Arya's face which lasted barely a second, but Sansa had seen...
it, and she understood that something had happened between Arya and Gendry. Whatever had
happened, it too was causing her sister anguish.

Their venue that night was a Michelin starred restaurant called *The Ravenry* located at *The Grand
Citadel Hotel*. Their father had ordered the limousine to transport them that evening, and once their
party of seven had been seated, Sansa was glad to see that at least for the moment, Arya was able to
push aside her troubles and enjoy their last dinner with Robb before he returned north.

"It's been lovely having you with us this past fortnight, Robb." Catelyn had reached over to squeeze
his hand across the table. "I wish you could stay longer."

"I'll be back in April, mother." Robb had smiled at their mother. "During Spring Break, so please
have my room ready for me!"

"Really?" Catelyn had looked at him with mild surprise, before her eyes had narrowed suspiciously.
"I suspect this is to do with a certain young lady, am I correct?"

"She caught you out, Robb." Ned had shaken his head at him. "You sounded far too eager to be
coming here for Spring Break instead of...where was it that Theon 'dragged' you and Jon to last
spring? The Bahamas, if I remember correctly."

Robb grinned unapologetically. "It's all thanks to you, mother. I would never have met Jeyne
Westerling if you hadn't nominated me for the bachelor auction."

"He's right, mother." Sansa was unable to prevent her own smile from her lips.

Catelyn surprised them all by responding with a smile of her own, laced with a touch of smugness.

"That's right. It was *my* idea to enter you in the auction. Without *me*, you would still be a stranger to
Jeyne Westerling. Let that be a lesson to you all...your mother always knows what's best for all of
you."

Her statement was met by a chorus of "Oh, mom!" followed by laughter. The mood at their table
was lively, and conversation revolved mainly around various family members interspersed with small
amounts of gossip. There was a mention of the Baratheons, and a little about Gendry, but Sansa was
glad when their mother hastily changed the subject.

"You never know who may be listening," Catelyn had said, but it was more for Arya's sake that
Sansa was thankful for the change in topic.

Arya had visibly stilled for a moment at the mention of Gendry, but resumed eating when their father
addressed Robb once more.

"What are your intentions after graduating, Robb?" he asked as he cut into his steak. "I would have
gladly given you this analyst role if you'd been interested in it. I know you could have done the job."

"Did you offer him a role, father?" Bran asked curiously.

"I did, but he refused."

"Why didn't you want the role, Robb?" Bran asked him. "You're good at math, you could easily do
it."

Robb had shaken his head. "I'm interested in a more hands-on role. If it was a role in operations I
would have been more than keen. I don't want to sit behind a computer looking at numbers all day."
Besides, Willas is more suited for the role anyway."

"Willas?" Sansa repeated. It was now her turn to pause.

Robb turned to her. "Willas Tyrell. I'm sure you know him."

"Of course, I do," Sansa said as she frowned. "Willas is going to be working at Stark Industries?"

"He is," Ned replied, "though I've only offered him a one-year contract for now. I have no doubts that he has the capability to do the role, but I've always thought he was more interested in racehorses than economics."

"Why Willas?" Sansa asked, hoping she didn't come across as rude. "Was there no one else?"

Her father shrugged. "I mentioned to Mace that I had a position for a Business Analyst available during our meeting last week, and he had Willas submit a resumé. The young man is undeniably clever, and I saw no reason why I shouldn't hire him. He will be working very closely under my guidance as the tasks I will be giving him are quite urgent. He will start in a part-time capacity until he graduates in May, then he'll work full-time hours. It also gives me peace of mind that I will not be inviting a stranger into our home as I anticipate we will be doing quite a lot of work outside of hours too, so expect to see more of him in the coming months."

"I see," was all Sansa could think to say.

Shit! She cursed silently. This was a development she certainly had not been expecting, and could have done without entirely. Willas Tyrell was incredibly handsome, incredibly charming, and had she met him a year earlier she imagined that her old self would have found him incredibly appealing. As things currently stood, her present self was left cold by Willas Tyrell. There was no spark there at all, no hint of attraction whatsoever, on her part anyway. *A box of wet matches would have more spark*, she thought with some derision.

Sansa had been acquainted with Willas long enough now to know that beneath his charm, Willas was actually quite...well, boring. Out of his more attention-seeking siblings, Willas was the most studious, and Sansa suspected that the charm he employed was practiced, enabling him to fit in with his more dazzling siblings. From the conversations she'd had with him, and what she'd observed of him, she'd seen that the real Willas Tyrell was bookish and gentle, prone to acts of chivalry, and as Robb had said, perfectly suited to the role of Business Analyst. He was the perfect catch...for someone else. Without underestimating him, Sansa knew that she could handle Willas and his subtle hints and attempts at flirtation. It was not for herself that she now became concerned. Her consternation was all on behalf of a certain Hound.
Good morning everyone!

Spring is here and nothing brings more people out into the warm King's Landing sunshine than a good outdoor music festival. Lucky for us, the Tourney Fields Festival is this weekend! The full list of big-name artists and DJ's are on the website, though I must give a shout out to our very own Brotherhood Without Banners who will also be performing on Saturday. Their set is scheduled for late afternoon, so be sure to cheer our boys on!

I'm sure many of you are all looking forward to it, but for those who are unaware, the biggest school dance in KL Prep's calendar will be happening later this month. The annual Spring Fling will be held in the final week before Spring Break, and with Margaery Tyrell heading the planning committee we can only imagine how extra this year's dance will be! Ateliers and couturiers all over the city are going to be busy with the coming Prom season, not to mention all the soirees and garden parties that bring all of King's Landing society out of winter hibernation!

First round college offers are also due for release from some of the biggest colleges in the nation around this time, and I know many of our seniors will be anxiously waiting for the arrival of those thick envelopes that could only mean an acceptance offer. I heard that King's Landing College, White Harbor College and Vale University have already issued their first-round placements. All you seniors out there, good luck!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Sandor

Coach Selmy was wearing a rare smile. The old man's weather-beaten features became even more lined and crinkled around his eyes and the corners of his mouth as he gazed at Sandor from across his office desk. There was only one other teacher in the Physical Education Department staff room at that moment, Coach Unella, the coach of the girls' volleyball team, and she too had turned to regard Sandor with a quiet awe when he had broken the news to Coach Selmy.

"You did it," Coach Selmy said, and he reached over the table to shake Sandor's hand. "Congratulations, Clegane."

Sandor shook his hand. "I couldn't have done it without your support."

"I barely did anything. You did the hard work, and it has paid off. The University of Valyria football team will be all the stronger with you in their ranks."

"I just want to keep doing what I'm good at, Coach."

"I have no doubts you'll do just fine, my boy." Coach Selmy continued to smile at him, his eyes twinkling with what could be taken for pride. "Only one or two of King's Landing Prep graduates get accepted to The University of Valyria each year, almost always for academic merit, and rarely are they offered full scholarships. You, however, have achieved a first for our school, and the first in my career as a football coach. The University of Valyria has offered you a full-ride Football Scholarship,
and the opportunity to play at the highest level of college football. You ought to be proud of yourself, because I certainly am."

"Thanks, Coach." Sandor was unused to hearing praise and he didn't quite know how to act, but he had wanted to tell Coach Selmy the news in person, and to thank him for his guidance. "I wanted to thank you for helping me with my application, and for your recommendation. I'm sure it helped."

"You're more than welcome, Clegane. You're one hell of an athlete, and I have no doubts you'll go far in your football career."

Coach Selmy dismissed him from his office not long after and Sandor then made his way toward the cafeteria where Sansa and her friends were waiting for him. In his backpack, tucked in between the pages of his chemistry textbook so that it wouldn't get crumpled, was the fat envelope with the fancy crest of The University of Valyria emblazoned in the corner that had arrived in his mailbox the day before. He knew what it signified the moment he had laid eyes on it, as only a 'fat' envelope could mean that he'd been accepted. Everyone knew that rejection letters arrived in skinny envelopes.

He had not been willing to believe it at first, and the envelope had lain unopened on his desk for at least a couple of hours as he'd sat on his bed, just staring at it. When he had finally, and carefully, torn open the top of the envelope and unfolded the official letter offering him a full-ride Football Scholarship, he'd had to read it three times before it had finally sunk in. He was going to attend his first-choice college, and he wouldn't have to worry about anything except playing football and keeping his grades at the standard required to maintain his scholarship. A full-ride scholarship at Valyria meant that his tuition, student fees, accommodation, books and supplies would be fully covered for his four years of study. In addition, he would also receive a generous annual stipend for living expenses. Sandor knew that without this scholarship, The University of Valyria would have been completely out of reach for him.

After the third time he'd read the letter his first instinct had been to grab his phone to call Sansa to tell her the news, but he'd stopped short of pressing the call button because he'd had a sudden flashback of Sansa's face the last time they had spoken about him going away for college. He'd hesitated, because he knew that while Sansa would be genuinely happy for him, he also knew that the news would bring up the issues he'd forced them to ignore over the last couple of months. He was going away, that was inevitable, and neither of them knew how they were going to handle the separation. I can't ignore it now. We can't ignore it any longer. Sandor had then decided that Sansa deserved to hear the news face to face, so he'd mentioned nothing about it when Sansa had called him later that evening for their nightly chat. However, when morning had arrived and he'd picked her up for school, he'd found himself unable to bring it up. He had still been unwilling to remind her about their impending forced separation and ruin her good mood.

Instead he'd chosen to tell Coach Selmy first, without whose help Sandor's application to Valyria may not have happened. He rarely ever felt genuine gratefulness towards anybody, simply because he did his best never to be reliant on anyone, but Coach Selmy had gone out of his way for him on numerous occasions, beyond the responsibilities of what a normal teacher would do – beyond what any other teach would have done for him – and Sandor couldn't help but be grateful towards one of the few adults he had come to respect.

It had been Coach Selmy who'd pulled him aside in the past to ask him if he was okay, noticing whenever Sandor succumbed to the black moods that often plagued him. It was Coach Selmy who'd come to his house to check on him during his self-imposed exile following the malfunctioning torch incident at the championship game, and Coach Selmy who'd personally written him that letter of commendation. Sandor usually loathed being referred to as an athlete, because it would often be
accompanied by a comparison to his much-loathed older brother, but such was his regard for the man that Sandor did not mind when Coach Selmy had called him an athlete.

He had yet to inform his own father, but Sandor suspected that Theodor Clegane's reaction would be much the same as when Gregor had landed the scholarship to King's Landing College.

"I don't need to pay for a thing, that's what you're telling me?" had been Theodor's only words to Gregor.

Sandor would email him about going to college in another state, if only to let him know when he'd be leaving the house in Gregor's care once more. As hard as it was to believe that the buffoon could use his brain to that extent, Gregor was actually graduating from college in a few months, and he had every intention of moving back home after graduation. Sandor abhorred the idea of having to live with him again, and for this reason only was he glad to be moving away.

Pushing aside thoughts of his family, he approached the cafeteria and quickly spotted Sansa and her friends at the table they had claimed by the large window that looked out onto the quad. He grabbed a tray and piled a healthy amount of food onto it, before paying and walking over to join Sansa, the girl called Jeyne, and the other seniors. He nodded at Lothor Brune and grunted a hello to the girls.

"Hi, Sandor!" Sansa greeted him with a wide grin on her face. "Guess what? Randa got the tickets for the Tourney this morning. I'm so excited for the weekend!"

"Great," Sandor returned, offering her a smile of his own. "What time do want me to pick you up on Saturday?"

"Eleven?" Sansa suggested. "Everyone's planning to meet at the Tourney grounds by midday so we can have lunch together, so we'll have an hour to get there."

"Fine by me," Sandor agreed.

Sandor then listened as Sansa and her friends chatted excitedly about what they would be wearing and which artists they were most looking forward to seeing. Lothor had tuned out of the conversation long before Sandor had got there and was engrossed with something on his phone, so Sandor was able to eat his lunch without having to engage in small talk.

"Prepare for a full day out, okay Sansa?" Randa was saying.

"Bring a picnic blanket if you have one," Mya said to her.

"And, don't forget to bring a jacket," Jeyne advised, "it might be warm in the day now, but the Tourney grounds can get cold at night, being so out in the open and all."

"Okay, got it." Sansa nodded excitedly. "Can Saturday get here already!"

Watching her and seeing her buzzing with so much excitement and anticipation, Sandor decided that telling her about his acceptance letter could wait. I'll tell her after the Tourney, he thought. There was no point in killing her mood.

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**Gendry**

The sound of a wailing guitar, a rhythmic bass line, harmonic keyboards and rolling percussion filled the basement rehearsal space of the *Brotherhood Without Banners* below The Hollow. The sound of the instruments was frequently punctuated with the angsty vocals of their lead singer. They were
rehearsing for their upcoming show at the Tourney, and as usual, Beric was being his pedantic self.

"Hold up, hold up." Beric held his hand up and they all stopped playing. "Gendry, repeat those last sixteen bars again, please. This time, could you really emphasize that riff?"


"Let's take it from the second verse... and a one, two... one, two, three, four!"

Beric and Edric had gaped in shock when Gendry had walked into the waiting room before the Bachelor Auction, dressed in his fancy suit and his hair slicked back. He had been the last bachelor to arrive having utilized an alternate entrance into the room to avoid being seen.

"Way to keep a secret, you damned Bull!" Edric had punched his shoulder at the time. "Why didn't you tell us you were going to be in the auction too?"

"I didn't know I was going to be in it until a few days ago," Gendry had told them. "My... er... sponsors, kept it a secret even from me."

"Sponsors, hmm?" Beric had given him a very telling look.

His friends had put two and two together eventually, realizing that Gendry's absences from band rehearsal were due to his grooming and preparations for his debut into society. Beric and Edric had understood why he'd chosen to keep his silence, but now that Gendry's deportment classes and the auction were over, Beric had been working him hard during rehearsals. Gendry had been told weeks before that they had a gig at the end of February, but Beric had failed to mention that it was the Tourney Fields Festival, only the biggest outdoor music festival hosted in their corner of the planet.

Growing up in King's Landing, it was impossible not to have heard about the annual festival. He'd always wanted to attend the Tourney with his friends in previous years, but he'd never had the means to before, having to be satisfied with secondhand tales about other people's experiences about the crowds, the food and the music. Now, he was going to be attending as a performer, and he would get the chance to witness the festival from an angle few people got to see... from up on stage, looking out over everyone who'd come to see the Brotherhood.

Between school in the day and rehearsals in the early evening, Gendry's time was well occupied. Even when he got home, homework and the chores that Ellen made all her children perform around the house took up what idle time he might have had. Mentally, he'd allowed himself very little opportunity to dwell on much else, but in the dead of night, in those moments before sleep claimed him, Arya would always steal into his thoughts.

He hadn't seen much of her since he'd found out about her breakup with Jaqen, not that he'd been keeping himself away from her or anything like that. In fact, he had made it a point to acknowledge her and say hello if he passed her in the halls at school. He had meant it when he'd told her that he wanted things to go back to how they were, or as close to it as possible, and he hoped to do that by normalizing their daily interactions. Hot Pie had told him that Arya seemed to be doing okay, and did not appear to be too hung up about Jaqen.

"Arya's not really the moping type though, is she?" Hot Pie had pointed out. "She's probably keeping herself busy to keep her mind off it, you know?"

Gendry was using the same tactic, so he didn't worry too much about Arya's sudden reclusiveness. However, he couldn't help but feel even more antipathy towards Jaqen H'ghar. He'd never liked the
guy, but he liked Jaqen even less now that he knew that he had broken up with Arya because he was moving to New York to become a famous rock star. Jaqen had struck him as the kind of guy who'd tough it out during a long-distance relationship, the kind of guy who'd 'make it work' no matter what. There was a reason I never liked him, and it turns out it's because he's a douche after all.

Gendry finished playing the last chord of the song, holding the note until Beric signaled 'cut'. All of them waited to see how their leader would react, and only when Beric nodded in approval did they all breathe and relax their poses. After the fifth run-through, they'd finally found the best version of Beric's newest composition that he was happy with.

"All right!" Beric whooped. "Let's go with that. Nice work, guys!"

"Tourney Fields, here we come!" Thoros shouted.

"I can't believe we're going to be playing at the Tourney!" Tom exclaimed.

Gendry grinned as he took a sip from his water bottle. Excitement was high amongst them, and all of their friends were going to watch them. Lommy had also called him to let him know that the Flea Bottom crew would be attending too. Gendry smiled, remembering Lommy's reaction when he'd learned about who Gendry's father turned out to be.

"Holy fuckballs, dude!" Lommy had shouted over the phone some days after the official news had broken. "The guys and I had seen all that stuff about you in the Herald, but we didn't want to believe it until you said something. We always suspected you'd be the son of someone important, and now we find out you really are the son of Robert fucking Baratheon and that is insane!"

"No kidding," Gendry had said with a tired laugh, "but it's not all it's cracked up to be. I don't have anything to do with him. In fact, I've barely spoken to him at all."

"Who the fuck cares about that?" Lommy had laughed loudly, sounding much like a braying donkey at that moment. "You're rich, and that's what matters!"

"Always straight to the point," Gendry had said, glad that Lommy was unfazed by his true identity.

"I've known you too long," his friend had stated, "I just need you to promise me that you'll never forget where you came from."

"Of course, I won't," Gendry had told him.

"And, that you'll never forget about your childhood friends,"

"I seriously doubt you'd let me forget you even if I wanted to,"

"It's good that you feel that way," Lommy had chuckled, "because I'm about to hit you up for VIP passes to your band's show at the Tourney!"

"You're a jackass, Lommy." Gendry had laughed. "I'm sure I can get passes for you and the guys, but only because you asked so nicely."

"You're the best, Gendry!"

"See you at the Tourney."

Gendry had made a mental note to call the boys to plan a night out after the Tourney. Lommy and his friends had made attempts to keep in touch, even coming to see him perform on numerous
occasions, while he'd only gone to see them that one time at the 'Lucky 8'. Lommy was right, and it was very important that he never forget where he came from.

"Let's call it a night," Beric now said, "I think we know what we're doing now."

"Excellent!" Edric was already out from behind his drum kit and putting his sticks away even before Beric had finished speaking. "I'm starving!"

Gendry unplugged his guitar and began packing up just as his own stomach began to growl loudly. "I could do with food, too."

"The kitchen is still open upstairs," Beric said after a quick glance at the clock on the wall, "but, you'd better hurry."

"Hey, Beric," Thoros called for his attention, "any word on whether you want us to perform at the Spring Fling?"

"Not yet." Beric shrugged. "I was going to think about it after the Tourney."

"Would you mind telling that to Margery Tyrell," Gendry suggested, "she seems to think I can influence your decision somehow."

"Oh, I don't think that's why Margaery's suddenly hanging around you." Edric glanced at Gendry with a cheeky smile on his face. "And, I don't think you really mind, do you?"

Gendry sighed. "I can't believe you think Margaery likes me."

Edric wiggled his eyebrows. "You can be real slow on the uptake sometimes, Gendry."

Gendry hated to admit it, but even he had noticed the extra attention Margaery had been paying him over the last week. One day she had approached their group as they were sitting on the steps at the Performing Arts building with a request for the *Brotherhood* to perform at the Spring Fling. Beric had not seemed crazy about the idea, but after exchanging glances with Gendry and Edric, he'd given Margaery a non-committal 'I'll think about it'.

"She's not going to give up that easily you know," Allyria had told Beric, "I've heard she can be very persuasive."

"I've heard that too," Beric had said, "but, we're going to be busy with the Tourney, then after that there's the *Epic Day Out* in Essos City to prepare for, and I was hoping just to chill out at the Spring Fling. It is our last one as seniors after all."

"Then, just tell her no," Edric had suggested.

Beric had not been ready to rule out the possibility completely, and he'd promised to think about it for the meantime. Margaery had begun to appear at the steps of the Performing Arts building almost daily during lunch breaks, which they had all expected, but it soon became clear that her real target was Gendry. The polite nods in the halls that Margaery used to give him turned into thousand-megawatt smiles followed by casual touches on his shoulder or forearm while she engaged him in small talk, usually beginning with a question about Beric's decision about performing at Spring Fling, before she would ask him about topics that were more specific to him. Gendry had continued to believe that it was all still an effort to convince Beric, until Edric had said otherwise.

"It's you that she's after, Gendry," Edric had stated.
"What the hell are you talking about?" Gendry had frowned. "She's trying to get me to talk Beric into saying yes."

"Wake up, dude." Edric had given him an exasperated look. "You seriously haven't noticed how much attention she's been giving to you lately? Not to mention the fact Margaery bid for you at the Bachelor Auction."

"Ah, but she quit bidding for me half-way through," Gendry had pointed out.

"True," Edric had agreed, "but out of all the guys in that lineup – my handsome self included – Margaery only raised her hand for you and Robb Stark. Joffrey Baratheon didn't even get a look at."

"You're not seriously suggesting what I think you're suggesting, are you?" Gendry had shaken his head.

Edric had grinned. "Olenna Tyrell seems to like you too. The Queen of Thorns does not go around embracing just anyone, and the old lady hugged you in front of everyone, so it's safe to say she already approves of you as a potential future grandson-in-law."

"You're reading too much into things," Gendry had dismissed Edric’s claim at first, but from that point on he did find himself second-guessing Margaery's actions each time she even looked his way.

Regardless, whatever Margaery's intentions towards him were did not matter. She had even less chances with him than Jazmine Choi, not that he seriously believed that Margaery could be interested in him that way. Margaery and the rest of the Tyrells were cordial towards him because he was Robert Baratheon's son, and if not for that, Margaery would have remained as oblivious of his existence as she had been before the King's Landing Herald had publicized his birth certificate.

Margaery aside, Jazmine was still an occasional presence at his side, sometimes joining his group at lunch with her friend Jessika. Although she had mostly backed off in her pursuit of him, he knew that she was only waiting for some signal from him, so he was always mindful about doing or saying anything around her that could be potentially misleading.

A year ago, he would never have imagined that there would be girls like Jazmine Choi, let alone Margaery Tyrell, who would be interested in him. Gendry Waters from a year ago would not have hesitated at dating either of them...but, he also did not know Arya Stark a year ago, and no matter how much he tried to tell himself that moving on was the best thing for him, he just had no interest in looking at other girls. Not yet, at least.

"How long are you going to keep denying that Margaery likes you?" Edric now asked him.

Gendry shrugged and picked up his guitar case, ready to head upstairs for some food. "I'll keep denying it until Margaery tells it to my face, and even then, she'll have to spell it out before I believe her."

"Dude, why are you playing so hard to get? First you turn down Jazmine and now Margaery?"

Gendry laughed as he followed Edric up to the restaurant, and while they ate their meal he humored his friend and joked with him about what Margaery would have to do to win his affections. If Edric was correct about Margaery, then he was truly flattered, but for the moment, he decided that the best thing for him was to be by himself, forget about dating girls and just focus on his music, reconnect with old friends and perhaps make new friends too.

Arya
She understood what Jazmine had been trying to tell her that night at the auction. She'd wondered what the story of *The Dog and His Shadow* had to do with her, and now she knew. *Those who covet all may end up losing it all.* Jazmine had been trying to warn her about being too greedy, warning her against chasing after Gendry or risk losing him as well as Jaqen in the process. Perhaps what she had been chasing was a shadow after all, because whatever attraction Gendry might have felt for her was no longer there, and what she had jumped into that river for had been nothing but a reflection of her own wishful thinking.

She'd lost Gendry and Jaqen, just as Jazmine had warned her. Of course, Arya was aware that Jazmine's warning was meant to be taken literally and she could see how Jazmine had been inclined to think she was being unfaithful to Jaqen. But, Arya had never set out to 'covet' both Gendry and Jaqen, regardless of how circumstances may have appeared. Technicalities and intentions aside, Arya had to admit that emotionally she had been unfaithful to Jaqen, and he had known it. She'd committed so many transgressions against Gendry and Jaqen in her blindness, and been so impulsive, unable to foresee the consequences of her actions or take a moment to really see and understand the situation in front of her. It had all been to her loss.

In the days since her breakup with Jaqen, she had been doing her best to heal and recover emotionally, but shortly after Gendry's rejection the story of *The Dog and His Shadow* had lodged into her head one day when she'd spotted Jazmine talking to Gendry outside his classroom. It had irritated her to remember how Jazmine had whispered that warning in her ear, and doubly irritated her when she'd realized how the older girl had somehow correctly predicted the outcome of her sad love triangle. Her irritation was made worse when she realized that she was still jealous of Jazmine and how easily she was able to approach Gendry, smile at him and talk to him. Arya wanted so badly to be able to do the same, but knew that this was impossible with how things stood. Even if Gendry had been acknowledging her when they passed in the halls, his rejection still stung and it was all she could do to nod at him before averting her gaze in case he saw how much she was hurting.

Gendry appeared unaffected by their last conversation, proving to her that he had meant every word of what he'd said and that he really was over her. His popularity had never been greater, and with Margaery Tyrell now openly flirting with him whenever they were in the same vicinity, his eligibility had skyrocketed. Arya knew that she should have been glad for him. Things were finally going his way, and he looked happy, but realizing that part of the reason for his happiness was because he had chosen to move on from her made the wounds he'd inflicted in her heart sting all the more.

Robb had returned to the north a week earlier, and within hours of his return to the apartment he shared with Jon and Theon, Arya had received a call from Jon.

"Little sister, how are you?" Jon had asked casually.

"Robb told you about my break up with Jaqen, didn't he?" Arya had asked the obvious.

"Yeah, he did," Jon had said. "I'm sorry to hear that, Arya."

"Robb said he wasn't going to say anything," Arya had said irritably, ignoring Jon's words.

"He didn't give me any details," Jon had added, as though it would lessen Robb's guilt. "I asked him how you were and made him tell me the truth when he took too long to answer."

Arya had sighed. "Oh, Jon…I've messed up big time."

"I'm here to listen if you want to tell me about it," Jon had said quietly.
So, Arya had told Jon everything, beginning at the Bachelor Auction and ending with the last conversation she’d had with Gendry in the courtyard outside the science building.

"Wait… wait," Jon had interrupted, the line crackling as Arya pictured him shifting the phone against his ear. "You have feelings for Gendry? As in, romantic feelings?"

"That's what I just told you," Arya had grunted.

"Finally!" Jon's exclamation had startled her. "You've finally realized it!"

"What do you mean?" Arya had demanded. "You knew?"

"Well, yeah. It was obvious to me when we had that talk back in December. I'm really glad you're finally being honest with yourself, Arya."

"Hmm... much good it's done for me."

"Ah, you mustn't think like that." Jon's tone had taken on a soothing quality. "It's always much better to be honest about these things."

"I know, I know." Arya had sighed. "I just feel so helpless right now. I don't know what to do and I hate feeling like this."

"What do you want to happen, Arya?"

"I want to stop hurting," she'd replied automatically, "and, I want to stop feeling guilty about Jaqen. I want things to be okay between me and Gendry. I...I want to be with Gendry. That's what I want."

"I don't think those things are impossible to achieve,"

"Um, you did hear me say that Gendry rejected me, right? You heard how he's told me that he just wants to be friends after all."

"Yeah, he may have said that," Jon had said in agreement, "but, I'm not convinced he's telling the truth."

"He sounded pretty convincing to me,"

"There's something called self-preservation, Arya." Jon had declared. "I'll admit that I don't know him all that well, but from everything you've told me – including how he kissed you that night – it sounds to me that Gendry's backing off because he's convinced that he really has no chance with you, and he's trying to let you go so he can get over you."

"But—"

"Gendry never struck me as the type of guy who'd just kiss a girl for no reason," Jon had stated, "and, I doubt that kiss was as meaningless to him as you think it was. There's still a chance, Arya."

Arya had sighed into the phone. "I want to believe that, Jon. So, so much."

"It won't be easy though," Jon had warned her, "you'll probably find it difficult to convince him about your feelings. After all, you've rejected him before in favor of another guy."

"What do I have to do to convince him?"

"That, I can't help you with, unfortunately. You know Gendry better than I do, so you'll have to
really put a lot of thought into what it will take to convince him."

"What if you're wrong, Jon?"

"What if I'm right?"

Arya had acknowledged that her brother had a point. "Even if you are right, I think I should give it some time before I do anything…if I do anything. It's too soon…for everyone."

She was super conscious of how hurtful it would be to Jaqen if she should move on so soon after their breakup, and at the very least she needed to give both of them time to cool off. Her guilt, she realized was turning out to be an unexpected roadblock. *I'm capable of inflicting so much pain, especially towards someone I'm supposed to care about…towards a boyfriend…I could easily do it again, so why should I deserve to have Gendry as my boyfriend?*

"There's no rush," Jon had replied, "you should give yourself all the time you need. And, if you do decide to go after Gendry, it's best if you have a clear conscience and a clearer heart."

Conversation with Jon almost always left her feeling thoughtful afterwards, and her brother's words would play over in her mind in the days following his call. Hot Pie was conscious of her ongoing dejectedness, though she made sure to keep him in the dark about her true feelings for Gendry, so he often tried to engage her in conversations that were light in content. She was aware that he was doing his best to cheer her up, and she appreciated the effort he was making for her.

"Hey, I have a suggestion that may cheer you up," Hot Pie said to her while they were eating lunch in the school cafeteria on Friday.

"What might that be?" Arya asked as she nibbled on her sandwich.

"We should go to the Tourney this weekend," Hot Pie replied with a smile, "it'll be fun!"

"That's tomorrow, and I heard that tickets were sold out."

Hot Pie's smiled widened as he then pulled out an envelope from his backpack. "Good thing I bought some before they sold out."

"Oh, my god!" Arya gaped at the two tickets Hot Pie produced from the envelope. "You really do have tickets."

"I'll pick you up tomorrow morning, okay?"

"Okay, sure." Arya shrugged. "I'm free anyway. I just can't be out too late because I have to be up early on Sunday morning."

"Why?"

"I promised Bran I'd go with him to this symposium thing."

"Don't worry, I'll have you back home before your curfew."

"Have you told Gendry that we're going to be there?"

"I told him we might be. I wasn't sure you'd be interested you see, but Gendry said he'd get us VIP passes just in case. Isn't that awesome?"

"Awesome," Arya agreed.
At a quarter to eleven the following morning Arya found herself waiting in the foyer of Chateau Maegor for Hot Pie to arrive, half-listening to Sansa's excited chatter as she waited for Sandor with her.

"Sandor will be here soon," Sansa said, "you should have told me you were going to the Tourney, we could have given you a ride."

"It was a last-minute thing," Arya told her, "Hot Pie only told me yesterday."

"That really is short notice." Sansa glanced at her, skimming over the sweater, jeans and boots she was wearing. "You didn't even get a chance to plan your festival outfit."

Arya really took notice of Sansa's outfit then, noting that her sister had teamed her denim cutoff shorts with flat ankle boots, an embroidered peasant blouse with the most voluminous sleeves she'd ever seen, all topped off with a crown of blue roses and ribbons set upon her glorious auburn tresses. Sansa's eyes were also lined with shimmery glitter, while her neck and arms were adorned with beaded necklaces and bangles.

"Wow, you look straight out of some 70's movie."

"That was the idea," Sansa said with a smile, "it's a pity you didn't have time to put an outfit together."

Arya shrugged. "It's not a big deal."

"Oh!" Sansa suddenly exclaimed. "Come with me!"

Her sister then grabbed her by the wrist and all but dragged her back upstairs towards Sansa's bedroom.

"Sansa, what are you doing?" Arya felt compelled to ask even as she was being stripped of her sweater.

"Did you really need to ask?" Sansa returned. "Take your jeans off, and quickly. Move it!"

Arya undressed down to her underwear and literally stood there as Sansa re-dressed her. Two minutes later she was looking at a totally altered reflection of herself in the mirror.

"Whoa," Arya said as she turned from one side to the other, pleased with what she saw. "I didn't know you had clothes like this."

Sansa grinned at her. "I thought you knew me better than that, of course I had multiple outfits ready just in case."

Arya was now dressed in a long black skirt which bore slits up to her knees on both sides. She had a black, midriff bearing off-shoulder blouse on top which showed off her slim shoulders, and a fringed suede vest layered over the ensemble. Sansa then looped a gold chain about her neck, along with strings of glass beads and a leather choker. The last thing Sansa did was roll Arya's jacket into a neat ball before stowing it into Arya's backpack.

"You're going to need that jacket later, so when it gets cold swap the vest over."

"Thanks, Sansa." Arya gave her sister a smile as she once again turned in front of the mirror, impressed with the boho-chic look that she had put together.
"You're welcome." Sansa grinned back at her.

They both heard the crunch of gravel outside, along with the deep rumbling noise they knew belonged to Sandor's Mustang.

"That's my ride," Sansa said as she hurried out of her room and back down the stairs.

Arya followed behind her, reaching the still opened doorway in time to see Sansa getting into Sandor's car. Sansa waved and stuck her head out of the passenger side window.

"If you need a ride home later, call me," her sister said before she and Sandor drove away.

Hot Pie arrived at the gate while she could still hear Sandor's Mustang in the distance.

"Sorry I'm a little late," Hot Pie apologized as Arya strapped her seat belt on. "I had to stop by The Hollow to pick up the VIP passes that Gendry left for us."

"Are the guys heading to the Tourney now?"

Hot Pie nodded. "I got to The Hollow just as they were leaving. Gendry said we can visit them in their dressing room backstage. The VIP passes will get us into a private lounge area and into a viewing section close to the stage."

"That's pretty cool."

"This is exciting, isn't it?" Hot Pie grinned at her before he concentrated on the hour-long drive ahead of them.

The Tourney grounds were situated on the very outskirts of King's Landing's city limits amid open, rolling fields. Hot Pie talked about which acts he was most looking forward to, and the food stalls he was intending on hitting up.

"I've never been to the Tourney before," Hot Pie told her, "though I've been to smaller fringe festivals, the Tourney is the biggest one."

"I've never been to any outdoor festivals ever," Arya admitted, "I was too young, and I couldn't see the appeal. But, I think I see it now."

"We're going to have fun today!" Hot Pie declared.

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Sansa

The sun was shining brightly that day and the spring weather had arrived, bringing with it milder temperatures. Sansa could safely say that she did not miss the northern springs and the muddy puddles created by thawing ice and melting snow. The drive to the Tourney grounds with Sandor beside her turned out to be more fun than she was expecting, with Sandor often reaching over the gears to squeeze her bare thigh and flash her rare smiles and looks that flitted between desire, playfulness and other expressions she couldn't readily name. Sandor had been showing her unfamiliar faces lately, though she had yet to recognize them all, she knew that these new expressions meant good things.

The scenery changed as they reached the city's outer limits and suburbia gave way to larger acreages, woodlands and farmlands. They reached the tourney fields just before noon and Sansa was amazed by the scale and the sheer amount of organization that would have been required to host the Tourney.
Fields Festival. The signs and banners they had passed along the way had given no indication of the carnival atmosphere they now found themselves entering. Sandor drove his car onto the grass as the attendant at the gate had indicated and it took him some minutes to navigate the seemingly endless rows of vehicles already parked in the designated parking area before they reached an empty space. From there they walked over a grass covered hill, following other festival goers until they reached the blockades and barriers that led to a large white tent where tickets and ID and security checks were being carried out. Once they had been issued with color coded wristbands and past the gate, they immediately came upon a space that had been designed to look like a medieval market place with rows and rows of stalls selling festival souvenirs like t-shirts and headbands, official merchandise with band logos and names of performers, flower crown stalls, and not to mention dozens of food vendors offering every imaginable sweet or savory concoction.

"This is heart attack city," Sandor remarked, before sniffing the air appreciatively. "I smell fried chicken."

Sansa laughed while she dialed Randa's number on her phone. "Hey…yeah, we're here…okay, we'll meet you guys there."

"Where are they?" Sandor asked when she'd hung up.

"They're at a stall selling Japanese food. Apparently, there's a giant inflatable sumo wrestler on top of the roof…like that one!"

Sansa pointed to a stall in the distance, with the aforementioned inflatable sumo wrestler just visible above the tops of the stalls directly in front of them. Sandor took her hand and led the way through the crowded aisles. Randa began to squeal when she caught sight of Sansa's outfit.

"Oh my god! You look so cute!" Randa greeted her with a hug.

"So do you," Sansa said as she gave all her friends a once over, "you all do!"

Randa, Mya and even the normally conservative Jeyne had all chosen to go for a boho-luxe theme with their outfits, with Randa the most extravagant of them in a maxi dress with a slit at the front right to her thighs, matched with a faux-fur gilet and over-the-knee boots. She had also woven silk ribbons into her hair, and topped off her entire look with layers of jewelry and dramatic eye makeup. Mya went for an asymmetrical mini-dress and thigh-high boots, while Jeyne wore tight black jeans artfully ripped and torn in strategic spots, with a gauzy multihued blouse and a matching flower crown on top of her brunette locks.

"Jeyne, you look amazing!" Sansa grasped her friend's hand and made her spin on the spot in front of her.

"Thanks to you," Jeyne said as she twirled around obligingly. "I couldn't have put this outfit together on my own."

The boys, Sandor and Lothor, could not be persuaded to wear anything remotely boho or luxe, choosing to wear their everyday attire of jeans and t-shirts, insisting on comfort above all else.

"Besides, we're going to end up carrying your bags and stuff," Lothor had pointed out.

Lothor had been correct, and now he and Sandor bore backpacks with picnic blankets and jackets belonging to the girls within them. With a shared look over the heads of the giggling bunch of females, they dutifully followed the girls through the crowd as they went from stall to stall buying food and drinks for their lunch. They then found a spot on an expanse of grass that had become an
impromptu picnic area for hungry festival goers. Once all the savory items had been consumed, Mya and Lothor braved the stalls again, returning with an armload of sugar and cinnamon coated, chocolate drizzled morsels for all of them to share.

They began to explore the festival grounds after lunch, wandering between the four main stages that had been spread out over the fields and watching the artists that Randa had tagged on the performance schedule she’d brought with her. Sansa recognized some of the bands as competitors from the Battle of The Bands, others were YouTube and social media famous with loyal followers who had travelled great distances just to watch them perform live. The more well-known acts were scheduled for timeslots later in the afternoon when the larger crowds were expected, while the really big name draw cards had been scheduled to perform after sunset when the crowd was expected to reach peak numbers.

"What time is the Brotherhood playing?" Sansa asked Randa.

"Um, let's see…” Randa flipped the program over and searched until she found the Brotherhood's name. "5PM, at the center stage near the VIP area."

"Wow, they're more popular than I thought," Mya commented, "the center stage is where the big stars are performing later tonight."

"We still have a couple of hours until then." Sansa checked the program again. "There's that rock band Sandor wanted to see, who were they again?"

"Sons of The Harpy," Sandor replied, "are they performing soon?"

"In fifteen minutes. Come on, let's go."

They spotted a lot of familiar faces in the crowd, including people from school and those Sansa recognized from the various social events she had attended with her family. She was having fun, and from the way Sandor was tapping his heel on the ground in time with the music it was safe to say that he too was enjoying himself. Given the number of people she knew and recognized attending the festival, it should not have come as a surprise to her when their group came face to face with Renly Baratheon, accompanied by Margaery Tyrell, all of her brothers, and her brother Garlan's girlfriend Leonette Fossoway.

"Sansa! Fancy meeting you here!" Renly greeted her with an exuberant hug, ignoring Sandor's watchful stare in the process.

"You too, Renly."

Sansa stepped out of his arms and went around the group to greet the rest of his companions, who were all exchanging greetings with the people in her group. Margaery was complimenting Randa on her outfit, while she herself looked like a fashion model, effortlessly chic in a forest green midi-length sheath dress with a crown of golden roses upon her head.

"Nice to see you again, Sansa."

Sansa greeted Willas Tyrell with a pleasant smile, as she had with Loras, Garlan and Leonette, hoping to keep her distance from him as much as possible given Sandor's presence and the dislike he had for the oldest Tyrell son. Willas it seemed, had no qualms approaching her in front of her boyfriend.

"Yeah…you too, Willas." Sansa hoped her voice was friendly enough, despite her less than friendly thoughts towards him at that moment.
"Which acts did you come to see?" Willas smiled at her, clearly ignoring Sandor right behind her.

He's got some guts to ignore Sandor like that, she thought, or he's really not as clever as everyone says he is.

"We came to see Commander Lazer, The Chainpuffers and Empire of the Moon mainly, but we're also going to watch the Brotherhood Without Banners later."

"Ah, my darling new nephew's band is remarkably popular," Renly commented upon hearing Sansa's answer, "we're going to the VIP area to watch them, too."

"Will you ladies and gentlemen be going to the VIP section too?" Margaery enquired.

"We were too late to order VIP tickets unfortunately," Randa shook her head.

Margaery grinned. "I know someone who can get you all in, if you're interested?"

Sansa was sure that if Willas had not been present she would have been more than thrilled at the invitation, but her priority at that moment was to keep him and Sandor apart. She looked up at Sandor, whose expression had considerably darkened at the appearance of the Tyrells.

"That's awesome, Margaery!" Randa exclaimed. "How about it guys?"

Jeyne, Mya and Lothor looked excited by the prospect of watching from the comfort of the VIP section, but Sansa waited for Sandor's answer. He looked down at her, meeting her eyes after sensing her stare. He looked far from excited, and she was about to decline the invitation when he suddenly spoke.

"Count us in," he grunted, "can't miss this chance, can we?"

"Great, I'll call my friend about those passes now." Margaery dialed a number on her phone, and after some minutes she ended her call with a wide smile, triumphant in securing additional VIP passes as promised.

Their group swelled to accommodate their guests, who stayed to with them to watch the other bands that came after the Sons of The Harpy. When the afternoon began to cool and shadows on the ground lengthened, they all headed towards the VIP area as one impressive and jaw-dropping group to those who looked on. Sansa Stark and Margaery Tyrell by themselves drew many admiring gazes, but together, they were formidable. However, Randa, Mya, Jeyne and Leonette held their own against the two stunning beauties. Combined with the dashing looks of Renly and the Tyrell brothers, as well as the intimidating presences of the heavily muscled Sandor and Lothor, no one questioned them when Margaery led them all to the front of the queue, bypassing everyone else in line.

They were whisked through the security checkpoint and ushered to a large covered area decked out in lounges and low-line tables, with organic food and beverage trucks set up at the far end, and a clear view of center stage. Sansa also saw signs for luxury portable bathrooms, and even ATMs. A number of lounges and tables were cleared for their group, and soon Sansa was seated comfortably in the corner of a lounge with Sandor beside her, a cold drink in her hand and the table in front of them laden with yet more food. It was an altogether different festival experience from what she and her friends had gone through earlier, but she wasn't about to complain, especially if it meant not having to suffer the horror of waiting in endless queues to use the bathroom.

If only Willas Tyrell wasn't sitting across from me, this would be the most perfect festival experience ever. Willas had not said or done anything to her to arouse suspicion or provoke Sandor's temper,
and yet his mere presence was sending Sandor's blood pressure sky-high, and Sansa could feel this in the tension radiating from him where his arm brushed hers. Sansa was hyper-sensitive to Sandor's mood at that moment, and because he wasn't having fun, she found it impossible to relax. She hadn't yet told him about Willas being employed by her father, and she was on edge in case Willas said something before she could tell Sandor first. She was trying to find the right timing, but right then and there was definitely not the right time.

"Would you like another drink, Sandor?" she asked him when she saw his empty glass, aiming to break his silent brooding.

"Yeah, I could use another one." Sandor got up from his seat. "I'll go buy one."

"I'll come with you," Sansa said as she quickly finished her own drink. "I'd like another drink too, and see what else is available in the food trucks. Does anyone else want anything while we're buying?"

Her companions listed what they wanted before Sansa took hold of Sandor's hand as they walked towards the food trucks, glad that her distraction method worked. She felt some of his tension leave his body as they walked further away from Willas and company.

"I didn't know that Margaery and her brothers would be here today," she began, "I know you don't exactly like Willas, so if you want we can go and do our own thing after we bring all the food back?"

Sandor shook his head. "It's okay. Don't worry. Seeing Tyrell's face just pissed me off for a moment, but I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"As long as he doesn't make a pass at you right in front of me he won't get his face punched in," Sandor replied in a tone that suggested it was more of a threat than a joke.

Sansa was not entirely comforted by his words, but she knew Willas enough to know that he was too much of a gentleman to make any underhanded moves, which did placate her nerves a little. In the meantime she took advantage of being away from their companions by tugging on Sandor's arm, making him bend his head down so that she could place a kiss on his lips.

"What was that for?" he grunted.

She shrugged. "I just wanted to do it."

"Everyone can see us," Sandor whispered, looking around them.

"Let them look," Sansa said with a shrug.

Sandor looked mildly uncomfortable, never being big on PDA's, but he sighed and bent down again. "One more, and just this once, okay?"

Sansa giggled, feeling a tickle in her heart at the sight of her tough, bad-boy boyfriend asking for affection in public, and promptly pressed her lips to his. Afterwards they took their time buying the drinks and food that her friends had requested, and when they returned to rejoin their companions both she and Sandor were in much better moods. Randa was laughing at something Margaery and Willas were debating, while Jeyne and Mya were being entertained by Renly and Loras. Sandor was involved in a rare conversation with Lothor, Garlan and Leonette, and for a few minutes Sansa believed she finally had the perfect festival experience that had eluded her earlier.
"Sansa," Margaery now called for her attention.

"Yes?"

"If I could, may I ask a favor from you?"

"Sure," Sansa said with a nod. "I'll be happy to help, if it's something I can do. I owe you for getting us these VIP passes, after all."

"Great." Margaery grinned. "It's nothing difficult, don't worry. You know that Willas will start working with your father next week, right? Anyway, he's told our parents that he'll have to visit Chateau Maegor quite frequently to work on a project for Stark Industries and mother is worried he's going to be doing lots of overtime. So, if it's not too much trouble, could you please make sure he eats dinner at least, and remind him to go home before it gets too late in the evening, okay?"

Sansa froze where she sat, and she noted that beside her, Sandor had stiffened too.

Oh, shoot! Sansa thought in a moment of panic, and it was while she was contemplating how to explain things to Sandor that she heard the tail end of Lothor's sentence, and she realized why Sandor had suddenly stilled.

"Congratulations again, Hound." Lothor patted Sandor's shoulder. "You deserve it."

"What did we miss?" Willas asked, his interest piqued.

"You don't have to repeat it, Brune." Sandor's brows had furrowed.

"Don't be shy about it, man," Lothor told him, oblivious to Sandor's true mood. "I heard Coach Selmy boasting about it to the other teachers when I was in the staff room the other day…the Hound has scored himself a full-ride scholarship to Valyria U."

"You did?" Renly joined in on the conversation, clearly impressed by the news. "Awesome work, Clegane!"

While the members of their present company took turns congratulating him, Sansa met Sandor's eyes, and judging by the turbulence she saw in their grey depths it was evident that he had heard Margaery mention her brother's role at Stark Industries as clearly as she'd heard his news about his acceptance to The University of Valyria. It was also perfectly clear that each of them had been hiding something from the other.

Arya

The VIP passes that Gendry had got for them were not the ordinary VIP passes that were available for public purchase, as she and Hot Pie found out. The wristbands they were wearing were the ultra-rare VVIP passes, issued only to performing artists and their entourage, selected members of the press and, if you were well connected enough, friends of the performing artists. She and Hot Pie qualified as friends of the Brotherhood Without Banners, which was how they found themselves in the rear of a golf buggy being driven to another section of the tourney grounds beyond the access of the everyday festival attendee.

They were taken to a location where the noises of ongoing concerts and the general crowd could no longer be heard, and where a multitude of white trailers, buses, vans and trucks had gathered around a group of tents and demountable structures. The staff member who'd driven the buggy now led them into the air-conditioned tent, which housed a private bar, giant screens showing live broadcasts of the
concerts currently occurring on each of the four stages, plush lounges and armchairs arranged in intimate clusters, as well as buffet tables offering everything from organic fresh fruit and gluten-free cupcakes, sushi platters and panko-herb crusted fried chicken.

"The Brotherhood Without Banners will be in dressing room three, in that building over there," the staff member now told them, "also, there are menus available from selected stalls in the main market, if you would like to place an order please inform a member of our bar staff who'll call it through for you. I hope you enjoy your Tourney Fields Festival experience today."

"We definitely will. Thank you." Hot Pie smiled at the staffer, who nodded and promptly departed.

"Did Gendry tell you he was getting VVIP passes?" Arya asked him.

"No, he didn't." Hot Pie looked around him, eyeing the buffet table hungrily. "But, I don't think he realized there were two types."

"Should we go say hi to them now?"

"Let's go," Hot Pie said and began to walk towards the building that the staffer had pointed to. "The sooner we say hi, the sooner I can hit that buffet table."

Arya estimated it took them twice as long as it should have to walk the few feet the dressing rooms, because no sooner had they taken a couple of steps when a group of scantily clad girls walked by, giggling as they headed towards the bar.

"Oh, my god! Those girls…they're Seventh Harmony!" Hot Pie gasped, eyes wide.

"Who?"

"They're a really popular pop-group who've been topping the charts recently…I can't believe I was standing just two feet away from them!"

From there, it really hit Hot Pie hard that they were in the VVIP section, while Arya watched on in amusement as her friend's eyes grew as round as saucers when he recognized yet more famous faces around them. Of course, she too experienced a curious fascination at seeing so many popular artists so close by, but she was far from being star-struck as Hot Pie was. When they finally reached dressing room three Hot Pie's jaw was nearly dragging on the floor.

"Arya! Hot Pie! Glad you could make it, guys!" Allyria greeted them when she opened the door. "Come on in."

Arya had no sooner stepped into the room when she was suddenly set upon by a lanky blonde, who swooped down to hug her.

"Hey, Weasel! Long time no see!" the blonde cried excitedly. "Hey guys, look who's here!"

"Lommy? Nice to see you too." Arya greeted him after she'd recovered from his enthusiastic greeting. "Hey everyone."

Aside from the members of the Brotherhood, she saw that there were four other guys in the room who she recognized to be Gendry's friends from Flea Bottom. Gendry had stood up from his chair while everyone else had been greeting the newcomers, and now he approached them too with a wide smile on his face.

"Hey, Hot Pie!" Gendry greeted his friend with a hearty thump on his shoulder before he turned to
Arya. "Hi, Arya. You made it after all."

Arya was struck by how gorgeous he looked at that moment, dressed in ripped jeans and a fitted shirt that pulled tautly across his chest and shoulders in a way that made her suddenly grow overly conscious of him.

"Hi, Gendry." Arya returned his greeting with what she hoped was a normal smile on her face. "Thanks for getting these passes for us."

"No problem. I'm really happy you could make it today…" Gendry's eyes travelled down the length of her body briefly, before raising them to meet hers. "…Both of you. I'm really glad you're both here. And, you look great, Arya."

"Oh, um…thanks…you too." Surprised by the compliment, Arya now became conscious of her bare midriff and she discreetly tugged at the vest she wore in an attempt to cover some of her skin, which had grown unexpectedly warm under his gaze.

"We wouldn't have missed this, dude!" Hot Pie thumped Gendry on the shoulder too, returning his earlier affectionate gesture.

The dressing room was housed in one of the demountable buildings in the compound, and while the structure was basic, the couches were new and the dressing area was more than generous. There was also a screen mounted on the wall which was tuned into the live-broadcast of the four performance stages. In a corner of the room near the dressing table was a rack with the outfits and makeup that the guys would be using for their show. Allyria told her that all the local artists and smaller acts that did not have their own trailers or tour buses had been assigned similar rooms, while the big-name artists with their larger entourage and specialized equipment had come with their own trucks and custom mobile dressing rooms.

Everyone had greeted Arya warmly and no one questioned her presence, but seeing as it had been a while since Arya had visited them backstage at a show, their curious faces told her that Gendry had not spilled about her breakup with Jaqen.

"This is a huge deal for the Brotherhood," Beric had declared, "so you should all be thankful to be sharing in this momentous occasion with us."

His comment had been met with laughter and plenty of joking around from the other members of the band.

"One day, it's gonna be us that girls will get tongue-tied and star-struck over," Thoros said.

"You mean, like how you stuttered and embarrassed yourself in front of those Seventh Harmony girls?" Edric grinned at him teasingly.

"Says the monkey who literally tripped over while trying to get a photo with that pop princess…what was her name again? Red Priestess?" Thoros shot back.

"Hey! She's hot, she can sing, has a bangin' bod and she's junior in high school like me," Edric pointed out, "and who knows, maybe she'll find my clumsy yet boyish charms appealing?"

"Dream on. Someone that hot and talented can do way better than some green puppy like you." Thoros pat his head, as though petting an actual puppy.

Edric's indignant expression when he realized it sent them all laughing, which prompted Thoros into trying to placate him by offering to get him a drink.
"A drink, as an apology?" Edric raised his brow.

"Yeah, but it'll have to be milk or juice for you, 'cos you're still a puppy and all." Thoros smirked at him.

"Make it a strawberry milk then, you old fart." Edric punched his arm.

"Old fart? I only just turned twenty!"

"I think we should all go to the tent to chill out and mingle with the famous and the beautiful while we can," Beric suggested, interrupting the two. "It's getting too cozy in this dressing room for all of us anyhow."

Their entire group found themselves pulling a couple of lounges and armchairs together in a more private section of the tent, and it was while Hot Pie was off raiding the buffet table and a few of the guys were hitting the bar that Gendry quietly came to occupy the empty seat beside her.

"Can I get you anything, Arya? A drink, maybe?" he asked her.

Arya looked at him and shook her head. "No thanks, I'm fine. Hot Pie and I actually ate at the food stalls outside before we came here, but you'd never know that by the way he's hittin' that buffet."

Gendry laughed as they both observed their friend balancing a plate piled high with food. There was an awkward pause filled with the sound of their friends bantering near them, and Arya got the feeling that Gendry wanted to say something. She had a good idea about what it could be, so she saved him the effort.

"I know what you want to ask," she said calmly and quietly, "and the answer is, I'm fine. I'm putting the breakup behind me."

Gendry's expression cleared and a look of relief flashed across his face. "That's reassuring to hear. I was worried about you."

"You were?"

"Well, yeah." Gendry looked at her with an earnest look about his eyes. "It happened really suddenly, and what friend wouldn't be worried?"

Friend.

"You don't need to worry about me. But, thanks. You...you're a good friend." Arya almost choked on the last word.

"Look, Arya." Gendry leaned towards her and dropped his head, speaking softly so that she was forced to move closer to hear him over the noise. "I know you're not the type to talk about those kinds of things, but I am here for you if you do want to talk about anything, okay? You've done a lot for me, like when you came with me to Storm's End to meet Stannis, for example. I just want to be able to help you out too, if I can. After everything...despite everything that's happened, you never stopped being my friend."

Friend.

Hearing the word upon Gendry's lips hurt, as though someone had placed a large jagged rock where her lungs should be, but she forced herself to smile at him, because it looked like he was expecting it.
"Thanks, Gendry," she managed to say, "I appreciate that."

Gendry smiled back and Arya thought he might have been about to say something else, but Hot Pie returned at that moment, placing his plate on the coffee table in front of them with a solid thud.

"Arya, you've gotta try this chicken. I got enough if you want some too Gendry, it's delicious!"

"Thanks, but I just ate, Hot Pie. I'm not hungry." Arya shook her head.

"That's not the point." Hot Pie gave her an incredulous look. "It's an all you can eat, gourmet buffet. You don't have to be hungry. Just eat!"

"He's right, you know." Gendry helped himself to a mini-drumstick coated with a dark sticky sauce from Hot Pie's plate. "The chicken is awesome. You'll regret it if you don't try it, I'm tellin' you."

Arya shrugged, picked up a sticky drumstick between two fingers and promptly bit into it, receiving approving nods from her two friends as she did so. Lommy and Gendry's other friends returned from the bar carrying drinks shortly after, and as the conversations in the group grew more boisterous and the laughter more raucous, they unwittingly drew the attention of other guests and performers, including some of the girls from Seventh Harmony, much to Thoros and Hot Pie's shocked delight. Arya watched in amusement as Hot Pie stuttered a greeting when he was introduced to the girls, though she was less amused when Gendry appeared far too comfortable in their presence, and when two of the glamorous pop-stars looked far too interested in him.

After a time she was able to place herself at the periphery of the group, taking part in conversation if and when she was directly addressed. She behaved as though she was enjoying herself and having fun, but whatever excitement she might have had earlier in the day had mostly dissipated in the wake of her disappointment, having been reminded of Gendry's stance on their friendship.

This is how it feels, she thought. This is how I made him feel all of that time. It was, she realized, one of the most distinctly uncomfortable feelings she'd ever experienced, and she didn't know how to deal with it.

With the Brotherhood's performance still a few hours away, Gendry insisted that Arya and Hot Pie accompany Lommy and his friends to check out the other concerts currently underway on the other stages. They had their own golf buggy and driver to take them around, as part of VVIP perks, and the added bonus of being able to watch from the side of the stage.

"You better make the most of those VVIP passes," Gendry had told them, "I can't guarantee we'll be performing here again next year. Besides, I didn't expect you guys to wait around with us the whole time. Go and enjoy the festival!"

Arya had gone, mostly because Hot Pie and Lommy had all but dragged her to the buggy. In the end, she was glad that they had, because watching the other performers had provided the perfect distraction from her thoughts, and the last thing she wanted was for Gendry to pick up on her mood before their show.

They returned to the VVIP area shortly before the Brotherhood's show, and Arya walked into the dressing room to find all of the guys already dressed and made up, ready to go on-stage. Tom's girlfriend Jenny, a fashion-design student, had styled them all in coordinating black and metallic-grey ensembles she had put together from off-the-rack pieces, thrift store finds and handmade creations. All of the guys were also wearing stage makeup including eyeliner, which pulled their edgy look together.
They were then taken by buggy to the center stage, entering backstage where the band waited for their cue to go on. Spirits were high amongst the group, not just for those in the band, but also those who'd come to support them.

"We'll be watching from the side," Arya said to Gendry after they'd been called to the stage, "so get out there, and break a leg."

Gendry grinned at her. "Thanks, Arya. Seeya after the show."

It turned out that they weren't the only ones who came to watch the *Brotherhood Without Banners* from the side stage, and Arya had found herself biting her tongue to keep from verbally swearing when she saw four of the seven girls from *Seventh Harmony* already there. She almost drew blood when she saw one of them give Gendry a hug moments before he walked onto the stage. However, her annoyance was quickly forgotten when she heard the screaming that welcomed the *Brotherhood* onto the stage.

"Hello, Tourney Fields!" Beric shouted into his mic, drawing yet more screams from the crowd. "Are we all havin' a good time today?"

Arya peered out from where she stood, her eyes suddenly widening when she saw just how huge the crowd had gotten in front of center stage. This crowd was by far the biggest the *Brotherhood* would be performing for, surpassing even the thousands that had been at The Battle of The Bands, and all of a sudden she felt nervous too.

"For those of you who don't know us, we're the *Brotherhood Without Banners*..." Beric paused while an impressive number of people began to cheer, proving just how popular they were. "...I won't waste time by doing much talking, 'cos we haven't been given that much time on this stage, you see. Instead, we're just gonna play a few songs for you, and hopefully you'll all know us better by the time we're through...we hope you like our music!"

Beric stepped back into position and signaled Edric, who counted them in with taps of his sticks. Gendry strummed on his guitar, the sound of it filling the arena with a satisfying wail. Thoros thumped out a heavy bass line, and Tom's fingers flew across his keyboard as he began to play the recurring melody of the song. Beric opened his mouth, and soon the sound of his soulful vocals could be heard loud and clear over the screaming crowd. Arya grinned when she recognized the song, which happened to be the song that had got them into the final round at The Battle of The Bands. She needn't have felt nervous for them at all, because the guys had come out with guns blazing!

The transitions between songs were smooth, having been arranged by Beric to perfection, specifically to showcase each of their individual talents in turn. Arya always knew that each of the guys were remarkably talented musicians, and she felt a bout of pride to see those talents being acknowledged by the cheering crowd. The *Brotherhood* chose to finish their half-hour set with the duet between Gendry and Beric, the same song they had debuted at their *Heart of Fire* gig, and once again Arya was left in awe at the raw power of Gendry's voice. The crowd certainly appreciated it, and so did the pop-stars standing in the wings with them. Arya was sure that the *Brotherhood* would have at least four new fans before the end of their show.

With a final wave at the crowd, the *Brotherhood* left the stage amid the sound of roaring cheers. Arya did not get a chance to congratulate Gendry at all, because he was immediately surrounded on all sides by pop-stars, one of whom had placed a possessive hand on his tattooed arm. She'd balled her fists without even realizing it, but Lommy's timely interruption saved her from doing anything stupid.
"What are you spacing out for, Weasel? Come on, the buggy's waiting for us." Lommy tapped her shoulder, urging her to follow the rest of their group.

"Let's go, Arya." Hot Pie had turned around, noticing that she hadn't been following him. "This is our last chance to chill out. The big-name acts will be performing soon, so we gotta clear this area."

The band, along with the pop-stars, had gone ahead on a different buggy back to the dressing rooms. Arya figured that was just as well, given the way her blood pressure had risen at seeing some other girl touching Gendry. The mood in dressing room three was energetic, to say the least, with everyone pumped from the clear success of the Brotherhood's first appearance at the festival. The girls from Seventh Harmony departed not long after, much to Arya's great delight, to prepare for their own show later that evening.

"Dude, did she ask for your number?" Edric demanded of Gendry. "Please tell me you gave her your number?"

Arya did not want to stick around to hear Gendry's answer, so she excused herself and headed for the ladies bathroom, where she took her time washing her hands and finger-combing her hair to work out the knots that had developed during the day. She'd been having a hell of a day, with far too many ups and downs than she would have liked. She suspected that being around Gendry from now on, if she didn't do anything to change their situation, would be one continuous, emotional rollercoaster ride with no end that she could see.

She was returning to the dressing room, passing through the tent zone when Arya caught sight of two faces she had not expected to see, and by the time she could react it was already too late to change her course, for they had seen her too.

"Hello, Arya," Brea Brusco greeted her, her tone cool.

"Hello, Brea…Talea." Arya returned their greeting, before she quickly scanned the area behind them.

If Brea and Talea were around, then there was a high chance Brea's boyfriend…and the boyfriend's best friend were there too.

"Jaqen is here," Talea said when she noticed Arya's shifting gaze, "if that's what you want to know."

There was an edge in Talea's voice that Arya had not heard before, and she understood that they were more than aware of her and Jaqen's breakup. Brea and Talea had been more than friendly with her in the past, welcoming and accepting even, but the coolness in their eyes and the invisible wall they'd raised up around them let her know exactly how they felt about her now. Jaqen's childhood friends very clearly blamed her for the breakup, and Arya could not refute them.

"I'll stay out of his way," Arya said quietly.

Talea watched her for a moment before she took a step closer to her. "Don't you want to know how he's doing?"

"Of course, I do," Arya told her truthfully, "I never stopped caring for him."

Talea's eyes narrowed, but after a tense few heartbeats, she released an audible sigh. "You'll get to see for yourself soon enough."
"Let's go, Talea." Brea tugged on her sister's sleeve. "See you around, Arya."

The Brusco sisters walked away in the direction of another demountable structure where more dressing rooms were located. Arya had not failed to see that both sisters had been wearing VVIP wristbands, despite her surprise at encountering them.

*Even if they're here, it doesn't mean they're performing.* The *Faceless Men* had not been listed in the lineup or mentioned in any promo material for the Tourney, but Jaqen knew lots of people in the music industry so it wasn't hard to imagine he'd used his contacts to arrange VVIP passes for himself and his friends. Still, she felt her stomach tighten at the knowledge that Jaqen was somewhere nearby. She wasn't prepared to run into him so soon, not because she was afraid to see him, but because she was afraid of how he would react to seeing her.

All of the guys in the *Brotherhood* had changed back into their street clothes by the time she returned to the dressing room. Gendry, once again wearing his ripped jeans and a fresh shirt, appeared to have been waiting for her. Arya made herself smile.

"I was wondering where you'd gone," Gendry said.

"Just had to freshen up," Arya told him, "you guys were awesome up on that stage tonight. I didn't get a chance to tell you earlier."

"Thanks." Gendry's smile brightened at her compliment. "It's great having you back to cheer for us from backstage."

"I've missed hanging out with you guys," she admitted, "this has been fun."

"The night's not over yet. There's one more local band scheduled to play before the first big act of the night, so we'll be heading back to the stage in a minute to make sure we get a good viewing spot. I've heard that even the reserved VIP viewing area still gets quite packed."

Gendry had not heard wrong. The reserved viewing area was already full when their group got there, but their VVIP status ensured they still secured prime viewing positions towards the front-left of the stage.

"Who's performing next?" Lommy asked one of his friends, a guy called Teddy.

"Uh…the *White Walkers* are supposed to be next, but I heard people backstage saying something about a last-minute change."

"You didn't hear who the replacement would be?"

"Nah, they walked away before I could hear anything else."

Arya heard a ringing in her ears and she subconsciously braced herself for what was about to happen. She was one small girl in a crowd of thousands, and in all likelihood Jaqen would not even see her. She'd told Talea that she would stay out of Jaqen's way, but she had not bargained for this!

There was a crackling above the noise of the crowd as the announcer switched on a mic, and Arya looked up towards the still darkened, empty stage.

"Ladies and gents, there's been a last-minute change to tonight's lineup," the announcer informed them, "the *White Walkers* have had to cancel their performance due to three of their members all coming down with serious chills earlier today." The announcer paused while the news was met with disappointed murmurs in the crowd. "However, we have a very special group of guys here to
entertain you in their place…Everybody, please welcome the *Faceless Men*!

The lights flickered on blindingly, illuminating four spots on the stage floor and the *Faceless Men*, led by Jaqen, walked onto the stage to take their places behind their microphones and instruments amid the deafening screams and cheers of a surprised audience and *Faceless Men* fans. Jaqen raised his hand to adjust the mic to his preferred height, and Arya noticed the wine-red leather arm band, the one she had gifted to him at Christmas, still bound around his wrist. It pained her a little to see that he still wore it, because she'd expected him to have taken it off.

She sensed Gendry shifting beside her, while Hot Pie, Allyria, Beric and the rest of their group turned to glance at her. Other than Gendry and Hot Pie, no one else knew about their breakup. As if sensing their thoughts, she knew her friends were wondering why she was not backstage supporting Jaqen. Arya ignored them. She didn't know what else she could do.

"Good afternoon," Jaqen uttered into the mic in his accented, molten caramel voice, "is everyone having fun?" Jaqen laughed at the chorus of answers he received. "On behalf of the *White Walkers* we would like to say a very big thank you to all of their fans who came out to see them today. They sincerely regret having to cancel their show, but we were told that they are planning to hold a free concert at some point to make it up to all of you." This news was met with wild cheers. "We will certainly do our best for you tonight, and hope that you will not be disappointed."

Jaqen paused as the girls in the crowd began to scream anew, and while he continued to smile a girl very near to where Arya was standing chose that moment to bellow out in a very loud voice.

"I love you, Jaqen!"

He clearly heard it, because his smile broadened and he turned his head in the direction where the voice had originated…and promptly came eye to eye with Arya. The smile on his lips did not waiver, but Arya did not miss the slight widening of his eyes. She felt a little like a deer caught in headlights, frozen to the spot and unable to do anything to escape his sudden scrutiny. All the while, she was acutely aware that Gendry stood beside her, barely a foot away.

"Thank you. Your love is truly appreciated."

Jaqen had been addressing the unknown girl, but with his eyes still on Arya, she couldn't help but note how superficial his words seemed. With a painful pang, she wondered if her words had sounded just as without promise to him when she had told him she'd loved him, as though she'd said it simply to appease him. She realized, with another painful pang, that it was probably so. Her love meant little when she had still chosen to break up with him. Jaqen's eyes briefly flicked to Gendry at her side, and Arya was surprised to see that his gaze did not turn cold. They continued to stare at each other for several moments longer, and anyone watching them would say they were speaking volumes with their looks, but Arya sensed a finality in the way Jaqen was looking at her, and when he finally broke their gaze she became aware of one certainty; Jaqen was not going to dwell on the past.

"Before we begin," Jaqen now said to the audience, "I would like to say that tonight will be our last show in King's Landing for some time. We have been offered an opportunity to record our first album under a major label, and very shortly we will be moving to New York. To celebrate, we would like to play for you a new song we wrote especially for tonight...aptly, it is called 'Goodbye'"

Jaqen turned to Jorge on the drums, who opened with a rapid staccato on the snares, before Jaqen strummed his guitar to life. When he opened his mouth to sing, his usually buttery vocals held a hint of steel beneath his caramel tones. He was singing about leaving behind the people and places that he had known for so long, everything that was familiar to him, and everything he called home. Jaqen's
new voice, a voice Arya had never heard before, made the words he sang more poignant, affecting
the listener on a level that hit close to the heart.

"I won't be taking much, an old suitcase and my favorite shirts...but I'll be carrying memories of you
close to my chest, 'cos it's easier to find them there when the nights away from you get much too
tough, and I need the comfort of your smile...so, I'll say goodbye...for now."

The music the Faceless Men now played showed an undeniable graduation of the sound they had
been honing since they were boys in junior high, resulting in the much more refined sound they
heard now. It was a glimpse, Arya thought, of the greatness that awaited Jaqen and his band. Jaqen
was performing better than he ever had, too much of a professional to let anything disrupt his cool,
not even the presence of his ex-girlfriend in the audience. Arya was relieved to see that, and she
came to realize that there were so many faces of Jaqen she never got to see. Looking up at his poised
figure up on stage, she knew without a doubt that Jaqen would be fine without her. Jaqen turned his
gaze towards her once again, and she was convinced. He was far stronger than she had ever
understood.

"Don't worry about me," Jaqen continued to sing as his eyes met hers. "I'll be just fine...I've got my
friends by my side, and my guitar in my hand...the stars up above look so much closer than before,
we're making our dreams come true...so, we'll say goodbye...for now."

The song ended with a lingering chord, after which there were several seconds of awed silence,
before the crowd erupted into cheers and applause. Jaqen finally broke his gaze so that he could
respond to the crowd, turning away at last. Arya's throat felt dry as she drew in a deep breath that
made her shoulders shake. I had to see this, she thought, I'm glad I was here to see this.

She felt a warm hand on her elbow at that moment, and she looked up to see Gendry peering down
at her with a concerned expression.

"Are you okay, Arya?" he asked her, his fingers tightening slightly on her arm. "You're shivering."

Perhaps it was serendipitous that it was Gendry by her side at the precise moment she decided to stop
feeling guilty about her breakup with Jaqen. Serendipity, or irony? Arya sighed as she contemplated
the matter. Either way, she had decided to move forward, just as Gendry and Jaqen had chosen to
do.

"I'm fine," Arya replied, "I will be fine."

I won't be left behind.
Episode 39 "What Everybody Knows"

Gossip Spyder

Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Arya Stark and Jaqen H'ghar call it quits!

That's right folks, Arya and Jaqen have broken up. My witness claims to have overheard a close friend of Jaqen H'ghar talking about the split at the Tourney Fields Festival last night. The source was heard saying that the breakup was a 'good thing' given the Faceless Men's imminent move to New York, amid news that they have officially signed with Red God Records. I was at centre stage last night when I heard Jaqen H'ghar telling the audience this news with my own ears, and with this evidence it's not hard to deduce that the breakup was brought on by Jaqen's professional rock-star aspirations – I have heard that long distance relationships suck at the best of times, but with Arya Stark still a highs-school freshman, and Jaqen on the verge of fame and glory, maintaining a relationship would have been a hard task for two very young people. I did some digging around and word on the local music-industry grapevine is that Jaqen and Ky, the only two members of the band still in high-school, will not be attending their senior Prom or graduation, choosing instead to fast-track their move to New York…and to music greatness!

Arya and Jaqen appear to have avoided each other at the Tourney, although Arya was spotted hanging out in the VVIP zone with the guys of the Brotherhood Without Banners, including her pal Gendry Waters. Arya and Gendry had been subjects of speculative rumors after their Bachelor Auction 'date', with people questioning how close these close-friends truly were…however, with Gendry seen flirting and getting very friendly with the girls from pop-group Seventh Harmony, it's safe to say Arya and Gendry's relationship is…disappointingly platonic. LOL! I live for drama, people!

In other news, more colleges have issued first round offers, and I would like to be among the first to say a big congratulations to Sandor 'the Hound' Clegane, who is the first student ever from King's Landing Prep to have been offered a full-ride football scholarship to The University of Valyria! Congratulations! Woohoo! Sandor is one of the strongest linemen KL Prep has ever produced, and attending the prestigious Valyria U brings him one step closer towards a Pro Football career.

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Sandor

The rest of the music festival had been utter shit, in his opinion, but it was utter shit accompanied by an awesome soundtrack. The music had still been good, though his mood and the company he'd kept could have been better. After Sansa had found out about the news he'd been keeping from her, and he had heard about hers, all he'd wanted to do was grab Sansa by the hand and hightail it out of there. Instead, what they had done was endure each other's presence and the discomfort they felt from the impending confrontation that they knew was coming…for the next several hours.

Sansa did not want to make a scene, and neither had he. As far as all of Sansa's friends were aware, Sansa had to have been the first to hear about his scholarship. In turn, Sandor should have known about Willas' new job at Stark Industries because it was assumed that Sansa told him everything. It had not helped that the people with them had not been in a rush to change the topics under discussion either. Lothor, Renly and Loras, the three other football players amongst them, were continuously
bringing up random facts about the *Dragonlords*, Valyria U's famous football team. Willas also continued to try and engage Sansa in conversation about his up-coming job at Stark Industries and asking for pointers on how best to work with, and for, Eddard Stark.

Suffice to say, their long car ride home from the Tourney grounds after an already long day was proving unbearably exhausting for both of them. Sansa sat with her arms crossed over her chest, looking out of the passenger side window at the darkened landscape in silence. Eventually, Sandor could no longer contain himself.

"How long have you known?" he asked her, his question not requiring elaboration.

"Since last week," Sansa replied after a second of hesitation. "And, what about you?"

Sandor also did not need her to elaborate. "Early this week. I got the envelope on Tuesday."

It went unsaid that both of them had had more than ample time to tell the other of their respective news.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Sansa turned towards him. "Valyria U is a huge deal, and you're the first student from KL Prep to be offered full-ride on a football scholarship."

"I was gonna tell you after the Tourney," he replied.

"Why wait to tell me? We could have celebrated earlier."

Sandor now wondered why he had bothered to wait as well, and his irritation came through in his raspy tones.

"I thought I was doing you a favor," he told her, "by not reminding you about how I'm going away for college."

"What?"

"You were all excited about going to the Tourney with all your friends…I didn't want to kill your buzz, you know?"

"Sandor, I always knew this moment was going to come," Sansa said with a slightly exasperated and incredulous note in her voice. "You leaving for college was always on my mind. You didn't have to keep your acceptance to Valyria U from me."

"So much for trying to do something nice," he grumbled, annoyed and feeling stupid. "I kept it from you, for nothing then."

Sandor kept his eyes on the dark road ahead, but he could sense Sansa shifting uncomfortably in her seat. He had tried to be considerate, only to have his efforts blow up in his face. *Fuck it, I may as well keep going while I'm at it.*

"What's your excuse?" he demanded. "Why didn't you tell me about Tyrell?"

Sansa sighed. "I didn't know how to tell you, because I knew you wouldn't be happy about it?"

"And, keeping it from me helps the situation…how?"

"You're angry about it, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I'm fucking mad." Sandor shot her a quick glare, seeing the hard set of her jaw despite the
gloomy shadows in his car. "I hate the idea of Willas Tyrell being anywhere near you."

"He’ll be working with my father, not with me," Sansa reminded him.

"Margaery said something about him having to visit your house as part of his job." Sandor now thought to mention the part that had really bugged him about everything he'd learned. "Were you going to tell me about that, eventually?"

"I don't have any say in father's work," Sansa said, ignoring his question, which made Sandor grind his teeth. "I have even less influence over who my father chooses to employ, so unless you have a very good reason, I will not bother my father by interfering."

"I really hate that fucking pretty boy." Sandor spat. "That's a good enough reason, I'd say."

"I'm just going to continue to ignore Willas--"

"Just like you're ignoring me right now,"

"-- as I always have. I just wish you'd trust me on this."

"He's going to be at your house…a lot. I've never even stepped foot inside your house."

"Is that something you want to do? Because, I could invite you over tomorrow if--"

"That's not my point."

Sandor was without doubt behaving like a petulant and jealous boyfriend, but as much as he loathed his behavior at that moment, he couldn't do a thing to stop himself.

"Do you trust me?" Sansa asked calmly.

"We've been through this before, Sansa," Sandor rasped. "You know I trust you, just as you know that I don't trust Willas Tyrell."

Sansa sighed once again. "You'll have to keep trusting me, Sandor. There's nothing I can do about Willas coming to work for my father. I can handle him, and besides, he's not the type to try anything funny. He can sweet talk me all he wants, but my ears are deaf to him, you understand?"

Reluctantly, Sandor had to agree that Willas Tyrell was too much a gentleman to try sneaky or dirty tactics on Sansa, and he was partially relieved that he didn't have to worry about the guy getting physically inappropriate with Sansa. However, the oldest Tyrell son was a master conversationalist and possessed all of the princely charms that Sandor lacked. Furthermore, the thought that Willas was a far better match for Sansa had never left his head, taunting his insecurities once again.

Sansa's guarantee did little to cool his temper unfortunately, and by the time they pulled into the gates of Chateau Maegor, Sandor was still far from appeased.

"Um…I'll call you tomorrow, okay? I have an essay I need to finish, so I'm not sure when I'll be free," Sansa said to him as she prepared to get out of his car.

"Write your essay," Sandor grunted. "I've got chores that need doing. I'll see you on Monday."

"Okay." Sansa tilted her head and pressed a kiss to his unmoving, yet unresisting lips. "Goodnight, Sandor. And, I'm sorry for not telling you about Willas sooner."

"I'm sorry, too."
Sandor drove home after seeing her go inside her house, glad that they had parted on peaceful terms, even if he was still seething about Willas Tyrell. He did not actually have chores to do the next day, but he had not wanted Sansa rushing to complete her essay in order to see him, so he gave her an excuse and he spent a good part of that day working out and trying to clear his head. Willas’ smiling face frequently appeared in his thoughts, and each time it did he would add another set of reps to whatever exercise he happened to be doing at the time.

The Starks and Tyrells were far too chummy for his liking, even outside of work the families of Eddard Stark and Mace Tyrell appeared to socialize quite regularly, which meant continuous opportunities for Willas and Sansa to encounter one another without Sandor around. A lot of these events were closed gatherings, which meant Sandor would rarely be allowed to accompany Sansa, if at all. Especially with the spring soiree season just beginning, there would be plenty of parties to come in the coming months. Joffrey Baratheon had been his ticket to those things in the past, but with their association effectively terminated from the moment Sandor hooked up with Sansa, that option was no longer available.

In the past Joffrey had always told Sandor to turn up to events without asking if he had wanted to attend, and he never used to question how his name would end up on the guest list, so long as he could get a drink without being ID’d. He was sure that Sansa would happily extend invitations to include him if he asked, but Sansa was not the type to bully event organizers or ask favors from their hosts. With the Baratheons no longer hosting as many parties as they used to, the Tyrells had taken to filling the role of society hosts and they certainly were far more selective in whose names made it onto their lists. And, like hell I'm going to ask her if I can tag along.

After exercising he showered and ate a late lunch, before he sat down and composed a message to his father, finally informing him about his acceptance to Valyria U. A response had arrived within the hour, taking him by surprise as it should have been the middle of the night where his father was. Theodor Clegane usually took a day or two to respond to even the most basic emails.

"Did you make a mistake? Did you really apply to The University of Valyria?" his father had replied.

"Yes. Definitely Valyria U." Sandor had confirmed, wondering if perhaps his father had been somewhat impressed.

His father had taken twenty more minutes to respond, which Sandor still considered to be a new record.

"Send through any documents I have to sign. Let me know when they're due."

There were no congratulatory words or expressions of parental pride from Theodor Clegane, not that Sandor had expected any such thing, yet he still considered this a successful exchange with his father.

Sansa called him early in the evening during a break she'd taken from essay writing, asking about his day and complaining about her English teacher.

"Persuasive essays are the worst," Sansa groaned, "and it's even worse when the topic is so dull."

"Mr. Walgrave's infamous for his essay subjects. I had him my sophomore year too." Sandor recalled the elderly man who was known to confuse the names of the students in his class on a regular basis.
"I thought he'd retired because he was showing signs of dementia."

"This is his final year," Sansa told him, "he's retiring at the end of the semester. His memory really must be getting bad."
"I heard that he was found weeping in the library once, because he couldn't remember the way back to his office."

"Someone else said that Mr. Walgrave raises chickens and that when he dies, he wants them to eat him. Isn't that crazy?"

"The man is definitely going senile," Sandor remarked darkly.

He was glad that Sansa seemed to be in a good mood, but while he was content to go with the flow of the conversation, he was conscious that they were both taking care to avoid mentioning the incident from the previous evening. Willas Tyrell was going to be a sensitive topic for a while.

"...Arya's been acting strangely all afternoon," Sansa was saying.

"What about Arya?" He frowned, realizing he hadn't heard the first part of Sansa's sentence.

"I said that she went to a symposium with Bran this morning, and when they came back Arya was behaving oddly."

"Symposium?"

"Yeah, they went to see this famous motivational speaker that Bran's a huge fan of."

"Sound's boring. Why would Arya go to that?"

"Well, we both kind of owed Bran a favor but I had this essay to write, so Arya went with him."

"How was she being odd?"

"She was quieter than usual, even quieter than after the breakup, and you know that my sister's hardly ever subdued."

"Could be she's still shook up about her faceless ex showing up on stage last night," Sandor suggested. "If she was hanging around Gendry all day, then suddenly seeing the ex-boyfriend that she dumped for Gendry..."

"Hmm...I guess that's what it could be," Sansa agreed. "Anyway, I'd better get back to my essay. I'll text you before I go to bed, okay?"

"Sure,"

"Oh, and Sandor..."

"Hmm?"

"Let's do something this week."

"Huh?"

"You know, to celebrate your admission to Valyria U?"

"If you want,"

"I do want to, Sandor," Sansa insisted. "I'm proud of you."

Her voice carried the truth of her words, not that he had expected any different, but he couldn't help
notice the bittersweet note it held. There was no escaping what his college admission meant for the two of them.

"Okay," he finally said, "we'll do something."

They ended their call shortly after and Sandor spent the evening vegging out in front of the TV, his mind wandering from the show he was attempting to watch so often that by the time the show had ended he had no idea what had been going on. It was odd for him to be thinking so much about his future. There were so many things happening to him and around him that he never thought possible not so long ago. He had a girlfriend, a college acceptance, and a pro-football career that was looking more achievable than ever. It was hard to believe that he wasn't watching it all happen to somebody else, and that it really was his life that he was living.

His future was on a trajectory that was set higher and further than he could have imagined. All in all, he was looking forward to what lay ahead, for the first time in a long time. Yet, there was that sinister voice that lurked in the shadows of his mind and always had to have a say in everything.

"Now we wait," it said ominously. "Now we wait to see how you're going to fuck it all up."

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Arya

Bran had strange friends. No, strange isn't the right word. Perhaps, they were more intense than what she was expecting, intellectual types for sure, interesting in certain aspects, and both of them were older than Bran and herself. The fact that Bran had older friends shouldn't have surprised her, as her brother had always seemed far older than his twelve years.

"These are my friends, Jojen and his sister Meera," Bran had introduced them. "And, this is my sister, Arya."

"A pleasure to meet you," said Jojen as he'd shaken her hand.

Jojen was fifteen with short brown hair and unusually deep green eyes that Arya found almost mesmerizing. He also appeared not to have hit his growth spurt yet as he stood not much taller than Bran.

"You too," Arya returned his greeting. "And you, Meera."

"Nice to meet you, Arya." Meera smiled at her, her green eyes near identical to her brother's.

Meera was sixteen and had long brown hair. She was also on the petite side, and though her face was void of cosmetics, Arya considered her to be pretty. By the look in Bran's eyes, she would bet that her brother thought the same.

"Our fathers went to college together, Arya," Bran told her. "Father said that Howland Reed is one of his oldest friends."

"Howland Reed...yes, that name does sound familiar." Arya frowned when she was unable to recall her father ever mentioning Howland's kids.

"We really are glad to meet both of you in person," Jojen declared. "This is the first time we're meeting Bran in person as well. I guess, with our families living in different states we never had the opportunity before."

"That's why were we excited that the symposium was being held in King's Landing this year,"
Meera added, "because it gave us the chance to meet both of you."

"Arya, did I tell you that it was Jojen who first told me about Brynden Rivers?" Bran asked her.

"No, you never told me."

"It's true," Jojen said, "my sister and I have a deep admiration for the Three Eyed Raven."

Arya soon learned that Bran and Jojen had met online while playing Bloodraven, Bran's favorite RPG game, and had been friends for months before they'd swapped personal details and quickly worked out their real identities. Once they learned that they shared similar tastes in books and television shows, their conversations gradually evolved to more cerebral topics.

Brynden Rivers fashioned himself to be a self-help guru of sorts, teaching people how to unlock their full potential and such, as far as Arya understood. The people around them were a mixed bag of intellectual types like Bran and the Reed siblings, hipsters, new-age hippies, and everyday people looking just as out of place as she did. The symposium was being held in the convention hall of The Forest Hotel, one of the new boutique establishments in the city, which prided itself on being different to all the other city hotels that were void of personality. Indeed, The Forest Hotel was overflowing with personality, with a forest green theme throughout the foyer and in the convention hall, living art of succulents and air plants on the walls instead of paintings, chandeliers and fixtures designed to mimic roots and plants snaking through the ground, and natural materials such as enormous ornamental rocks and boulders as focal points in the foyer.

Jojen led them to seats close to the speaker's podium where they would have an unimpeded view.

"The guest speakers today include Leaf Childs, who frequently tours with Brynden Rivers," Meera told her, meaning to be helpful.

"Um…I don't really know too much about all of this," Arya confessed. "I'm only here because Bran asked me to."

Meera smiled. "This should be an eye-opener for you then."

"A third eye-opener," Jojen piped in, to which Bran and Meera responded with laughter.

The joke had gone over her head and Arya sat there awkwardly smiling, feeling even more out of place amongst her teenage companions, who were young only in terms of physical age. While they waited, Arya listened as Bran and Jojen entered a discussion concerning the existence of life after death, both speaking passionately and basing their arguments on various religious beliefs and philosophical reasoning. Meera played referee, butting in when things got too heated between the boys. Arya always knew that Bran was smarter than the average twelve year-old, but listening to him debate like a grown-up, and an extremely learned one at that, made her appreciate him with a renewed awe. And this is all before the first speaker has even gone on stage! Arya thought.

When the first of the speakers eventually took to the podium, Arya told herself that she would keep an open mind about the things she was about to hear, but more often than not she found herself daydreaming, simply because the topics held no interest to her whatsoever. The first speaker talked about the uses and benefits of a medicinal concoction called weirwood paste, which did make her raise a brow when someone pointed out its hallucinogenic properties. Another speaker led them through breathing exercises that were supposed to sharpen the senses, but all Arya felt after doing the exercise was dizzy. She had not known that audience participation would be mandatory when she'd agreed to come with Bran.
The woman called Leaf Childs whom Meera had referred to earlier presented a talk about dreams, the meaning of dreams and how dreams were potential portals into the past, and into the future.

"One only needs to learn how to divine one's dreams to step through this portal."

Arya listened to the entire talk with one eyebrow cocked skeptically, though she was quick to assume a more neutral expression when Bran happened to glance in her direction.

"Isn't that cool, Arya?" her brother asked, clearly excited.

"Yeah…it sure is," Arya agreed.

The theme of the symposium that day was Greenseeing; An Esoteric Awakening. By the time Brynden Rivers was called to the podium, Arya was wondering how trippy his talk was going to be as the draw-card speaker, given everything she'd heard so far. She watched with a mild anticipation as the curtain parted, and was taken aback by the man's appearance. He was an albino, with a shock of white hair, skin as pale as milk stretched over his slender frame, and an eye-patch over one eye. The other eye that gazed out over the audience was red, seeming to see everything and everyone before him. He was also quite advanced in age, perhaps closer to ninety years old, and used a walking stick to approach the seat that had been prepared for him beneath the spotlight.

Arya had seen images on him on TV and social media so she knew what to expect, but what she had not expected was the aura of…wisdom…that had surrounded him, a kind of energy that made her want to hear what he had to say.

"Good morning to all of you," the man began, "thank you for being so kind as to come and listen to this old man speak. I see familiar faces among you, and many more that have come to see me for the first time. For the first-timers, I would like to point out that I have no tricks or illusions, no magic potions or spells that will miraculously enable you to awaken your third eye. I will not speak to you of meditation, or chanting, or listening to music made by whales. What I will tell you – and this goes to everyone in the audience – is that the power to awakening your third eye, the power to utilize the sight, and the power to unlock your hidden potential is inside all of you. Today, for those of you first-timers, I will be teaching you how to start the journey towards unlocking your potential, and for the rest of you, I hope to help you continue on your way.

Let me begin by saying that time is the greatest teacher. Many would say that it is life that is the greatest teacher, but in fact it is only within the confines of time that we are able to live. Why do I make this distinction? Let me ask you this; what is life? To me, life is the manifestation of time in its physical form …when a person is born he or she has only a certain length of time on this earth. When a person is born, he or she becomes the living embodiment of time. Again, many would say that life itself is the gift, and I do see how it can be seen as such. However, life is finite. Life ends. And, time? Why, time is infinite. Time will continue on long after our life has expired. The way I see it, time is the true gift. Now, what we do with the time we are given…that is living."

Okay, mind-fucked. Arya thought, trying wrapping her head around the concept as she sat up in her seat to continue listening.

"Time teaches us patience. Time teaches us how to observe, to discover different emotions, and time allows us to discover our purpose for being born. However, the lessons time can teach us can often only be appreciated in hindsight, when the moment has passed. Some people never come to realize that in each and every moment that passes, there is a lesson to be learned. What I would like you all to understand and take away with you today is that you must become aware of each and every moment of your life, of every event that occurs, of every person you encounter…because only by becoming aware can we begin to learn the lessons of time and understand our place in the life we
have been given. When you understand your position in your own unique timeline, you can then begin to see how your existence affects those around you and what role you may play in the timeline of someone else. By harnessing the power of hindsight, you can enhance the power of foresight...to see through time, if you will. This is what it means, in its most simplistic form, to awaken your third eye."

Brynden's lecture became more obscure from that point in Arya's opinion, which made it difficult for her to concentrate, and at length she stopped paying attention altogether. A quick glance around the conference hall revealed that everyone else was still engrossed in the lecture, so she returned to daydreaming once more. Inevitably her thoughts turned to Gendry, and Jaqen too. Seeing Jaqen onstage the night before had rattled her, and together with Gendry's presence at her side she'd felt such a mish-mash of emotions that had resulted in her becoming quiet for the rest of the night.

"Are you all right?" Gendry had asked her. "You're shivering."

"I'm fine," she'd replied, "I will be fine."

That was the moment she'd made the decision to stop feeling guilty about breaking up with Jaqen. She'd seen how Jaqen, and even Gendry, had begun to move on with their lives while she had still been stuck in the emotional mire of her own making. She had not wanted to be left behind. However, as these things went, it was easier said than done.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Gendry's fingers had tightened on her elbow. "You don't have to watch the rest of his show if you don't want to."

"It's okay. I don't mind watching." Arya had assured him. "Besides, getting out of this crowd will be tough."

Gendry had watched her, in a concerned friend sort of way with a concerned friend expression on his face, but did not ask her again. She had felt his eyes on her face several times throughout the duration of the Faceless Men's show which she thought unnecessary. Gendry did not need to worry about her. She did not want him to be worrying about her, especially in a concerned friend way.

She'd been unconsciously tense during Jaqen's show, relaxing only after they'd left the stage half an hour later. All of her friends had picked up on her unusual behavior, but none of them said a word, perhaps also sensing that there was something bigger going down. Hot Pie had spared a glance or two her way during Jaqen's show, but all he had ended up asking was what time she'd wanted to go home. She'd been loath to make Hot Pie leave before he'd seen all the acts he'd been waiting for, so she gave him as long as possible, keeping her curfew in mind.

During a break between acts Gendry had stuck to her side, for the first time all day, which she had been happy about until she'd realized he was keeping a lookout for Jaqen.

"You don't need to watch out for me," she'd told him after he'd abruptly taken her shoulders and directed her towards another refreshment stand when he'd seen Jaqen's unmistakable red and platinum streaked head at the bar. "I'm not trying to avoid him. I'm not scared of bumping into him."

Gendry's eyes had narrowed, again in a concerned friend manner that she had increasingly found irritating, but he'd let her shoulders go and given her a smile.

"You're right," he'd said, "there's absolutely no reason for you to run."

She did not encounter Jaqen or any of his friends again that night, but her guard had been up for the remainder of the evening, and by the time she and Hot Pie had left the Tourney grounds she'd been
more exhausted than she'd realized.

Sunday morning had seen her swearing at her phone when she'd seen Gossip Spyder's broadcast about Jaqen and their breakup. It was bound to happen sooner or later, and she was surprised that it had taken as many weeks as it had for Gossip Spyder to spill the news. Jaqen's move to New York was now public knowledge too, and she was mentally bracing herself for the gauntlet of gossip she'd have to face at school come Monday.

Right then however, she was pondering how her existence was affecting those around her. She'd done so much meddling in other people's affairs, and she was certain she was being punished for it somehow. The Three Eyed Raven's discussion ended while she'd still been deep in thought, and only when the overhead lights came back on did she stir from her seat, noticing that her companions had begun to rise from their seats.

"That was enlightening!" Jojen remarked, a rapt look on his face.

"It really was," Bran agreed. "What did you think, Arya?"

"Uh...yeah, enlightening," Arya mumbled.

"Shall we head to The Cave now?" Meera proposed.

"What's The Cave?" Arya asked.

"It's the restaurant on the lower-ground floor of this hotel," Meera replied, "it's where the meet-and-greet is being held."

"Let's go now so we can all grab something to eat before the queues get too long. Brynden will be making his way down soon," Jojen said, and began to lead the way.

Arya and Bran followed the Reed siblings from the conference hall and out into the foyer where many of the attendees were mingling and passing the time before the official start of the meet-and-greets. They opted for the stairs and made their way down to the themed restaurant, which displayed as much personality as the hotel. The lighting in the restaurant was more subdued, with fixtures resembling rambling roots, and tables arranged in secluded groves offering discreet dining for customers.

A section of the restaurant had been set up with a long table for the guest speakers to occupy, as well as a queuing section close by. There was also a buffet table laden with finger-foods laid out for symposium attendees. Arya was not particularly hungry, but she knew she'd be edgy if she didn't eat, so she nibbled on a savory tart and a small wedge of melon. The speakers began to arrive not long after, which prompted Bran and the Reed siblings to make a beeline for Leaf Childs who was signing copies of her latest book.

Arya took that opportunity to excuse herself to go and freshen up, telling Meera where she was headed before walking out of the restaurant to find the restrooms. She'd never been able to sit still for such extended periods of time, so when she was done freshening up she took the chance to further stretch her legs by exploring more of the peculiar hotel's publicly accessible areas.

She ended up at a gallery of sorts, which ran the length of the hotel. Situated on the third floor, it overlooked the foyer below, and had a view of the street outside from the wrap-around glass windows that provided natural sunlight to the masses of air plants and succulents that had been arranged like a cascading waterfall from the balcony. From there, she observed the people still mingling in the foyer, wondering if any of them would really put to practice the Three Eyed Raven's
teachings, and not merely consider it to be enlightening.

"You have such a serious expression on your face for one so young, my dear."

Startled by the sound of the raspy voice Arya spun around to find herself being watched by the Three Eyed Raven himself, his one red eye seeing more than what many people could see with two.

"Mr. Rivers." Arya offered him a polite smile. "I didn't hear you approaching."

"That's usually the opposite of what people say," he said, tapping his walking stick on the polished floor. "This normally gives me away."

"I'm sorry, I didn't notice. I was--"

"Deeply preoccupied within your own thoughts," Brynden finished for her.

"Yes," Arya admitted, curious as to why the man had approached her. "I was."

"You are a new face," Brynden stated. "In as much as I would like to think my earlier lecture is the reason you are now so thoughtful, I do believe I lost your attention about five minutes after I began speaking, would that be correct?"

Arya cringed inwardly, yet awkwardly smiled outwardly. "I'm sorry…how did you –?"

"I'm very observant," Brynden replied, not looking at all insulted.

"I really am very sorry you had to catch me not paying attention. I tried to focus on what you were saying, but this whole way of thinking is totally new to me and--"

Brynden put his hand up to stop her. "I'm not here about that."

"Oh." Arya couldn't think what he might want with her. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Here I was hoping I could help you," Brynden replied. "As I said, you looked incredibly serious, and I dare say…troubled."

Arya wondered just how much the man could see. He was freakishly observant.

"It's nothing serious, Mr. Rivers. I really wouldn't want to bother you with the details. It's just teenage girl problems."

"Ah, teenage girl problems…the most unique of problems they are too. Now you really have my interest piqued."

"Mr. Rivers," Arya tried again. "I'm a stranger to you, why would you want to help me?"

"Call it the eccentricities of an old man," Brynden said with a small smile. "Even if I cannot help you fix your problems, I hope at least to impart some of my wisdom, and perhaps guide you towards the answers you seek."

Arya wasn't sure why she suddenly felt compelled to pour her heart out to the strange old man, but two seconds later she was doing just that.

"I broke up with my boyfriend, because I realized I was in love with another guy the whole time. Now I'm feeling guilty because my ex-boyfriend did nothing wrong and yet I've caused him so much pain. I hate that I had to hurt him, and I hate that there was nothing I could do to avoid it. I saw him
last night, and I saw that he's going to be fine without me, so I want to stop feeling guilty, but I can't seem to figure out how."

Arya had spoken in a rush, and Brynden stared at her for some moments after she'd finished speaking appearing to mull over what she had told him, and Ayra sensed that he'd heard more than just her words.

"You must learn to forgive yourself and cease punishing yourself by dwelling on things you cannot change," Brynden said at length. "Let go of the past, because only then will you be able to free yourself from the guilt and regret that you carry."

"Let go of the past?" Arya repeated, confused. "Weren't you just lecturing us about how looking into the past was the key to unlocking the third eye or something?"

Brynden shook his head. "I said let go, not forget. I also said that hindsight has many lessons to teach us. In your case, the lessons taught by guilt and regret. Both are negative emotions, powerful ones that can easily overshadow the positive lessons one can glean from a breakup. It appears to me that you feel guilty because you have unintentionally misled a person you once thought yourself in love with, correct?"

"Yes. I really never meant to mislead him." Arya bowed her head. "I really wish it didn't have to be this way."

"It is clear you regret the way things have happened, but what is even clearer to me is that you are remorseful. Remorse, in my opinion, is far more important than regret. Not everyone who regrets also feels remorse, you see."

"So, what do I do with this guilt and remorse?"

"Take your guilt and use it to gain a better understanding of yourself, my dear. Perhaps the reason you feel as though you misled that boy is because you did not understand your own heart. Use this chance to learn why it is that you felt romantic love for someone else, and hopefully in future you will recognize romantic love with more certainty. As for remorse…well, you now seem to understand the repercussions of your actions. A truly remorseful person will be moved to avoid such hurtful actions again."

Arya felt as though a switch had been flipped inside her head, because suddenly there was so much clarity around her thoughts.

"I don't have to keep feeling bad about not knowing my own feelings? I don't have to feel guilty about being unsure?" Arya asked, hopeful.

"That decision is yours to make. In life, my dear, you must understand that sometimes events must unfold the way they do for a reason, despite our best efforts to influence the outcomes. Sometimes fault cannot be laid at anyone's feet, because love is a mysterious game, and often there are no winners or losers…only lessons."

"Is this about those timelines you mentioned, and how our own timelines intertwine and intersect with those of others?" Arya frowned. "Because, I'm afraid I didn't listen to all of that."

Brynden chuckled. "I do believe you listened well enough to the parts that pertain to you. I can see that I may have given you more food for thought, however."

"Thank you, Mr. Rivers," Arya said gratefully, surprisingly. "I think you really have helped me."
"That's wonderful." Brynden's wizened face broke into a broad smile. "I'm truly glad to hear that. Now, if you would be so kind as to assist this old man to the restaurant downstairs, I would be most grateful."

"Of course, I'd be glad to." Arya immediately held her arm out for him to take.

"Thank you," Brynden said as they began to walk back along the gallery towards the escalator. "I told my assistant that I would be resting in my suite awhile, and that I would call him when I was ready to come down. But, then I caught a glimpse of you wandering the gallery and I could not ignore you...my dear, what name might I call you by?"

"It's Arya," she replied, "Arya Stark. My younger brother Brandon, or Bran as we call him, is a big fan of yours and he's downstairs waiting to meet you."

"Stark...hmm?" Brynden raised the brow above his one red eye. "It would be my pleasure to meet him also."

Bran and the Reed siblings looked on in surprise when Arya escorted the Three Eyed Raven to his seat in front of his waiting fans.

"What happened?" Bran asked when she joined him in the queue.

Arya shrugged. "I helped him down the escalators."

She thought it best that she keep her encounter with Brynden Rivers to herself. It was an unexpected lesson with an unexpected teacher, and she had a feeling that his words would stay with her forever.

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Gendry

There were photos of him laughing and flirting with the girls from Seventh Harmony backstage at the Tourney. The photos had been taken by an official photographer for the event and had been posted on the Tourney Fields Festival Facebook page. Someone who knew Gendry had seen it and shared it, which in turn got re-shared several more times before Gossip Spyder had been clued in and made it common knowledge that Monday morning. By the time he'd sat down in his homeroom class he'd been asked about it at least a dozen times. He'd smiled about it, joked around even, when all he wanted to do was tell them all to shut up and go away. He'd never even heard of the pop group until Edric had fanboyed over them when he'd spotted the girls in the VVIP area. Now there were rumors that Gendry had hooked up with one of the girls after the Tourney.

"No, Hot Pie," Gendry said when his friend sat down next to him with an excited look in his eyes.

"You haven't heard my question." Hot Pie frowned.

"Doesn't matter, because the answer's no," Gendry repeated. "I didn't hook up with any of those girls, and no, I'm not about to date one either."

"But, they gave you their numbers, right?" Hot Pie looked at him hopefully.

"Two of them did," Gendry admitted. "But I won't be calling either of them."

"What's wrong with you?" Hot Pie demanded.

"Why the hell is everyone so keen to see me get with someone?"
"Because you've been hung up over one girl for far too long and you need to move on," Hot Pie replied. "Also, everyone kinda wants to know who you'll end up hooking up with, because you're hot property and all."

Gendry sighed. "I'm not about to get with just anyone. How can I trust that they want me for me, and not because of my Baratheon connections?"

"Then how about getting with one of your own kind?" Hot Pie suggested.

"My own kind?" Gendry gazed at him quizzically.

"Yep." Hot Pie nodded. "Like, Margaery Tyrell for example. You two seem to be getting closer lately."

"Absolutely not." Gendry shook his head vehemently. "That girl's a man eater and always seems to have a hidden agenda. Plus, her grandmother's probably a mob boss or something."

"What about Jazmin Choi?"

Gendry shook his head again. "The spark isn't there. Believe me, I've had her practically sitting on my lap and glued to my side and...felt nothing."

"Are you a goddamn statue or what? Dude, does your dick even work?"

Gendry had smacked the back of Hot Pie's head before his friend even had the chance to defend himself.

"It works just fine, thank you."

"I'll bet he's lonely though," Hot Pie said with a teasing grin. "He's got no friends, other than your right hand...argh!"

Gendry was out of his seat and grabbing Hot Pie in a headlock in a matter of seconds. "Don't insult his best friend like that, dude."

"Hahahahaha!...I'm sure they have a beautiful friendship – urgh!"

Hot Pie was in the process of tapping out when the homeroom teacher walked in a moment later, and Gendry released him much to his great relief. Gendry knew that his friend meant well, but he just didn't want to get with a girl until he had completely moved on from Arya, and he wasn't there just yet. Seeing her react to Jaqen's presence at the Tourney had set off his protective instincts, especially when he'd seen the way she was staring at her ex-boyfriend while he was up on stage. He wasn't sure if his protectiveness was due to lingering romantic feelings, or genuine concern of a friend.

Hot Pie had told him that he'd convinced Arya to come to the Tourney in order to cheer her up and take her mind away from Jaqen. Gendry knew that his friend meant well, but he just didn't want to get with a girl until he had completely moved on from Arya, and he wasn't there just yet. Seeing her react to Jaqen's presence at the Tourney had set off his protective instincts, especially when he'd seen the way she was staring at her ex-boyfriend while he was up on stage. He wasn't sure if his protectiveness was due to lingering romantic feelings, or genuine concern of a friend.

Arya and Hot Pie had left at ten o'clock to be sure that Arya made it back home by curfew, after which Gendry and the rest of his friends caught the last acts of the evening from the comfort of the
VIP area where they'd still had a view of the stage. Jaqen and his crew had had the same idea, though they'd stayed well away at the opposite end of the tent. Gendry had watched Arya's ex for a time, seeing him laughing and mingling with fans and other artists and enjoying himself in general. As he'd watched, Gendry had found himself getting angry. There was the guy who'd broken Arya's heart, trading her in for stardom.

After you stole her from me, after you made her fall for you, you're just going to break up with her to chase fame and fortune someplace far away. Gendry's already low opinion of Jaqen descended even further and his anger over the entire situation persisted for the rest of the weekend, especially after Gossip Spyder had reported about the breakup on Sunday morning. Despite the mask she was wearing, Arya was having a tough time with the breakup, and now she would have to endure people gossiping about it at school too. Part of the reason Gendry had been annoyed that morning was because he'd already heard people talking about it as he'd walked from the parking lot, and the things people were saying had not been kind.

"Jaqen H'ghar was out of her league from the start, even if she is a Stark."

"It makes sense that he would break up with her," someone else said, "why would he want a high-school girlfriend tying him down when he can keep his options open? Once he's famous, he's going to have way more glamorous women throwing themselves at him."

"Arya Stark has abysmal luck with guys, doesn't she? I mean, Sandor Clegane ended up hooking up with her older sister, and now Jaqen's choosing his band over her. That just goes to show that money, looks and a name really don't guarantee happiness."

Lunch break couldn't come fast enough in his opinion, but when the bell rang his relief was short-lived when Margaery suddenly materialized at this side.

"Hi, Gendry," the man-eating brunette greeted him. "I caught your show at the Tourney on the weekend. Too bad we didn't get to meet up."

"Oh. Hey, Margaery." Gendry returned her smile. "Thanks for coming to see us. The Tourney was a huge deal, so it's kinda cool that so many people from school were there."

"You're more popular than ever now."

"Am I really?" Gendry raised his brow, his tone uninterested.

"Your aloofness is part of your appeal." Margaery laughed. "Are you heading to the cafeteria?"

"I am,"

"What a coincidence! I'm headed there myself. Do you mind if I walk with you?" Margaery asked as she linked her elbow with his.

"I'd be glad for the company," Gendry replied, having not been given a choice about it.

Margaery Tyrell was one of the few girls he knew who could get away with doing something so bold. The cafeteria was situated on the opposite end of the school from the building they had just exited, and although it appeared that Gendry was leading her, the truth was that Margaery was in control. He followed her as she led him through the covered walkways and thoroughfares that teemed with students, seeing to take the route that would guarantee them the most exposure to the greatest number of eyes, which made him wonder what her agenda was this time.

"Has Beric said anything to you about performing at the Spring Fling?" he asked her.
"I have, as a matter of fact. I spoke with him this morning." Margaery glanced up at him. "Has he not told you the news?"

"What news?"

Margaery sighed. "Beric's decided that the *Brotherhood* will not be performing after all."

"Oh, is that so?" Gendry returned. "Beric must have a good reason for deciding against it."

"He did." Margaery pressed his arm closer to her side, and he tried to ignore the fact she'd purposely brushed the side of breast against him on purpose. "He argued that he and Allyria just want to enjoy their last Spring Fling quietly, without the pressure of performing, and I can understand that. It's a shame though, because with the success of the *Brotherhood*'s appearance at the Tourney, and the buzz generated from your *Heart of Fire* gig before that, I think this year's Spring Fling would definitely have been that much more memorable had you guys performed."

Gendry was neutral on the subject, but Margaery appeared to be serious about her planning committee responsibilities and she looked genuinely disappointed about Beric's decision.

"Cheer up," he told her, "I'm sure it will be fantastic regardless. You're the one leading the committee, and I doubt you'd let it be anything less than spectacular."

"Thanks, Gendry!" Margaery squeezed his arm again. "That's very kind of you to say."

Gendry couldn't help but notice the attention they were attracting, and knew for sure that Margaery was doing this on purpose. He just couldn't figure out why.

"So, what have you been doing other than attending music festivals and planning the biggest dance of the school year?" he wondered, hoping she would just tell him what she wanted from him.

"Oh, you know…just holding court, keeping wayward princes in line…that sort of thing." Margaery looked up at him.

"Is *wayward* the right word to describe him?" Gendry muttered through gritted teeth.

Margaery's glance shifted, as though checking to see who might hear them, and her voice dropped an octave when she spoke. "Our Prince of The Playground's rule over this school appears to be at an end, if the rumors are to be believed. I could call him many things, but wayward is one of the more polite words I choose to use."

Gendry clicked his tongue. "In other words, you think he's as big of an asshole as I do. Why do you hang around him?"

Margaery's expression remained genial, but the set of her mouth and the sudden intensity of her gaze made him realize how much of a stranger this girl was to him.

"You're not the first person to ask me that question, and while I could go into the myriad of reasons why, I'm afraid you would find it rather convoluted."

"Fair enough." Gendry took the hint. "You have your reasons for sticking with the blonde jerk."

"I didn't mean it to come across that way," Margaery was quick to say, her smile returning. "Let's just say that I'm looking out for my best interests, okay?"

Gendry shrugged. "It's your business."
"Exactly!" Margaery exclaimed. "The future of Reach & Marches Holdings is in my hands and I won't let anything jeopardize it. Not even a wayward prince."

"What?" Gendry frowned, realizing that she was talking about her family's company. "No, never mind. It doesn't concern me."

"But it does." Margaery corrected him, confusing him further. "There's going to be some changes coming Gendry, and the wheels were set in motion the moment your existence was acknowledged. The question is, will you be ready for what's to come?"

"I'm not sure what you're trying to say."

"Did you ever wonder why I made a bid for you at the bachelor auction, and not for Joffrey?"

"I figured you'd finally had enough of his shit," Gendry said with another shrug. "But, Arya Stark outbid you in the end."

Margaery's smile turned humorous, as an adult might smile at a child who'd said something mildly amusing. "You and I both know that I could easily have won if I'd chosen to continue bidding."

"Except, you didn't."

"Indeed, I did not," Margaery acquiesced. "I thought it was cute how Arya looked so desperate to win, so I let her and Jazmine Choi duke it out. Besides, my goal was merely to send a message to everyone in that ballroom, and it seems to have been heard."

"What message?"

"Haven't you heard, Gendry?" Margaery grinned at him. "King's Landing Prep finally has a king!"

Gendry could only stare at her as his brain tried to process the fact that the king she was referring to was him, while another part of his brain was stuck on the mention of Arya being desperate to win him at the auction. Had he not been so distracted, he might have noticed that they were nearing the cafeteria, and that they were currently walking right through the center of the quadrangle, being watched by the greater populace of the school.

Except he didn't notice, and neither did he notice the approach of an unwelcome face until Joffrey Baratheon was right in front of him.

"Well, what do we have here?" Joffrey questioned with a sneer about his mouth.

Gendry snapped out of his musings and immediately raised his guard. Encounters with Joffrey were never pleasant, but he had a bad feeling that this encounter was going to be particularly nasty. Joffrey, accompanied as always by Trant and Blount, was also looking particularly annoying with his blonde hair slicked back with too much gel, and wearing a white leather jacket that made him look like a cheap Justin Bieber impersonator.

"Hello, brother," Gendry greeted him, the word brother coming out like an insult. "To what do I owe the presence of your company today?"

"What makes you think I want to talk to you?" Joffrey spat. "It's dear Margaery here that I want to speak with."

There was a glint in Joffrey's eyes that Gendry didn't like, and he realized that he'd seen that look before. Joffrey used to look at Sansa Stark that way whenever he was displeased with her. He
suddenly recalled that ugly fight Joffrey and Sansa had had right there in the quad all those months back, the one where Joffrey had gripped Sansa's wrists so hard she'd bruised. Arya had wanted to stop them that time, but Gendry had held her back. He'd come to regret his choice later on when he'd learned what had happened to Sansa. In fact, if he'd known then what he knew now, he would have marched right over and intervened in that fight himself.

With that memory in his mind, Gendry now found himself pulling Margaery Tyrell behind him, shielding her from the dangerous glint in Joffrey's eyes.

"Margaery and I were about to have lunch together, so you'll have to excuse us. Sorry we can't stay and chat." Gendry took hold of Margaery's hand, intending to walk away and hopefully prevent a scene.

"Running away is what cowards do, brother," Joffrey taunted him. "And, you're good at running away, aren't you? You run away every time I try and have a conversation with you. That's not very brotherly, is it?"

Gendry paused in mid-step and turned back to look at the blonde jerk, irked that he'd fallen for Joffrey's bait.

"You suck at conversations, Joffrey." Gendry scoffed. "All you do is whine about how small your dick is and really, who wants to listen to that?"

There were muffled snickers and giggles in the quad following Gendry's taunt, and Joffrey's face immediately turned red.

"Is this really what you're choosing over me, Margaery?" Joffrey directed his question at her, though his eyes remained locked on Gendry. "I always gave you credit for having impeccable taste, but your taste turned out to be garbage…just like him."

"Why are you bringing her into this?" Gendry demanded. "Your problem is with me, so leave her out of it."

"She made a problem for herself when she chose to humiliate me in front of everyone at the auction."

"Look, Joffrey. I never said I was going to bid for you—" Margaery attempted to speak, but was swiftly cut off by Joffrey.

"You told me that you were going to bid for the guy worthy of being your king," Joffrey spat angrily.

"And, it wasn't you," Gendry quipped, noting the way Joffrey's stance had shifted. "As far as I know Margaery was never your girlfriend, so she was free to bid on whoever she wanted."

"You're no king, and you never will be," Joffrey hissed in a menacing tone. "You're a bastard, and you always will be."

Gendry shrugged. "And everyone will always know that your dear old dad screwed around on your mom…multiple times at that."

"Let's go, Gendry." Margaery tugged on his hand. "We're attracting an audience."

Joffrey's gaze snapped back to Margaery. "I said I wanted to talk with you, Margaery."

Margaery did not flinch at his tone, contrary to what Gendry had expected, and she faced Joffrey
"I'll speak with you when you've calmed down, okay?" Margaery gave him a placating smile. "I understand why you're upset, and I truly am sorry for any misunderstanding between us, but as Gendry said, I wasn't dating you."

"Misunderstanding?" Joffrey looked ready to froth at the mouth. "All these months you've been fawning over me and flaunting your tits in my face and you call it a misunderstanding?"

"Don't go there, Joffrey," Gendry warned him in a low voice, sensing the rapid deterioration of Joffrey's mood. "You're a fucking cocktease, Margaery," Joffrey continued, ignoring Gendry's warning. "That's what you are."

"Joffrey, don't--" Margaery began, only to be cut off once again.

"Don't…what? Don't let all these people know how cheap you really are? Don't let them know how you're nothing more than a groupie chasing after my bastard half-brother because he's in a band, and you think this somehow makes him better than me? What a fucking joke!"

"I don't have to stand here and listen to this," Margaery stated in a cold voice. "Well, you should listen." Joffrey sneered. "You'll end up being a joke too if you keep hanging around trash like him. But, hey…since you like slumming it so much maybe you should move back to Flea Bottom with him. I bet you'll be real comfortable with all the rats and roaches there."

Joffrey was on a roll and it looked as though he'd only just begun. Gendry could see that the jerk was beyond caring who heard him or who was watching. Joffrey had stuff he wanted to say to Margaery, all borne from his apparent humiliation and the misunderstanding that Margaery was probably guilty of perpetuating on purpose. Margaery was not easily cowed like Sansa had been, so Joffrey had now switched from intimidation to character bashing. The more he talked, the colder Margaery's expression became. From the ice in her eyes, Gendry could not see any hope of Joffrey ever being in her good graces ever again. On his part, Gendry's irritation was compounding by the second, and while he was waiting for the opportunity to get himself and Margaery out of their current situation, part of him was also waiting for Joffrey to do something – anything – that would warrant a punch to the face.

"I never once said that I was going to date you, Joffrey," Margaery was currently saying, "and again, I do apologize if I somehow got your hopes up, but it was not going to happen. Frankly, after this display, your chances of dating me went from never, to when hell freezes over."

That was their cue to exit, but as Margaery turned to walk away Joffrey suddenly reached out and grabbed her elbow with enough force to make her whirl back around. "I'm not done talking to you, bitch!" Joffrey hissed. Gendry was quick to grasp Joffrey's wrist, pulling Margaery out of his reach not a second later. "Conversations over," Gendry growled, "don't you dare touch her again."

Joffrey shoved him in the chest with his forearm hard, making Gendry take a step back for balance. "Who the fuck are you to tell me what to do?" Joffrey's face contorted with rage.

There were gasps and murmurs building around them, but Gendry barely registered the noise. He
didn't reply to Joffrey's question. Instead he stared the blonde down, taunting him with a sneer, daring him to make a move. *Come on*, he thought. *What are you waiting for? Come at me! Just give me one reason.*

Joffrey's nostril flared, the only warning Gendry received a moment before Joffrey's fist came flying towards his face!

"Get that smirk off your face, bastard!" Joffrey shouted.

Gendry attempted to dodge, but with Margaery behind him his movement was restricted and the blow landed on his jaw. Margaery yelped in shock, as did the witnesses around them. The yelling then grew louder when Gendry came charging towards Joffrey with his own fists raised in front of him.

"Big mistake, Joffrey!" Gendry growled as he drove his right fist into Joffrey's cheek.

He felt the impact of the blow travel up his arm, but adrenaline was rushing through him and he felt no pain. All he could think about was how to end the fight, and quickly. He took another step towards Joffrey who was reeling from the blow to his face, but Joffrey still saw him coming, and before Gendry could land another blow Joffrey had bent his knees, rushing towards him with a clear intention of taking him down. Being on the varsity football team Joffrey was used to tackling opponents to the ground, and Gendry went down hard. Momentarily winded and pinned to the ground, Gendry grabbed Joffrey's jacket collar and maneuvered his arms until he'd put Joffrey in a headlock, keeping his torso close to prevent the blonde from being able to put any real power behind the blows he was dealing to Gendry's ribs. Gendry kept expecting Joffrey to twist out of his hold at any moment, having the advantage over him, but as the seconds passed and Joffrey continued to struggle in the headlock, it soon dawned on him that Joffrey had never been in any real fights, and he knew then that he had this won.

He raised his knees and planted his feet flat on the ground beneath him before he bucked his hips and, using Joffrey's weight against him, he rolled them both over. Suddenly their positions were reversed and Joffrey now lay vulnerable on the ground. Gendry punched him once…twice…hard, then he pushed himself off the ground and stood up to prepare for a possible round two in case Joffrey had not had enough.

"Get up, Joffrey!" Gendry grunted at the blonde who was struggling to pick himself up off the ground. "You wanted a fight, and now you've got it. Get up and let's end this!"

Joffrey was being assisted to his feet by Blount, but the blonde jerk shrugged him off. Joffrey had blood on his face, stemming from a cut on his cheek and busted lip.

"I don't need your help!" Joffrey hissed at Blount before he turned to face Gendry. "That was a lucky shot."

Gendry shrugged. "You took it to the ground. It's not my fault you don't know how to finish a fight. Not that easy going up against someone your own size, huh? It's a lot different from picking on girls smaller than you."

There was a chorus of 'ooohs!' from the gathered crowd, and Gendry could see the rage seething in Joffrey's eyes, but there was a wariness there too, because Gendry had spoken the truth.

"You're not worth wasting anymore of my time on," Joffrey huffed, refusing to admit defeat. "Next time, you won't be so lucky, asshole."
"It wasn't luck." Gendry laughed. "And, you know it."

"You can keep the thorny bitch," Joffrey continued as though he hadn't heard Gendry speaking, glancing angrily towards Margaery. "And, stay out of my way from now on."

"Teacher's coming, Joff!" Trant called out from the sidelines. "Let's get out of here."

The mention of a teacher caused everyone to scatter. Margaery pulled on his arm and he followed her as they bypassed the cafeteria in search of somewhere quiet where he could catch his breath.

"Thank you," Margaery said as they made their way towards the gardens. "Thank you for sticking up for me like that. I never expected you'd fight him on my behalf."

"It wasn't all for you," Gendry told her, "his face was calling out to my fist."

Margaery steered him towards a bench in a quiet corner of the school gardens and Gendry sat down with a heavy sigh, raking his hands through his disheveled hair. Margaery sat down next to him quietly, not saying anything for some minutes. He'd just about caught his breath when she suddenly gasped and pointed to the sleeve on his hooded sweater.

"Gendry, you're bleeding!"

"I am?" Gendry quickly gave himself a once over, but failed to find the source of the blood. "It's not my blood."

Quickly, he pulled the hoodie over his head and roughly flung it onto the bench beside him.

"Is that Joffrey's blood?" Margaery pointed to the bloodied hoodie.

"Yep." Gendry nodded, disgusted to have anything belonging to Joffrey near him. "Probably happened when I busted his face."

"I'll have it cleaned for you." Margaery picked it up and folded it into a neat square. "It's my fault you got into a fight with him. It's the least I can do."

"Just throw it in the trash," Gendry told her, "I won't be wearing it again."

"If that's what you want me to do." Margaery sighed and glanced at his face. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Gendry refused to admit that his jaw was starting to ache now that the adrenaline was wearing off, and that his ribs were sore. "What about you? He didn't hurt you back there, did he?"

Margaery shook her head. "I'm a little shaken, but otherwise unscathed, thanks to you. I am sorry that I got you involved with my issues with Joffrey."

Gendry gave her a searching look, before he finally told her what was on his mind. "I don't know what you want from me."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play dumb, okay? I took a fist to the jaw and had my ribs tenderized for you, so you owe me the truth. What do you want from me?"

Margaery looked somewhat impressed by his directness and she regarded him with perhaps the most unguarded expression he had yet seen her wear.
"I need you to keep being exactly who you are," she replied, "not only now, but into the future as well. Grandma says she can see you doing great things in future, and now I think I believe her."

"I should have known I wasn't going to get a straight answer," Gendry bemoaned, and having reached the end of his patience he stood up from the bench. "Look, Margaery. Don't think I'm going to be as easy to charm as all the other guys around you. I grew up in an environment you couldn't even begin to understand, so trust me when I say that it will take more than flattery to win me over. Whatever it is you're hoping to get from me, your best bet is to be honest with me. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll be leaving now."

Gendry began to walk away and he had taken a couple of steps away from her, Margaery began laughing.

"Gendry Waters," Margaery called after him, "I think I like you."

"Oh, and stop lying to me, okay?" Gendry returned with a shake of his head and a small smile. "Be careful around Joffrey, and don't forget to dump that hoodie."

It was while he was walking towards his locker that his phone buzzed with a notification. Gossip Spyder had a detailed account of the fight in the quad, and a scoop on a possible romance between himself and Margaery Tyrell. Gendry shook his head, and braced himself to meet the fresh wave of gossip.
Hands up who's excited for Spring Fling?

The annual school dance is happening this Saturday night and tickets are available from the committee reps who will be selling them from their booth by the cafeteria every lunch hour until Friday. This year's theme will be 'Some Enchanted Evening' and with Margaery Tyrell at the helm of this year's planning committee, you can bet that the school gymnasium will be bedecked and bedazzled like never before! Spring Fling marks the start of the spring party season which hits its peak during Spring Break and continues through to Easter, culminating with the Easter Banquet held each year at the King's Landing City Hall. This annual spate of celebrations has been dubbed by generations of KL Prep students as Hay Fever, and I'm certain this year will be the most eventful yet!

The rumors about the Brotherhood Without Banners performing at Spring Fling have turned out to be negative, with Beric Dondarrion being overheard stating that he would like to enjoy his final Spring Fling just as an ordinary senior, with girlfriend Allyria Dayne. But, not to worry folks – I heard that DJ Pylos, a rising star from one of King's Landing's hottest clubs has agreed to spin tracks on the night, all thanks to Margaery Tyrell's connections!

Speaking of Margaery, it has been one week since Gendry Waters and Joffrey Baratheon were involved in an altercation concerning Miss Tyrell. Having witnessed the fight take place on the quad lawn with my own two eyes, I was worried there'd be further acts of violence between the two half-brothers, but I'm glad to report that both appear to be laying low for the meantime. On the other hand, the budding romance between Gendry and Margaery seems to be progressing nicely! Although there have been no confirmations that the two are dating, both have been seen spending time together at school, and had been spotted together at Harrenhal Mall just last week.

Following Margaery's total and complete rejection of Joffrey in front of so many people, and the way opinions about Joffrey have continued to slide downhill after his less than princely display of behavior, many people have been referring to Gendry as the King of King's Landing Prep. With Joffrey losing his title of Prince of the Playground and effectively being dethroned, it seems only a matter of time before Gendry and Margaery 'Queen of the Quad' Tyrell will be crowned as the school's new it power-couple…stay tuned!

In other news, Margaery's big bro' Willas has now been working as an analyst at Stark Industries for almost a fortnight, reporting directly to Eddard Stark, if my sources are correct. The Stark and Tyrell dynasties are historical trading partners, with arms-length dealings going back over a century, according to a report published in the King's Landing Tribune. Mace Tyrell and Eddard Stark have gone a step further and aligned their business endeavors in an official partnership, which has ultimately led to their families becoming more intimately acquainted in various ways. Sansa and Arya Stark attend KL Prep with Margaery Tyrell, with Sansa and Margaery having formed what appears to be a solid friendship. The Starks and Tyrells also spent Christmas Eve together, while Catelyn Stark, Olenna Tyrell and Alerie Tyrell are involved with the same charitable organizations.

Willas Tyrell's appointment at Stark Industries is just the latest example of how the two families have grown even closer, while on the other hand, the Stark and Baratheon families have not been seen together at official functions since the Bachelor Auction a month ago. Word is relations between the two families had been strained since Sansa and Joffrey's public break-up, which appeared to have involved intervention by their respective fathers, if Sansa's unusual statement at the time of the break-
up is anything to go by. Perhaps we are seeing the beginning of a new era in King's Landing's social scene, one dominated by the Starks and Tyrells.

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Arya

She did not like how Gossip Spyder continued to write about Gendry and Margaery as though the two of them getting together and becoming a couple was a foregone conclusion. She had not been able to ask Gendry about it directly, but Hot Pie had told her quite readily that there was nothing romantic going on between them.

"They're just friends," Hot Pie told her, "I think they got to talking more after that incident with her grandmother. Why? Are you worried about him?"

"No," Arya had replied, turning away from Hot Pie's gaze. "Just curious, that's all."

She had not wanted Hot Pie to see that her curiosity came from jealousy and the secret longing she was harboring for their friend. However, she could not be satisfied with Hot Pie's response, especially after she'd witnessed Gendry coming to Margaery's defense in the quad that day. She and Hot Pie had been sitting at their usual table by the cafeteria window when they'd heard the commotion outside. Arya had looked out of the window in time to see Joffrey land a punch to Gendry's jaw, and by the time they'd run out onto the quad Gendry was dealing the final blow to Joffrey's face. They'd heard the parting exchange between the brothers a short moment before a teacher had arrived to disperse the crowd, and Arya had watched as Gendry walked away with Margaery's hand in his.

Gossip Spyder's eyewitness account of the lead-up to the fight had filled her in on what she'd missed, including how protective Gendry had been towards Margaery, and none of what she'd read had been at all reassuring. Despite the rumors that had sprung up in the wake of the fight Gendry had appeared calm and relatively unaffected by the talk involving himself and Margaery, but no one had dared to mention Joffrey's name in his presence, unless it was to congratulate him on 'teaching that ass-wipe a lesson'. People thought that Joffrey deserved what he'd got, and there were a brief couple of days where people suddenly remembered how Joffrey used to treat Sansa.

"Joffrey never changed," people said, "he was an asshole then, and now that Margaery's publicly rejected him he's become an even bigger asshole. I heard that Sansa and Joffrey's parents were involved in their breakup...maybe he really was abusing her?"

"He probably was," people agreed, "and now Karma's finally catching up to him."

Sansa and Sandor had witnessed the fight too, being seated at a table out in the quad with their group of friends when things had gone down. Sandor had been on his feet and standing at the edge of the lawn when Arya had spotted him. He'd been poised for flight.

"I didn't need to step in, after all." Sandor had shrugged and given a concerned Sansa a look of reassurance. "Gendry can fight."

"He grew up in Flea Bottom, remember?" Arya had pointed out. "He's never said he couldn't fight."

"I almost wish I had to step in," Sandor had grunted, "I've always wondered how it would feel to smash Joffrey's face."
"I'm just relieved that Gendry's okay, and that nothing happened to Margaery," Sansa had said, the relief she spoke of evident on her face. "The truth about Joffrey was bound to come out sooner or later."

Arya mentioned the incident to Gendry just once, only to ask if he was okay. She'd caught him walking to his locker the day following the fight.

"Of course I'm okay." Gendry had smiled at her as they'd walked down the hall. "I think Joffrey was forced to tackle me because he realized he had no idea how to throw a real punch. He didn't do much damage."

"That's good." Arya had noticed the bruising around Gendry's jaw, but oddly it had not taken anything away from his looks.

"What about you?" Gendry had then asked, his tone softening. "How are you dealing with… things?"

"Hmm?" Arya had seen his raised brow and realized he'd been referring to her breakup with Jaqen. "Oh, I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"I really am." She'd smiled at him, hoping it would convince him. "I just needed to see things from a different perspective."

"And, what about the rumors?"

Arya had shrugged. "I deal with them as I always do. I glare at the people I see talking about me, or accidentally push them into solid objects."

Gendry had laughed. "It's nice to see you haven't forgotten how to bite."

Gendry's offhand observation was a welcome sign that she was back to her normal self, outwardly at least. Mentally and emotionally, she felt like a different person. Perhaps, as Sansa had once told her, it was all a part of growing up. Perhaps it was as a result of the talk she'd had with Brynden Rivers, but there was no denying that deep down, something inside her had been profoundly changed. It had been almost two weeks since she'd attended the 'Greenseeing' symposium with Bran, and almost one month since she and Jaqen had broken up. Given enough time, she supposed she would have come to the same conclusion on her own, but the Three Eyed Raven had just made her realize it all the sooner – she and Jaqen were meant to meet each other for a reason. They were meant to come together for a reason, and even if they had not been together very long, she was going to remember the time they had with fondness. She did not regret what they'd shared, yet she also accepted her shortcomings that had contributed to their end. Jaqen had helped her to grow, and she only hoped that one day, he would eventually come to regard her with a level of fondness, or at least, with bittersweet nostalgia.

Having effectively compartmentalized their breakup and deciding to move forward with her life, Arya now saw herself facing a new dilemma. Gendry Waters was still not hers, and unless she did something about her feelings soon, then he might never be hers. Jazmine Choi was still hovering around him, but she was attracting Gendry's attention less and less in recent weeks, all due to Margaery Tyrell. Unlike Jazmine, who was more reserved than Margaery, Arya had no doubts that Margaery would be a far more tempting seductress. If Margaery had not been clinging to him so closely Arya knew that she would still be taking her time and continuing to hesitate, but she was
being forced to show her hand now. If she waited any longer, she could very well lose the game to Margaery before she'd even had a chance to play.

And, Gendry's heart is the prize.

Arya was counting on one factor to work in her favor. Gendry had held feelings for her not so long ago, and despite what he had told her about wanting to remain friends, she was hoping that she could reignite those feelings somehow, and convince him that she was the girl for him. She hoped that the affections he'd once felt for her had not completely vanished, and that they were still in a corner of his heart hidden away.

But, how am I going to do it? How do I tell him? What do I say?

She had never been the type to formulate plans and concoct schemes. She was more of the on-the-fly type of girl, spurred on by the heat of the moment and driven by impulse. And, not always to good end, she thought. My usual style isn't going to cut it. I need some kind of game-plan. She had to get Gendry alone, one way or another, and hopefully he would listen to what she had to say.

She was deep in thought, considering her options on Thursday as she bought lunch at the cafeteria, pre-occupied with scenarios she was imagining in her mind that she didn't immediately notice that Hot Pie was not alone at their usual table by the window. However, she recognized his broad shoulders and back even before Hot Pie could announce her presence.

"Hey, Arya," Hot Pie greeted her, "look who's decided to join us today."

Gendry turned around and flashed her a huge smile. "Hi, Arya."

"Hi, how are you?" Arya returned his smile.

"I'm fine," Gendry replied, shifting his tray over so that she could place hers next to it. "And, you?"

"Hungry."

Arya sat next to him and covertly drank in the sight of him dressed in dark fitted denim jeans and a grey shirt that somehow made the blue of his eyes appear deeper.

"We were just talking about the Spring Fling," Hot Pie told her.

"What about it?" Arya asked as she began to eat her turkey sandwich.

"Gendry was saying that Beric coerced him into agreeing to attend. Apparently Beric wanted to hang out and have fun with all of the gang on the night."

"Coerce?" Arya gave Gendry a look, this was news to her. "Why? You don't want to go?"

"Dances really aren't my thing." Gendry shrugged.

"But, you're such a good dancer," Arya teased him.

"Ah…that one time at the auction was the first time I've ever danced in public," Gendry admitted.

"Really? You're a natural, though." Arya grinned. "You made me look like I could dance."

"You were just really sensitive to my touch," Gendry said, "and you responded exactly how I wanted you to."
"Wow, dude." Hot Pie grinned in a rather lewd manner. "You're making me blush with that kind of suggestive talk."

"Huh?" Gendry frowned for a second, then his eyes widened and the tops of his cheeks turned pink. "Oh."

Arya had to look away to hide her own blush too, twice as embarrassed because she suddenly remembered exactly how she had responded to his touch that night.

"Real smooth, Gendry." Hot Pie chuckled.

"So…anyway." Gendry cleared his throat. "Neither of you have said whether you'll be going to the dance."

"I can't." Hot Pie shook his head. "I have a few things I need to take care of."

"Like what?"

"Fill out my application for the food and wine festival that's happening over Spring Break for one,"

"You're going to sell your pies at the food show?" Gendry looked impressed.

"Only if I get accepted," Hot Pie said with a shrug of his shoulders. "And, it's also my grandmother's eighty-fifth birthday so my mom's hosting a big party with all the family for her on that night."

"Oh, happy birthday to Granny Hot Pie in that case, but it's too bad you can't make it to Spring Fling." Gendry turned to Arya. "What about you, Arya?"

She hadn't seriously thought about going. She didn't have many friends at school, and since she didn't want to end up being a wallflower she'd planned on staying home that night.

"I'm still thinking about it," she chose to say, "dances aren't really my thing either."

"You should come," Gendry urged her, "you're part of the gang, after all. We could hang out afterwards, you know?"

He was inviting her as a friend, Arya was aware of that, but it was an invitation all the same and it would allow her to be by his side.

"Maybe I could make an appearance, in that case," Arya told him, trying to sound casual.

"Then I'll see you there."

Arya bought a ticket to the dance on her way out of the cafeteria from the Spring Fling committee reps at their booth. After school she headed straight to Atelier's Lane and hit up all the ready-to-wear boutiques she came across in search of anything that would fit. It was last minute but she didn't have a choice, if she was going to Spring Fling, she needed an outfit that would make Gendry say 'wow'.

Sansa

Sandor had not wanted anything outlandish or involved too much trouble when it came to celebrating his acceptance to Valyria U, and in the end they had gone to the Dragon Pit Steak House for lunch one Saturday, after which they'd taken a walk around the gigantic Harrenhal Mall. They'd walked by a tech and electrical goods store on the way and on impulse Sansa had bought a Polaroid instant digital camera. She'd then convinced Sandor to drive them to a place with pretty...
views, and they'd ended up at Godswood Park where the spring flowers had just began to bloom.

"Smile, Sandor," Sansa had urged him as she'd tried to take snaps of him.

"Do I have to?" he'd grumbled.

"You don't have to, but it would be nice if you did."

"You won't show them to other people, will you?"

"Nope."

He had remained less than enthusiastic about it, but he'd let her take his picture without a fuss, and even posed with her for crooked and often unflattering couple-selfies. A few of them had turned out nicely, and she'd been unable to hide her amusement when Sandor had asked in a roundabout way if he could keep some for himself...just as she'd planned. Sandor rarely took photos of anything, not even photos of her, and she had a pretty good idea as to why he did not like taking or have photos taken of his face. However, she wanted to create tangible memories of the two of them that he would be able to take with him when he left for college.

She was slowly reconciling herself to the fact that he was going away, and mentally preparing herself for when it happened. The photos she was taking were as much for her as they were for him, and by the end of their date Sansa had created a small pile of glossy, tangible memories. She'd vowed then that she would try and take as many photos of the two of them as she could before he left, whenever the opportunities presented themselves, intending on compiling a small album as a gift for Sandor.

Sansa had then somehow convinced Sandor to take her to Spring Fling in order to create more memories together, which was how she found herself at the mall the day before the dance, wandering the aisles at Sephora hunting for the perfect lip-color to match the outfit she had planned. Sandor, in an effort to scrub up before the dance, had booked an appointment with his barber at Trident's Bend that afternoon, so Sansa was able to take her time shopping for makeup on her own.

She came to a stop in front of a display case showcasing the latest must-have lip kits and she picked a likely looking shade from the selection on offer. She was swatching it on the back of her hand when a shadow fell across her view.

"Fancy bumping into you here," said a sing-song voice beside her. "Is that for tomorrow?"

Sansa turned to see Margaery's smiling face. "Hey, Margaery. Yeah, it is. I'm trying to pick a color that will suit with my outfit."

"Is that the shade you've chosen?" Margaery looked at the vial of vibrant coral gloss Sansa was holding.

"I think so," Sansa said with a nod. "My outfit is pale peach."

"That will look awesome, if you keep the rest of your look clean and simple."

"Okay, I'll get this one in that case." Sansa picked up a new box from the display. "What about you, Margaery? Are you looking for something, too?"

"I'm going to have my manicure done again, actually," Margaery replied. "I saw you as I was walking by."

"Where do you get your nails done?" Sansa was curious because Margaery's nails were always
immaculately maintained.

"At that nail salon further down the gallery," Margaery said, "the proprietor is an award-winning artist whose work has been featured in magazines. She trains all of her staff to a degree you wouldn't believe, so you're guaranteed the perfect manicure every time. Some of her staff specialize in nail art and design too, which is what I'm having done today."

"Can I come with? A manicure sounds fun right now."

"Sure, let's go."

After Sansa had paid for her lip-kit, she followed Margaery to the salon where both of them were quickly seated at work stations alongside each other. Sansa opted for a shimmery pearl varnish and allowed Margaery to talk her into having floral nail art accents on her ring fingers too. Margaery was going all out with gel color and rhinestone embellishments. The process was more involved than Sansa had thought, beginning with washing her hands and having her nails cleaned, shaped, and her cuticles tidied up, all before a drop of varnish had even been applied.

"This is nice and all," Sansa began, "but I don't think I can do this as often as you do."

"It's an indulgence," Margaery said, "and I can't do without it. At first I only had my nails done for special occasions, but I got addicted to seeing sparkly nails every time I looked down at my hands, and now I have them done every two weeks."

"That's a commitment I'm not sure I'm prepared to make for the sake of sparkly nails."

Margaery laughed. "Hopefully it won't be the only long-term commitment in my life for much longer."

Sansa caught the glint in Margaery's eye and her interest was piqued. "Is there a guy you like, Margaery?"

Margaery's smiled mysteriously. "There is someone I'm interested in, yes."

"Do I know him?"

"You do." Margaery nodded. "You sang a duet with him at the Christmas Recital."

Sansa gasped. "Are you serious?"

"Quite serious."

"So, the rumors about the two of you are true?"

"Unfortunately, no. We are not together yet, but I'm fairly sure he knows my intentions." Margaery's expression was full of confidence.

"Is he interested too?" Sansa had to know, because as far as she knew Gendry still had a crush on Arya.

"To be honest I think he likes somebody else, but that doesn't bother me." Margaery did not seem remotely perturbed by the notion that Gendry may be interested in someone else.

"Um…doesn't he have to like you back? That's how it works, right?" Sansa wondered if she'd missed something.
"One day, sooner or later, he's going to see that I'm the perfect girl for him. Attraction and affection will follow naturally."

"What makes you so sure?"

Margaery gave her a measured stare. "He's recently begun to realize the opportunities and doors that are open to him, now that everyone knows his real identity. He's realizing just how wide his horizon is, and that leaves him vulnerable to those who may not have his best interests at heart."

"And, you do?"

"Of course." Margaery grinned. "Because, I have my best interest at heart, and I take care of what is mine!"

Sansa did not doubt it. Margaery meant what she was saying and Sansa truly believed that any guy Margaery chose to date would be treated like a king. However, there was still the fact that Gendry was interested in someone else, and as Sansa knew how Arya felt about Gendry, she was concerned about how Margaery planned on winning him over.

"You're quite formidable that way," Sansa said with a laugh, "but you still haven't said how you're going to deal with the fact he likes another girl. Emotions can't just be switched on and off."

"Emotions…perhaps not." Margaery tilted her head and flashed her a wicked grin. "But, guys have plenty of other switches to turn on…if you catch my meaning?"

"You're going to seduce him?" Sansa blurted out, shocked by Margaery's blatant statement, at the same time not really all that shocked. "Such surprise coming from you." Margaery managed to look affronted. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you the girl who convinced a teacher to give you a guy's address so you could visit him at his house to show him how much you cared for him? That's a very bold move, I would say."

"Yeah," Sansa agreed, "it was."

"Sometimes all it takes is a bold move."

Sansa made a mental note to speak to Arya about Gendry, and whether her sister was at all inclined to pursue a romantic relationship with him, if only to remind her that she wasn't the only girl with designs on the black-haired and blue-eyed guitarist.

"Anyway, has my brother been behaving himself during his visits to Chateau Maegor?" Margaery enquired, changing the subject.

"Willas? Hmm…I suppose," Sansa replied, "he's visited three times since he started working at Stark Industries."

"Do you to speak with him?"

"Not so much," Sansa answered carefully, "because he and father tend to eat dinner quickly so they can get to work right away. I don't really have the opportunity to talk with him once my father's office door is closed."

Sansa was not going to mention that she was purposely avoiding Willas if she could, because she knew that Sandor was sensitive to this subject and she would rather avoid drama if she could.
"That's too bad," Margaery suddenly said, "I was hoping this job would give him the chance to get closer to you."

"What?" Sansa was perplexed by Margaery's statement. "Get closer to me?"

"You know that my brother has a thing for you, right?" Margaery asked her outright. "He was going to ask you out just before you got together with Sandor, remember?"

"Yeah…" Sansa said hesitantly, unsure what Margaery was building up to.

"Personally, I think that you and Willas are far more suited to each other than you are to Sandor."

Sansa's jaw dropped, completely taken aback not only by the statement, but also by how straightforwardly Margaery had said it.

"Are you kidding?"

"Why would I joke about this?"

"I can't believe you said that…I thought you liked Sandor? You even helped me get his address from Coach Selmy."

"I do like him." Margaery nodded. "However, my opinion of him as a human being is irrelevant. I am happy that he has made you happy, especially after what you went through with Joffrey. While we're young, I think it's fine to date guys like Sandor, but when we're older we're going to have to be more…selective."

"What are you saying, Margaery?"

"One day you're going to have to consider your position and choose a husband wisely."

"I think you're letting your Grandma get into your head too much."

"I'm speaking the truth," Margaery insisted. "You're Sansa Stark, and one day you'll have to seriously think about the kind of man you're going to marry and make babies with."

"Babies?"

Margaery laughed. "Babies, if you want them, that is. The point I'm making is that the man who becomes your husband has to be accepted by the society and people we associate with. He has to fit in, you know? He has to enjoy the limelight, to an extent, because you will always attract attention. Being good with people and being able to hold an intelligent conversation helps too."

"Why are you thinking about that kind of stuff? You're seventeen, Margaery," Sansa pointed out, as though her age would prove how incredulous her line of thinking was.

"Hey, in an alternate universe I could have been married and widowed twice over at this age," Margaery returned with a shrug. "I'm saying you at least need to keep those thoughts in the back of your mind when you date a guy. Ask yourself if he is potential husband material worthy of being at the side of Sansa Stark. Remember, you won't be fifteen forever."

"And you think Willas is husband material…for me?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Unbelievable…" Sansa stared at Margaery as though she had never seen her before.
"You don't have to believe me now, but someday you will. So, don't be so cold towards my brother, okay?"

Sansa did not believe a word of what Margaery had said, but their conversation did give her something to think about as she’d lain in bed later that night, staring at her sparkly manicured fingernails. She was having difficulty understanding that a girl as seemingly open-minded and well-educated as Margaery Tyrell could even have such elitist inclinations. For Margaery's sake, Sansa truly hoped that her ideals and criteria when it came to choosing a life partner were based on seeking compatibility and connecting on the same wavelength, as opposed to a prejudiced outlook.

In any case her talk with Margaery did make her wonder whether Sandor had ever considered such thoughts himself. Not that she had thought about marrying Sandor, or that she'd imagined Sandor wanting to marry her, but whether he'd ever considered her family's social status to be an issue in any way. She had never really given much thought about her or her family's social standing before as the idea of class and caste were never discussed by her parents. They had been taught and encouraged to treat everyone with respect and kindness, and it wasn't until Sansa had been in fifth grade that she'd begun to notice that not all families were the same as hers.

_The Mordane School for Girls_ taught students from elementary all the way through to high-school and while the girls who attended _Mordane's_ were not all from rich families, most were. _Mordane's_ image was built on the ideals of charity and giving, in addition to promoting feminine refinement and charm. A proportion of the students therefore, were enrolled under the sponsorship of charitable organizations, while others were on academic scholarships. It was always easy to tell who these girls were because they were always the ones that the rich girls picked on for being poor. They also tended to stick together and form cliques of their own, and at the time Sansa never understood why. Now, she knew that it was for solidarity. These girls naturally grouped together because it was easier for them to relate and make friends with other girls they shared experiences and circumstances with.

Jeyne Poole had been surprised when Sansa had wanted to be her friend all those months ago, and at the time Sansa had thought it was because Jeyne had assumed she was a snob. It had taken a little time for Jeyne to completely believe that Sansa genuinely wanted to be her friend, and it had taken Sandor even longer to be convinced that she genuinely wanted him as her boyfriend. Friendship was one thing, but romantic feelings, especially when the partner involved was a tough cynic like Sandor, was considerably harder to prove.

Did Sandor think about the differences in their classes? And if he did, was it in the same way Margaery did? Sansa hated to think that Sandor could even consider himself beneath her in any way, because when it came down to it, it was all about money, and she knew that having money did not make a person better than another. Sandor had made comments in the past, derisive and cynical observations of people and things around them that hinted at his general attitude to people with money. In the beginning, when he had first met her, he'd made comments about her too. He hadn't made those kinds of comments about her or her family since they got together, but Sansa wanted to be sure that Sandor really saw that her family was different from the Baratheons or Tyrells or anyone else he'd ever encountered.

She wanted to be with Sandor for a long time, and if it was longevity she wanted, it meant that Sandor was going to have to be comfortable around her family, and vice versa.

_It's about time_, she thought to herself, _it's about time that Sandor met my parents._
He had never attended Spring Fling before. Not even during junior high when attending a school dance had seemed like such a grown up thing to do. There were several reasons why he had never wanted to attend, and while a few of those reasons centered around his hideously scarred face and how no girl would ever want to look at him let alone dance with him, the main reason was because he thought dances were for idiots and he just did not see the appeal. However, times had changed and he was now a senior in high school with the most beautiful girl in the school as his girlfriend, and he was about to attend his first and only Spring Fling.

Sansa had talked him into it, though he knew that the truth of it lay in the fact that, in the end, he had just not been able to say no. Granted, they'd both been naked at the time and he'd found it difficult to concentrate when Sansa had been pressed up against him while they lay on top of his bed. Luckily she had given him plenty of warning and he'd had time to get himself a real suit, a black one in a cut that the tailor had assured him would not age. He'd bought a new shirt and tie to go with it, naturally. Dress shoes to fit his size fourteen feet were harder to find, but the internet had been his friend and he'd found a store on the other side of the country who'd express couriered it to him. He'd had his haircut, and he was even wearing brand new underwear. He had never been this dressed up before, or this nervous.

All because I'm officially going to be Sansa's date.

They'd been a couple for months, and while people had gotten used to seeing them around school and in public together, they had never attended any kind of formal event together as a couple. There were going to be official photos taken that evening which could appear in any number of social media outlets, which meant there would be a permanent record that he, Sandor Clegane, was the escort of Sansa Stark. This was monumental. He felt unworthy.

It's too fucking late now, he thought. He was already dressed and in his car driving to Chateau Maegor to pick up Sansa. The tickets to the dance were tucked away inside his jacket pocket, and Sansa had already texted him before he'd left his house to say that she was ready and waiting. It was far too late to change his mind.

"Get a grip," he told himself, "it's just a fucking school dance. You're not on your way to meet her parents, or some crazy shit like that."

Sansa was waiting on the landing by the front door when he pulled up to the driveway. The lights illuminating the landing were bright, and in their glow he saw Sansa looking every bit the society princess in a dainty peach colored dress that looked like it was made of delicately spun sugar. She had equally dainty shoes on her feet that sparkled with beaded crystals, and dangling from her ears were ornamental hoops that resembled golden vines. Her hair had been swept to the side in a cascade of auburn curls over her left shoulder, and his attention was drawn to her glossy coral lips that presently curved in a smile meant for him.


"Hey," he said as he switched off the Mustang's engine.

He got out of his car and stood before her, noting how her blue eyes travelled up and down his form, taking in his freshly cut hair, his brand new tailored suit, down to the tip of his brand new Oxford's. Sansa opened her mouth to speak, and he braced himself to hear the verdict.

"Holy shit! Looks like Beauty tamed the Beast after all. You scrub up decently, Hound. Too bad you're still ugly."

Both Sandor and Sansa spun around to find Arya standing at the doorway grinning at them. Sandor
quickly noted that she too was dressed to kill, wearing a flashy strapless number with her hair and makeup carefully made up.

"I see that Sansa let you play dress-ups with her clothes," he returned, "you look somewhat decent yourself, little bitch. Too bad you're still a short little runt."

"This is brand new." Arya indicated her outfit, ignoring his comment about being a runt. "I did not get this out of Sansa's closet. For your information this is Oscar de la Renzo."

"Oscar de…who? That grumpy monster who lives in a trashcan?" Sandor frowned.

"That's Oscar the Grouch, you unschooled Neanderthal." Arya glared at him.

"Actually, you're both wrong," Sansa interrupted them, her expression very much amused. "It's Oscar de la Renta, and I believe that's a new piece from this season's ready to wear line."

"Yeah, that guy." Arya nodded. "What she said."

Sandor laughed. "Who's unschooled?"

"Hush." Arya narrowed her eyes at him.

"The two of you get along better than you let on," Sansa observed. "You're both actually really good friends, aren't you?"

"Let's not go that far," Arya rushed to say.

"I'd say we tolerate each other," Sandor remarked.

Sansa laughed. "You deny it, but it's true."

"Are we going to the dance now, or what?" Arya changed the subject.

"Yes, we are." Sansa replied.

"Great." Arya shut the front door behind her and climbed the steps from the landing onto the driveway. "Let's go."

Sandor watched in silence as Arya let herself into the back passenger seat of his Mustang, before he glanced at Sansa questioningly.

"I told her it would okay for her to ride to school with us," Sansa answered his silent question. "I hope that's okay?"

Sandor shrugged. "She's already in the car. I can't throw her out now, can I? Her fancy dress might get ruined."

"Thanks, Sandor." Sansa smiled at him.

"Come on, let's get moving."

Sandor came around to the front passenger side and made to open the door for her, but Sansa stopped him just before he pulled the handle. He looked down at her questioningly once again.

"You look great, by the way," Sansa whispered, wearing a gentle smile and a look in her eyes that he couldn't mistake for anything but admiration.
"So do you," he rasped quietly, the unburned side of his mouth lifting in a crooked smile.

He helped her inside the car, and a short moment later they were on the road heading to King's Landing Prep. Arya's presence distracted him from his earlier nervousness, which he was grateful for. As he listened to the chatter between the sisters, he gathered that Arya was going to the dance only because Gendry had asked her to be there, not as his date, but as a friend. He'd heard nothing further about Arya and Gendry or the mutual feelings that neither of them seemed to want to act on, nor was he that particularly interested, but he was glad to see Arya looking more like her usual self. Her breakup with Jaqen H'ghar had made her act all subdued and broody for a little while.

"Are you ever going to tell Gendry how you feel about him?" Sansa suddenly asked her sister.

"Do we have to speak about this in front of him?" Arya responded, meaning Sandor.

"He doesn't care," Sansa told her, "do you, Sandor?"

"I don't," he answered, about ninety percent truthfully. "I really don't."

"See? He won't tell anyone," Sansa pointed out. "So, are you going to tell Gendry?"

Sandor heard Arya sighing from the backseat as he navigated the traffic heading to the Kingsroad Expressway.

"I want to," Arya finally confessed, "I do want to tell him."

"And, when will you do that?" Sansa pressed.

"When the time is right,"

"You do know that Margaery is after him, don't you?"

"That's only according to Gossip Spyder,"

"No." Sansa swiveled in her seat to face her sister. "Margaery told me so herself when we were having our nails done yesterday. She's after your man, so if you don't want her or Jazmine Choi to steal him from under your nose, you had better do something fast."

"Oh, my fucking god! Margaery likes Gendry?" Arya exclaimed. "For real?"

"I don't know how real her feelings are, but you've seen how close they've gotten lately. In any case, I wouldn't underestimate her."

Arya began to swear then, and Sandor couldn't help but chuckle darkly at the drama Arya was facing. The little bitch continued to suffer and he did not envy her at all. Sansa attempted to calm her down as they continued towards school, to little avail, and Arya worked herself up so much that by the time Sandor pulled into the student parking lot Arya's tension was emanating from her in waves.

"Chill the fuck out, little bitch," Sandor growled as they alighted from his car. "Gendry will think you don't want to be here tonight if he sees you in the state you're in."

"You're right," Arya said as she smoothed down the skirt of her dress, taking a deep breath. "I need to calm down. I need to go to the bathroom…I'm gonna go on ahead, I'll see you guys later."

Arya was gone before either he or Sansa could say anything further, dashing towards the school buildings faster than a girl in heels should have been able to.
"Is she gonna be okay?" Sandor asked Sansa.

"She's more like her usual self right now than she has been in weeks," Sansa replied, "I think she'll be fine."

Sandor made sure his Mustang was locked before he extended his hand for Sansa to hold. "You ready?"

"Let's go," Sansa said as she took his hand.

Spring Fling was being held in the school's gymnasium, and from the moment they stepped on the path leading from the parking lot towards the hundred years-old building it was evident that the Spring Fling organizing committee had gone above and beyond expectations when it came to décor and setting the mood for the 'Some Enchanted Evening' themed dance. There were fairy lights strung up along archways, railings and exposed beams, wound around the trunks of trees, columns and poles, and draped over hedges and tree branches. There were photo-op spots along the way, with props such as velvet upholstered divans, lantern lit archways and enormous floral arrangements that had been strategically placed were students could take turns posing for group photos and selfies. Sansa had looked at the people currently having their pictures taken along a covered walkway that had been festooned with garlands of flowers and twinkling lights with excitement on her face.

"I guess we could do that later," Sandor rasped in her ear.

Sansa grinned up at him. "Really? We can take photos?"

"One or two wouldn't hurt," he shrugged.

"I can't wait!"

They finally made it to the front entrance of the gymnasium, which was housed in an architecturally designed, turn of the century style building boasting limestone facades and arched windows, and queued up to present their tickets. People stared at them as they stood in the line, giving admiring glances towards Sansa, and looks of curiosity towards him. Like one would stare at an animal in a zoo exhibit, he thought. He felt distinctly out of place and uncomfortable with the attention they were receiving, but he was going to bear it for Sansa's sake.

The inside of the gym, when they finally made it inside, was completely unrecognizable. The exposed brick walls, bleachers and basketball hoops had been removed and completely hidden away with heavy dark blue drapes that spanned the length and height of the gym. The entryway itself had been flanked by real bamboo in gigantic pots, arranged to resemble a bamboo grove. There were real trees dispersed throughout the room, placed in strategic locations to create semi-secluded areas where people could to talk to friends with a level of privacy. There was a dance floor towards the centre of the room, and tables had been placed around the perimeter so that everyone had a view of the dance floor. A DJ who was currently playing a mash-up of current hits was stationed at a podium at the head of the dance floor. There seemed to be an inordinate amount of vines, flower garlands, floral arrangements and more fairy lights, in Sandor's opinion, but he was suitably impressed by how the space had been turned into something of an Enchanted Forest. The most breathtaking feature by far was the massive curtain of lights and translucent, crystalline beads that had been suspended from the ceiling, designed to resemble a waterfall.

"Margaery performed magic here," Sansa commented, clearly awed by the gymnasium's transformation.

Sandor opened his mouth to agree, but was suddenly blinded by a volley of camera flashes as
members of the Photography Club took photos of every couple or group as they came in. Sandor's surprise turned into a scowl as more flashes went off, and the photographer eventually noticed Sandor's expression and hastily lowered his camera.

Sansa was greeted by everyone they came across, and she seemed to know nearly everyone so that by the time fifteen minutes had elapsed they were only a few feet inside the entryway. Sandor recognized many of the people coming to greet Sansa as the children of prominent King's Landing families. He recognized them from the parties that the Baratheons had held at The Red Keep over the years.

Margaery Tyrell materialized out of the crowd and beamed a smile at them in greeting. Beside her were a bevy of her followers who quietly referred to themselves as Margaery's 'ladies in waiting'.

"You look gorgeous, Sansa!" gushed the brunette. "Your dress is Marchesa, right?"

"Marchesa Notte," Sansa replied with a tilt of her head. "You look stunning as always, Margaery. You're wearing Roberto Cavalli, right? It's amazing!"

"What…this old thing?" Margaery grinned.

"You're wearing the Giuseppe Zanotti Heavenly Sparkle sandal! Oh, my gosh they're so pretty!" cried one of the girls in Margaery's posse.

"Thank you." Sansa smiled at her.

"Oh, and Sandor you look…good, too." Margaery said after a quick and reluctant appraisal of his person.

Much to his chagrin this would not be the only comment he would receive, and neither would it be the most awkward.

"I didn't know that the Big & Tall section at department stores made suits like yours…"

"You look like her bodyguard!"

"Did you choose your outfit all by yourself?"

The comments he received seemed harmless enough, possibly even well-meaning in intent, but his ears heard only scrutiny and judgment. Even after four months as her boyfriend, still nobody was convinced that he belonged at Sansa's side.

"Anyway, you did an awesome job with the decorations, Margaery." Sansa now patted Margaery on her shoulder. "The gym is completely transformed! It's like we walked into a fairytale."

"Aww…thank you, but I had a lot of help. I couldn't have done this without everyone in the Spring Fling Committee." Margaery smiled and indicated the other committee members around her who were also busy greeting people at the door. Those who had heard her praise all looked chuffed by her recognition. "You two go on inside and have fun now. I still have some work to do before I can join in, but I'll come and find you later."

Eventually, they made it to the table where Sansa's friends had gathered to wait for them. Sandor personally thought that Randa Royce and Mya Stone talked too much, and the choir girl Jeyne Poole tended to giggle when she was nervous, but he was used to their company now and he could somewhat relax his guard in their presence. Lothor Brune was there too, dressed in a brown suit that really did look like he'd sourced it from the Big & Tall section at Macy's.
"Hey, Hound," Lothor greeted him as he sat down. "You two finally made it past the scrimmage."

"Brune," Sandor acknowledged him. "I'll take an actual football scrimmage over that gauntlet any day."

"I know exactly what you mean," Lothor said with a sympathetic nod. "I'm here because Mya wanted me to come. I'm guessing it's much the same for you?"

"Bingo."

Sandor turned to look at Sansa, who was currently engaged in an animated discussion with her girlfriends, feeling conflicted even as he watched her smiling and laughing. He loved seeing her light up with excitement and joy, so he wanted to stay for that reason. But, even as he agreed with Lothor, beneath the table he was tapping his foot impatiently, subconsciously counting the hours until he could get up and get out of there. In the meantime however, he sat and he watched as Sansa and her girlfriends got up to dance to the pop and dance mashups the DJ was playing, and he watched the people around them, overhearing the conversations taking place at the tables nearest to him.

It didn't take him long to realize that what he was watching was a mimicry of the scenes he had observed at the parties and soirees he had attended while he'd been Joffrey's dog. The same families tended to mingle together, social class by social class, money with money, the have's and the have-even-more. Once he began to look closer, he saw that the divisions went further; old money versus nouveau riche, left-wing versus right-wing, then by nationality and religious ideals, and so on and so forth.

Sandor had seen it written somewhere that schools were a microcosm of society, and he saw this all too clearly in the scene before him. This realization soon led to another, more sobering thought, one which brought the scowl back to his face. He'd never truly felt as though he had ever belonged at King's Landing Prep, even when people praised him for his performance as a star member of the White Knights. During his four years of high school, all he'd been waiting for was the day he could finally graduate and get out into the real world. But, if King's Landing Prep was a microcosm of King's Landing society, did it mean he didn't belong there either?

He looked back at Sansa, still dancing at the centre of the dance floor with her friends, happy as can be. She was right where she needed to be, right where she belonged…at the centre of it all…because she was a Stark, and the Starks of the world were born to rule it.

Where does that leave me?

At some point while he was brooding Sansa returned to stand before him, reaching to pull him to his feet.

"Come on," she said as she tugged on his arm. "Come with me."

"What?" he asked, snapping out of his thoughts. "Go where?"

"To the dance floor, of course." Sansa grinned at him. "Come and dance with me."

"I do not dance," Sandor rasped.

"But, it's a slow song," Sansa pleaded, "all you have to do is put your arms around me and shuffle from side to side."

"But, Sansa—"
"Lothor is dancing with Mya." Sansa pointed to the couple who were awkwardly swaying to the music.

Sandor continued to grumble even as he reluctantly followed Sansa onto the dance floor, swearing under his breath as Sansa guided his feet, arms and hands into the correct positions. Sansa told him when to move his feet, and soon he was shuffling as awkwardly as Lothor Brune, who was dancing with Mya nearby.

Sansa smiled at him once more. "You're doing fine."

"If I step on your toes or on your Gazpacho Zucchini sandals, it's not my fault."

Sansa laughed. "Trust me. You're not that bad of a dancer."

"Hmm." Sandor grunted. "So, are you having a good time?"

"I am," she replied with another broad smile. "I really am."

"That's good." Sandor swore under his breath again when he missed a step and narrowly avoided crushing her toes under his size fourteen foot. "Are they going to play a lot of slow songs, and will you be expecting me to dance with you every time?"

"They'll be playing slow songs throughout the night," Sansa replied, "but you can just dance every alternate one with me."

"Sansa…"

She gave him her most angelic looking smile, pressing her breasts up against his chest. "Please?"

"Fine."

"Great!" Sansa squeezed him. "Thank you, Sandor."

"Just don't expect your toes to go unscathed all night."

"Okay, I've been warned." Sansa looked up at him, her expression suddenly becoming more serious. "I'm glad you agreed to dance with me."

"Why's that?"

"I've actually been trying to work out how to best ask you something, and now I think it's just better to come out with it." Sansa eye's locked onto his. "Sandor, I'd like it if you could come and officially meet my parents."

Sandor stopped moving his feet entirely, and he looked down at her in shocked silence. Meet her parents? He'd previously seen Eddard and Catelyn Stark only from afar, and his first impressions of them were that they were very upright and formal people. Neither had struck him as particularly warm, but what Sansa had told him about them contradicted what he had seen. Regardless, he wasn't sure he was ready to look Eddard and Catelyn Stark in the eyes, because he knew that they knew he was sleeping with their daughter.

"You want me to meet your parents," he repeated.

"Yes." Sansa continued to stare into his eyes. "It would mean a lot to me."

"When?" he wanted to know how long he had to prepare.
"Mother said to invite you over for dinner one night during Spring Break. Would that be okay?"

Sandor did not really have a choice in the matter. Sansa meant for him to meet her parents, and it was going to happen whether he wanted to or not.

"That's fine," he replied.

"Thank you, Sandor!" Sansa reached up and kissed him on the lips. "You'll like them, I just know it."

*But, will they like me?* He wondered, unable to voice his question.

"Great," Sandor said instead, and began to shuffle his feet once more in time to the rhythm.

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**Gendry**

His reflection in the mirror appeared far more confident than he actually felt.

"Damn, James." Gendry turned in front of the floor-length mirror in his room and admired what he saw, despite his less than excited mood about having to wear formal clothes. "Your suits really are works of art."

He was dressed in the blue suit that James the tailor had handcrafted for him, impeccably fitted so that its sleek lines accentuated the broadness of his shoulders and the length of his legs. The white shirt under his jacket was crisp, and the slim black tie about his neck had been expertly knotted by his own two hands. His sessions with Mr. Cressen had included thorough lessons in grooming and being able to dress one's self properly, and as a result the young man who stared back at him stood tall and refined.

"It's Gendry Waters wearing Gendry Baratheon's clothes." Gendry made a face after he'd referred to himself as a Baratheon. "Okay, let's get this show on the road."

Gendry stowed his wallet and phone inside his jacket pocket, before he bade his foster-family a goodnight as he left the house. Shortly, he was on the Kingsroad Expressway driving towards school to attend Spring Fling. Indeed, almost every time he went out in public he was recognized by strangers on the street and he was conscious about how he was being perceived, especially since Robert had publicly acknowledged him. Every day at school he felt as though he was putting on a show for everyone, and unless he was on the stage with a guitar in his hand, he did not enjoy it. This was part of the reason he did not want to attend, but Beric had made a big spiel about it being his last school dance that he would get to attend with everyone, and even Allyria had joined in and talked him into agreeing to come along. *Then for whatever reason, I had to go and invite Arya along, too.* Gendry recalled that Arya had had no plans to go either, until he’d brought it up. *Now, I have to go because she's expecting me to be there.*

He approached the exit that would take him to Chateau Maegor, and he momentarily thought about calling Arya to see if she wanted a ride to the dance with him. But, then he remembered her telling Hot Pie that she would be going with her sister, so he drove past her exit with a small pang of regret. *If things had been different...*Gendry cut off his train of thought before it took him further down that path. Thinking about Arya, and being with Arya for that matter, either brought a smile to his face or made him remember dark emotions he never wanted to feel again. However, the one certainty he could not deny was that cutting himself off from Arya was impossible...he still needed her in his life, and gradually, he hoped that those dark emotions would eventually disappear over time.
Over the past couple of weeks they had got to talking more at school. Sometimes he would join her and Hot Pie in the cafeteria and other times Arya and Hot Pie would come down to the steps at the Performing Arts building to hang out with Beric and the rest of them. They were building their friendship anew, forming a new kind of normal for them, but Gendry couldn't help but feel a sense of loss for the spontaneity and the unguarded nature of the friendship they once had. It still felt as though there were tiptoeing around each other, and this did not sit well with him. And, like the dark emotions that sometimes haunted him, he hoped that time would also take with it the awkwardness that persisted to hang around them.

Beric, Edric and Allyria arrived in the school parking lot the same time he did, and together they wandered the garden paths and courtyards to admire the lights and take photos with other friends and students on their way to the gymnasium. Upon entering the gym he and his friends were met by Margaery, who must have been keeping a lookout for them. She was, as always, dressed in a cleavage baring outfit with her hair and makeup expertly finished. Her crimson painted lips stretched into a broad smile when she saw him, greeting him with an exuberant hug and pressing her cheek against his.

"Hello, handsome." Margaery's lashes fluttered as she gazed up at him. "Save a dance for me later, okay?"

"Sure, okay." Gendry smiled, not expecting her to collect on it.

Photos were taken of their group before they had been allowed to head inside to find a table.

"Dude." Edric draped his arm over Gendry's shoulder when they had walked far enough away from Margaery. "The pheromones she's sending your way are intense, man!"

"Stop exaggerating." Gendry laughed and shrugged Edric's arm off of him. "I've told you before, it's not like that between me and her."

They found a table close to the dance floor and once they were seated with refreshments in hand, more people had begun to approach them to chat and take photos. For some reason, everyone seemed to want to speak to him that night, even people from his classes who normally never said a word to him. Perhaps it was because of the jovial atmosphere, but people seemed friendlier all of a sudden.

The school gymnasium had been completely transformed into a fantasy wonderland, which had left him in awe when he'd first entered the building. At night, with the hall darkened and softly lit, there was a surreal feel in the hall that imbued a sense of magic and wonder that even he was finding hard to resist. As he'd now come to expect, nothing was done in half measures at King's Landing Prep. Margaery Tyrell being at the helm of the organizing committee probably had ninety percent to do with the extreme makeover, not to mention the fact that the school had a budget to cater for the extravagance in the first place. The dances at his old high school, with a budget for crepe paper streamers and helium balloons at best, could not even compare.

Across the dance floor Gendry unexpectedly made eye-contact with Jazmine Choi, who was seated at a table with her friend Jessika and some other people he recognized from the dance club. Jazmine nodded and smiled at him, but she made no attempt to get up from her table. Gendry returned her smile in acknowledgement. Perhaps, and he hoped this was the case, Jazmine had finally given up on him. The rumors circulating about him and Margaery may have been the cause, but he figured it was better that Jazmine move on from him before she got hurt. *Like what I should have done where Arya –* Gendry stopped his line of thought once again.

Needing a break from the constant chatter around him, and tired of having to keep a smile on his
face, he got up from the table and tapped Edric on the shoulder.

"I'll be back in a little while," he told him.

"Sure," Edric said, thinking he needed to go to the bathroom. "Take your time."

Gendry left the gym from a side door and headed towards the gardens. Once he was away from the crowd he immediately felt much better and he decided to take a short walk to pass the time. He had not been kidding when he'd told Arya and Hot Pie that dances weren't his thing. In terms of social interaction with friends, he much preferred going out for a decent meal or hanging out at someone's house, listening to good music and have meaningful conversations rather than sitting around in fancy clothes watching other people dancing terribly. Still, he was already at the dance, and he was going to try and enjoy it for what it was.

Arya still had not arrived, but he figured someone would alert him once she did. He checked the time on his phone, and to see if he'd received any missed calls or messages, but there were none. Figuring he had absent for long enough, he turned back around to return to the gym, avoiding the brightly decorated paths and the crowds still taking photos there, hoping to savor his solitude a little longer.

His solitude did not last as long as he'd hoped, surprised to encounter someone else ahead of him along the darkened walkway. It was a girl, and while she was not looking in his direction, her emerald green hair and petite frame gave her identity away.

Wow.

Gendry's breath caught in his throat as he stared at her. Arya was wearing a knee-length dress that appeared to be made of some gauzy fabric in different gradients of blue. The hem of the skirt was midnight blue, gradually lightening to mid-tone royal blue and azure around her hips, then finally to sky blue at her waist. The bust area was a soft cream color, while her pale shoulders and neckline were left unadorned. Her emerald green hair had been gently curled, while her eyes bore the barest traces of glitter. Arya looked amazing, and a second later his feet were carrying him towards her.

"Arya." Gendry gently touched her elbow to attract her attention.

Arya turned sharply up at his touch, and her eyes widened a fraction before her lips parted into a warm smile when she recognized him in the dim light.

"Hi, Gendry!" Arya beamed at him.

"How are you?"

"I'm great," she replied, "you?"

"Not too bad at all." Gendry shrugged with a smile. "What are you doing out here?"

"Oh, um…finding a bathroom that wasn't full of girls trying to fix their hair and makeup." Arya made a face and rolled her eyes.

Gendry laughed at her comical expression. "Did you find one?"

"Eventually."

"Then, do you want to head to the gym now? The others are already there."

"Sure, let's go."
They began to walk in the direction of the gym, and Gendry fell into step easily beside her.

"Thanks for coming," he said to her, "I know you weren't all that excited about coming tonight."

"You asked me to be here, so I came."

Arya's tone suggested that there was no question about her being there, which made him smile, and caused a tiny ache in his heart at the same time. *I'm a sucker for punishment.*

The queue at the door had become significantly shorter, and soon they were walking through the bamboo grove flanking the entrance. Margaery was no longer by the door, but the Photography Club students still were, and one of them approached them with camera poised in readiness.

"May I take a photo of the two of you together?" the guy asked.

Gendry looked down at Arya questioningly.

"Sure, go ahead." Arya smiled at the photographer.

"Great! Please stand over here and move in closer...a little bit closer...awesome!"

Gendry stepped closer to Arya and casually wrapped his right arm about her shoulders, curving his palm about her upper arm lightly. Unexpectedly, Arya looped her left arm about his waist just as casually, and when she pulled him closer he glanced down to see her smiling face, taken by surprise by her actions. The camera flashed several times, and seemingly pleased with the shots the photography student thanked them before wandering away. Their arms lingered about each other a moment longer, before Arya hastily let him go.

"Which...which way to the table?" she asked.

Reluctantly, Gendry let her go and returned her smile to cover the sudden awkwardness between them.

"Follow me."

The reason for Margaery's absence at the door became evident when they reached the table where Gendry's friends waited, because the brunette was sitting right there with them, and presently laughing at something Edric had said.

"Arya! You made it!" Allyria cried.

"Hello, Arya! I was wondering where you'd gone!" Margaery stood up and brushed air kisses on both of Arya's cheeks, while Arya stood there appearing to withstand it. "Your sister said you came with them, but I never saw you come in."

"I made a detour." Arya shrugged.

Beric indicated the remaining empty seats. "Sit down you two. Don't just stand there."

Allyria and Margaery proceeded to quiz Arya on the details of her dress, while Beric and Edric greeted her with much excitement and bantering.

"You look really pretty tonight, Arya," Edric said to her, "you're pretty all the time, but tonight you look especially cute."

"Oh...thanks, Edric," Arya said, looking uncomfortable with the compliment.
"He's right," Allyria agreed, "your dress makes you look even more pixie-like, and the color really suits you. Look, you match with Gendry."

Only then did Gendry realize that he and Arya did match, his dark blue suit complementing the blue shades of her dress.

"What do you think, Gendry? She looks great, right?" Allyria prompted.

"She does," he agreed, allowing his gaze to linger on Arya once more.

"Thank you." Arya abruptly lowered her eyes when she saw him staring, as though suddenly shy.

"Personally, I think that green is your color. Like that dress you wore to the bachelor auction." Margaery added, not to be left out. "But they're right, you do look exceptionally elfin tonight, Arya."

Arya did not respond to Margaery's comment, turning to engage Allyria in conversation instead. There was an odd aura about Arya that night, a discomfiture that Gendry couldn't place, and for some time all he did was observe her quietly as she conversed with Allyria. Outwardly, she looked like she was having fun, laughing at Edric's tasteless jokes and looking amused when Beric would try to outdo him. It was nice to see her smiling and happy, because he'd missed seeing that side of her in the weeks following her breakup with Jaqen. Heartbreak had not suited her one bit.

"You want me to dance with you?" Arya gaped at Edric after he'd made the suggestion a little while later. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, come on." Edric held his hand out to her. "Just one dance."

Arya still looked hesitant, but she relented after some more begging from Edric.

"Okay, fine…but don't say I didn't warn you!"

Arya took Edric's proffered hand and Gendry watched as Edric promptly led her to the dance floor in front of them. Gendry told himself that he was not envious of Edric for beating him to Arya's first dance. In any case, Edric was a far better dancer than he, and Arya shone because of it. She was a quick learner, and soon she was keeping up with Edric's moves.

There was a movement next to him, and he turned to see Margaery smiling at him expectantly.

"Dance with me," she said, and gave him no chance to refuse.

Gendry was on the dance floor before he knew it, his hands around Margaery's waist, while she stood before him in the circle of his arms with her fingers clasped in his. She'd pulled him into a crowded spot on the dance floor, and he found himself pressed against her far closer than he wanted to be…then she was grinding on him.

Oh, whoa…he thought, feeling awkward because he didn't know how to do this kind of dancing, yet knowing he had to see it through to end because he didn't want to embarrass himself by walking off the dance floor mid-song. The song couldn't have been more than four minutes in duration, but as he tried to imitate other people around them it became the most excruciating four minutes of his life. Needless to say he was more than happy when the song came to an end.

"We're not done, Gendry." Margaery grinned at him as she slipped her arms about his neck. "I still want to dance some more!"

"Could you find someone else to dance with?" he asked as he tried to find an exit.
Margaery was watching him with a look that suggested she understood what he was thinking, and her smile held a challenge.

"Don't fight it." Margaery traced the lapel of his jacket with a finger. "I was serious about what I said the other day."

"Let's talk about that another time, okay?" Gendry was not in the mood to tolerate Margaery's brand of teasing at that moment.

"Sure, we'll talk later…but right now, we're dancing!"

Gendry turned his head in the direction of their group to see that Edric and Arya had returned to the table. Édric was wearing a smirk as he watched on, while Arya had become expressionless. He met her eyes for a brief moment, before someone bumped into him from behind, making him break eye contact and swear out aloud. For the next couple of songs Gendry was trapped in Margaery's arms while a barricade of gyrating and bopping people prevented his escape on all sides. Margaery really was far too persuasive, he thought, being nice and stopping himself from calling her a bossy bitch. At the end of the second song, however, he dug his heels in and refused to dance, and Margaery relented.

"Oh, don't be mad at me, okay?" she fluttered her lashes at him once again. "I'm just having fun with you."

He gritted his teeth as he made his way through the crowd back to the table, looking for Arya as he sat down, but not seeing her anywhere. In fact, the entire table was deserted.

"Hey, man." Gendry tapped the shoulder of a guy sitting at the next table. "Did you see where they all went?"

"Oh, hey…yeah, I think Beric and Allyria are on the floor." The guy, who he recognized from his English class, pointed to the dance floor. "And, Edric is over there trying to chat up some girls."

"What about Arya?"

"I think I saw her heading toward the exit."

"Thanks."

Gendry walked out of the side door that the guy had indicated and instinctively knew that he would find her in the dimly lit garden at the end of the path. His instincts were proven correct when he found her seated on a stone bench, her face illuminated from the light coming from the smartphone in her hand.

"Hey, what are you doing out here?"

Arya looked up just as he sat down beside her, and he saw that she had the Uber app opened before she hastily put her phone away.

"Gendry, hi…I was just getting some air," Arya replied, "it was getting too warm inside."

"Were you trying to book a ride somewhere?" he asked, suspicious about the way she didn't seem to want him to see what was on her phone.

Arya sighed. "Yeah, I was."
"Where to?"
"Home,"
"Why?"
"It doesn't matter," she said as she shook her head. "Why are you out here?"
"For the fresh air," he replied.
"Have you had enough of dancing?"
"More than enough,"
"You looked like you were really enjoying yourself…with Margaery."
Gendry chuckled humorlessly. "That girl just doesn't take no for an answer."
"It didn't look like you were saying no." Arya observed.
Gendry glanced down at her, and chose to ignore the evident nosiness in her tone.
"So, you were thinking of leaving the dance early, huh?" he chose to say instead. "You were trying to sneak away hoping I wouldn't notice."
"I didn't think you would notice if I left," Arya stated, "and, you did look kind of…preoccupied."
She was hinting at his relationship with Margaery again, and he had to wonder why she was so curious about it.
"I'm the one who invited you to come tonight," he pointed out, "of course I was going to notice."
Arya looked away from him. "Now that you mention it, I only came tonight because you asked me. I didn't come to watch you dance with her all night…Ah, geez! Sorry, I don't mean to be like this…I guess I'm just…"
"Bored?"
"Hmm…yeah, among other things."
Gendry understood her now. Arya was put out because she was expecting to hang out with him, like he'd told her when he'd invited her to come along, but instead she'd been stuck at the table while Margaery had monopolized his attention.
"Ah…yeah. Sorry about Margaery." Gendry bit back a swear word. "She can be really insistent when she wants to be."
"You two seem to be getting really close."
"It's not what you think it is," he told her quickly, before the conversation turned awkward.
"No?"
"We're just friends."
"Hmm."
Gendry wondered about the odd note in her voice, but he put it down to concern. In any case, he now had an idea that both of them would probably appreciate.

"I have a suggestion," he said, "what do say about getting out of here?"

"Huh? Why?"

"I did tell you we'd hang out, didn't I?"

Arya smiled, excitement spreading across her face.

"But, aren't you having fun here? I don't want you to leave your friends just because of me," Arya pointed out.

"I've had all the fun I can take." Gendry shuddered at the thought of having to dance again. "And, you're my friend, too"

Arya's smile had turned into a bona fide grin. "Okay, then let's go."

Gendry smiled back and held his elbow out to her. "If my lady wishes to follow me?"

"Don't call me my lady," Arya said, even as she slipped her arm through his.

"As my lady commands…"

Arya punched his arm lightly. "Gendry!"

"My lady doth protest too much, methinks!"

"Come on, that's not even in the right context!"

Laughing, they made their way to Gendry's car, where he sent a quick text to Beric and Edric to let them know that he and Arya wouldn't be back, before they drove out of the school premises. Arya told him that she wanted a cold drink, so he drove to a popular cafe where he planned to find a quiet booth where they could continue talking. However, being a Saturday night the cafe was more crowded than he had bargained for, and every booth had been occupied.

"What do you say about getting our drinks to go?" he suggested.

"Great idea," Arya agreed, "we're kind of overdressed anyway."

Gendry bought large iced teas for both of them, before they were on the road once again.

"Let's go somewhere we can talk," Arya posed, "do you know of any place?"

Gendry did, and soon after he was pulling into a deserted parking lot by a cliff-top park overlooking Blackwater Bay. There was a playground nearby, which looked uninviting in the darkness of the night, with the closest houses situated far from the edge of the cliff on the opposite end of the park. Gendry indicated for her to follow him as he led the way towards a park bench that faced the water, while he carried their drinks.

"Where are we?" Arya asked as she sat down beside him, looking around at their surroundings.

"We're just outside of Flea Bottom," Gendry replied, "no one comes here because it's a residential area. Plus, there's nothing out here to look at."
"What are you talking about? There's the beach right down there." Arya pointed out towards the water.

"I meant, there's only old houses here, and no nightlife to speak of."

"That's good for us, in that case." Arya picked up her ice tea and took a sip. "There's no one here besides us."

"It's nice," Gendry agreed, "the quiet is nice after all that noise in the gym."

While they sipped on their drinks they talked about their plans for Spring Break and he learned that Robb would be visiting, while Jon and Theon were still undecided. He told her of how Tobho was letting him help out with admin work at Steel Street Fabricators over the break.

"You'll have a part-time job?" Arya raised her brows. "That's great!"

"It's nothing to get excited over." Gendry shrugged. "I've had a part-time job before."

"You have?"

"Yeah, I used to help out at the 'Lucky 8' from time to time."

"Really?"

Arya's expression was bordering on incredulous, as though the notion of someone of his age engaging in paid employment was unfathomable, until he realized that to a girl coming from a wealthy background like Arya, whose acquaintances were all just as equally moneyed, the concept probably was truly alien.

"Really," he replied. "I didn't always have money…as you know."

Arya regarded him quietly, her eyes studying his face with an intensity that made him self-conscious after she'd been watching him for some long seconds.

"There's a lot about you that I still don't know, Gendry Waters," Arya eventually declared. "I feel like I'm getting to know you all over again."

"Well…a lot has happened since we first met," he reminded her, "and even though I hate to admit that being Robert Baratheon's illegitimate son has certain advantages, it's also affected every aspect of my life…and something like this changes a person. I don't think I'm the same person I was when you met me last September, so…you probably are getting to know me all over again."

Arya was silent after hearing his declaration. But, when she eventually spoke again, her voice sounded hollow.

"Is that why you decided we would be better off as friends?"

He glanced down at her, trying to read her expression. She wasn't looking at him, and her eyes were downcast, but she was fidgeting with her drinking straw which suggested that she was anxious. The only light source around them came from the street lights some distance away, and from the moon above them, making it too dark for him to see her clearly.

"Why are you bringing that up all of a sudden?" he wondered.

Arya's shoulders lifted in a shrug. "I'm just curious to know if it was only the old Gendry who had feelings for me…because this new you just wants to be friends, and get closer to girls like
Gendry frowned, unable to grasp the train of Arya's thought. "What I felt for you had nothing to do with being outed as a Baratheon. And, why are you bringing Margaery up again?"

"Felt…that's past tense, as in, you no longer have those kinds of feelings for me."

"Arya, what's going through your head?"

Arya lifted her eyes to look at him, but only briefly before they began to dart about his face. "I'm wondering if there's any part of you…even the smallest part…that may still have feelings for me?"

Gendry drew in a breath, surprised by the turn in conversation.

"Why?" he quietly asked.

Arya lifted her eyes again, and this time she made herself meet his eyes. "Because…"

"Because…what?"

"Because…" Arya paused as she took a breath. "I want to know if there's still a chance for…us."

Gendry stilled, a frown creasing his brows as he tried to work out what she meant by her words. Arya was not making sense, and the look on her face…an expression of anxiousness and determination, mixed with that certain wildness that had always lurked behind her eyes, was suddenly causing his heart to beat rapidly inside his chest.

"Arya, what are you saying?" he all but whispered.

She looked up at him with her lips parted, her doe-eyes wide as she continued to stare into his. He didn't know when she had narrowed the distance between them, but now he noticed acutely how her legs were brushing against his and feel the heat from her body. There was a question somewhere behind her grey irises, but later he would not recall ever answering it. Later, he would also come to think that he should have seen it coming, but because he was confused and flustered from her nearness, he failed to see her intentions until Arya was reaching one hand behind his neck to pull his head down to hers.

She kissed him innocently with their mouths closed, her lips pressing firmly against his once…twice…soft kisses that affected him more than he thought possible from such an act, and by the third kiss his own arms were winding around her waist while he increased the pressure of his mouth against hers. Arya's lips parted, their tongues met and Gendry felt her sliding her other arm behind his neck. They took it in turns to push and pull, alternating between hard and gentle. Before long, he felt Arya shifting from the seat beside him, pulling away from him long enough so that she could straddle him on the bench. Her bare thighs rested on either side of his hips, with the ruffled fabric of her skirt covering his knees.

Arya was warm in his arms, too warm in fact, which seemed in contradiction to her shivering hands and trembling shoulders…shoulders that were still bare, which he now sought to warm up by covering with kisses. She gasped when his lips trailed along the line of her collarbone, against the side of her neck, and sighing deeply when he reached a spot behind her ear. He paused to nibble on that same spot, pleased to discover a weakness, and Arya's sigh became an audible moan.

He muffled the sound of her voice by kissing her again, and Arya responded by curving her back to push her breasts against his chest. His hands seemed to move on their own, and a moment later he was cupping her in his palms, feeling the shape of her through the bodice of her dress.
"Gendry..." Arya moaned his name against his lips.

Emboldened by her response he dared to go even further, finding the zipper on the back of her dress, which he lowered just enough so that the front of her dress gave way, falling from her body so that he could slide his hands beneath the fabric. She wore no bra under her dress and he was surprised, yet pleased, when he met bare skin under his palms. He broke their kiss, because he wanted to see what his hands were caressing, and by the silver light of the moon he watched as Arya's eyes lowered until they were nearly shut, her lashes causing a shadow over her cheeks as he drew his thumbs back and forth over her budding flesh.

He'd watched her far too closely and far too keenly in the past, so he knew that her breasts would be small, but her skin was smooth and warm, her slight curves filling his palms perfectly, and making him wish that there was better light so that he could see the color of her pebbled nipples. He was aware that Arya wore little underneath her skirt, and with some reluctance, he took his hands from her breasts so that he could explore beneath the fabric that bunched around their hips. Arya shivered when he touched her thighs, causing her to shift on his lap in a way that caused his pants to tighten around his groin. She shifted again when he palmed her ass, and this time there was no mistaking what was really causing the tightness in his pants. Arya seemed to know this too, suddenly moving on top of him so that she pressed herself against his erection, making him gasp in the process.

Things were escalating far too quickly, and much as he reveled in the feel of Arya grinding him, he didn't want to get to the point where he wouldn't be able to control himself. He couldn't believe that Arya was in his arms like this. He couldn't believe what she was letting him do to her. He'd dreamt of this so many times that now that it was happening…it hardly seemed real. His heart was beating hard in his chest, and Arya's erratic breathing echoed his. Both of them wanted to take things further, and if he let Arya's hands continue to wander up and down his chest as she was currently doing, he knew that his self-control would not hold out.

A dog barked in the distance – breaking the silence around them. All at once sanity crept back into Gendry's head, and he stopped kissing Arya. He remembered that they were in public, and while he was certain that nobody could see them he was reminded that what they were doing was risky. Not only that, but there was another voice inside his head giving him one other reason to stop. I can't do this, he thought, and promptly began to zip Arya's dress back up.

"Gendry?" Arya asked when he firmly pulled away from her, causing her to slip from his lap back onto the bench. "What's wrong?"

"We shouldn't do this, Arya," he replied quietly, "we can't do this."

"Why can't we?" Arya looked confused.

"Arya." Gendry took a deep breath. "You and me…I can't do it."

Arya froze. "What...what do you mean?"

"You've just broken up with someone else," he reminded her, "this isn't what you want."

"It is." Arya declared. "I like you, Gendry. I want to be with you."

He inhaled sharply. Those were the words he'd hoped to hear for the longest time, but now that he was hearing them, they did not bring him the joy he'd always expected would come with them.

"What are you playing at now, Arya?" Gendry frowned.

"I'm not playing anything." Arya looked at him imploringly. "I'm telling you that I want to be with
you…I'm asking if there's any chance that part of you still has feelings for me?"

Gendry didn't know what to think or how to feel at that moment. He could not have foreseen this happening in a million years. She had chosen someone else instead of him. She'd carried out a relationship with another guy for months…what she had just said to him was not making any sense, especially when his mind had already been conditioned to finally let her go.

"Of course I still have feelings for you," he finally admitted. "It's pretty obvious that I'm still attracted to you after…after what we just did. But…that doesn't mean that I still want to have that kind of relationship with you."

Arya had visibly winced at his words, clearly stung by them, and she looked at him with eyes filled with a desperation he'd never seen in them before.

"I really do want to be with you, Gendry."

"You just think you do," Gendry said as he shook his head. "But, you don't."

"I wouldn't say it if it wasn't true!"

"Do you want me to tell you what it is that you really want…what I really think?" There was a bitterness in his tone that had crept into his voice without him realizing it, and he could tell that Arya had heard it. "I think you're lonely because he's leaving, and now you're looking to me as a replacement."

Gendry didn't know what compelled him to say those words, but he believed them as soon as the words were out of his mouth. What else could possibly have brought about the change in Arya's heart?

"That's not true!" Arya cried, aghast that he could suggest such a thing. "I would never…I could never think of you like—"

"I don't know that I can believe you," he ground out, his throat suddenly feeling thick. "Even if you say otherwise, and no matter what you say…I don't know that I could believe you."

Arya's face fell, and despite the darkness he would see that she was fighting back tears.

"Is that it?" she choked out. "How can I get you to understand what I'm saying to you? Is there really nothing I can say that will convince you of how I feel?"

Gendry looked out across the inky blackness of the sea, fighting to keep from changing his mind about what he was about to do. Part of him desperately wanted to believe her, without asking how or why she suddenly came to want him, but another part of him was not about to let him forget about the pain he had endured because of his feelings for Arya. He'd put his heart on the line, only to watch her give hers to someone else.

"I don't want to feel like I'm just a substitute, Arya."

It was too much of a coincidence, he felt, that she was suddenly realizing her feelings for him just as Jaqen was leaving her behind. Bitterly, he felt that anything she said now was meaningless. I never want to feel like I'm second best.

"Gendry…" Arya said his name like a plea.

"I'm sorry, Arya."
Arya turned away from him, and he was certain that he heard a sob, but she must have stifled it because she suddenly became silent, even though her shoulders – the very same shoulders he'd been kissing moments earlier – were now heaving. He made no move for some time, giving her what privacy he could while he continued to fight his instincts, telling himself that this was for the best.

In the end it was Arya who first stood up from the bench, turning to face him without looking at him, expressionless and curiously dry-eyed.

"Please take me home."

He drove her home while the tension inside his car was so thick it had been difficult to breathe, yet somehow he'd dropped her back at Chateau Maegor with barely a word said between them. When he eventually reached the confines of his own room he could hardly muster the energy to undress before he'd collapsed on top of his bed. The events of the last couple of hours had played in his mind over and over again, while his brain tried to process and deal with the shock of how he'd had Arya in his arms half-naked one moment – to rejecting her feelings in the next. He'd lain in bed, drowning in the ever-deepening pool of regret, pain and confusion, thinking how much better things would still be if he'd stayed at home like he'd planned.

"I fucking hate school dances."
Spring Break has officially begun!

I know that many of you traditionally travel to tropical locales at this time of the year, but not all of us have the means nor the inclination to travel so far when King's Landing has so much to offer in terms of entertainment for those of us stay-cationing this week. Free concerts are being held at venues all around King's Landing and neighboring towns, food festivals are happening at all the popular farmer's markets, while King's Landings parks and outdoor recreational hotspots are alive with all of the spring flowers now in bloom, encouraging people to get out and enjoy picnics and games in the sunshine!

While many of you will be hanging out and having fun with friends, I have heard little whispers that the friendship between Arya Stark and Gendry Waters may have hit a rough patch. The two of them were spotted leaving Spring Fling together the other night all chummy, however just a few days later several witnesses have claimed to have seen the two of them at Harrenhal Mall, with Arya looking visibly upset as she walked away from Gendry – I'm curious to know what could have happened in that short space of time, so if anyone knows anything please drop me a message!

Lastly, my contact at the Photography Club has sent through images taken at Spring Fling, which I have posted on my gallery. I've put together an album of my picks for best and worst dressed on the night, as well as other fashion hits and misses. Curious to see who made it onto which list? Then check out my gallery!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Sandor

He should not have checked out Gossip Spyder's gallery. He had not even been interested in seeing who had been deemed 'best' or 'worst' dressed at Spring Fling, but he'd woken up super early and had time to kill so he'd scrolled through the photos. At first, he'd been happy to see Sansa's picture in the 'best' dressed list, because Sansa was big on fashion and would have been amused to have her taste acknowledged – but then he'd continued scrolling and found a photo of the two of them together…in the section titled 'the odd couple'.

For sure they were not the only couple to have been included. Mya Stone and Lothor Brune had been pictured too, with a caption next to their photo reading 'when colors clash on the dance floor'. Mya was wearing a bright yellow dress that clashed with Lothor's brown suit, so that when one looked at the two of them together the viewer couldn't help but see an unflattering vomit hued aura around them. Other couples had been similarly captioned, and some were not because the reason for their inclusion should have been self-explanatory, like a great difference in height between couples, more clashing outfits, and some where one partner was considerably more overdressed than the other. Sandor and Sansa's photo had not been captioned, and he had been wondering all day what could have been so obviously odd about the two of them.

Of course, there're too many fucking reasons! Sandor had thought angrily. How was the Spyder supposed to pick just one? He and Sansa were different in height and looks obviously, but there was
also wealth, social standing, popularity, pedigree…the list went on. Now, he had to think about it even as he got ready to go to dinner at Chateau Maegor to meet Sansa's parents for the first time. It was a stupid thing to worry about, but as he saw the situation, the photo was a manifestation of his insecurities. The public was now acknowledging that he and Sansa as a pair were odd, and he was furious.

However, there was nothing he could do about the photo now, and all he could do was try to squash his fury during the drive to Sansa's house. He knew that his emotions showed on his face, and the last thing he wanted was to greet Mr. and Mrs. Stark with a feral scowl on his face. He was anxious about this meeting, more for Sansa's sake than his. He had a strong suspicion that her parents would be critical of him, especially after what Sansa had gone through with Joffrey. Sandor also strongly suspected that Eddard Stark had already done a background check on him and his family. Chances were they already knew about his history with Joffrey, and his less than squeaky clean student record. Unlike Joffrey, he did not have a father with a famous name who could make his petty misdemeanors disappear from his transcript. Seriously, he had believed that his past suspensions and detentions would work against him when he'd applied for college. Lucky for him that he was the best damned linebacker of his age!

Sandor had a plan to mention his acceptance to The University of Valyria as a last resort, if he could do nothing else to make himself look good for Sansa's parents. He had one wish for the evening, and that was for it to pass quickly. He arrived at Chateau Maegor at five minutes to seven, messing up the PIN code at the gate due to his nerves. Usually he stayed in his car when he waited for Sansa to come out, having no reason to step inside her house previously. He'd been inside bigger and fancier mansions before, so the usual displays of wealth did not faze him. He'd met and been around plenty of King's Landing's prominent citizens while he'd been at Joffrey's side, and none of them had ever made him so conscious about his working-class roots. His imminent meeting with Eddard and Catelyn Stark now made it impossible for him to ignore it.

The front door opened just as he alighted from his car and he nodded in response to the smile that Sansa greeted him with.

"Hey! You're right on time." Sansa automatically linked her arm through his, and he hoped that she wouldn't notice how rigid he was. "We're all ready to go into the dining room. We were just waiting for you."

"We did agree on seven, right?" he asked, hoping that none of her family had been waiting hungry.

"We did," Sansa confirmed, "and everyone's looking forward to meeting you."

Her words did not comfort him, as he suspected she probably intended. It meant her family had been discussing him, and as Sansa led him through the foyer and past the grand staircase he'd only ever glimpsed from the front door, he began to break out into a sweat. Eddard and Catelyn Stark, along with the rest of Sansa's siblings, had gathered in a living room to await his arrival and by the silence that greeted him when they entered the room, Sandor knew that his appearance had caught them off-guard.

"He's here! Finally, we can eat!"

The shout had come from the youngest in the group, the auburn-haired boy that Sandor knew to be Rickon Stark.

"Rickon, that's not polite," Robb Stark gently told him off.

"But, we've been waiting for ages!" Rickon emphasized. "I'm starving!"
"I should have come earlier, Sandor thought, kicking himself. I should have come earlier.

"You'll get to eat soon enough," Eddard said to his son, before he turned his attention to Sandor. "Welcome to our home, Sandor."

Sansa's father held his hand out for him to shake and Sandor took it without hesitation, meeting Eddard Stark's eyes, unapologetic about his looks and the scars he bore. As far as first impressions went, Sandor knew he was at a disadvantage, so the least he could do was give the man a firm handshake.

"Thank you for inviting me," Sandor responded gruffly, "it's an honor to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Stark."

Sandor greeted Sansa's mother in turn, aware that the woman was eyeing him much more shrewdly than her husband had.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you, Sandor." Catelyn's gaze had lingered on the scars on his face. "We've heard quite a lot about you."

Sandor fought to keep from grimacing as she continued to observe him. He had no doubts about what thoughts Catelyn Stark was having about the boy dating her eldest daughter. He felt more sweat begin to bead on the back of his neck.

"I heard that you've already met our son, Robb." Eddard indicated towards Robb, who stood at the back of the room.

"We've met a few times," Sandor confirmed, watching as Robb approached him with his hand held out.

"Good to see you again, Sandor." Robb smiled at him politely as they shook hands.

"I've been told that you're friends with Arya." Eddard nodded towards Arya who stood to the side wearing a mildly bored expression on her face. "So, the only two members of our family here today that you have yet to meet are our youngest boys, Bran and Rickon."

Bran came forward to shake his hand politely when his name was called, murmuring a quiet 'how do you do', while Rickon unabashedly stared up at his face with his mouth open.

"Hello, I'm Rickon," the boy said, "nice to meet you."

"You too," Sandor rasped.

"What happened to your face?"

Sansa gasped loudly beside him, while Catelyn gave her son a sharp look of warning.

"Rickon, apologize to Sandor at once. You're being very rude."

Rickon's eyes went wide when he realized he was in trouble and he gazed at Sandor with a horrified expression.

"I'm sorry," he squeaked.

"Don't worry about it," Sandor replied, feeling bad for the kid, but now even more conscious of his scars and the awkwardness in the room.
"Perhaps we should all head into the dining room now," Catelyn suggested, "we can talk more once we're seated."

Dinner at the Stark household was never going to be a simple or quiet affair, given the size of the family and the boisterous personalities of some of the family members. Sandor had never experienced anything like it and he sat rigidly in his high-backed chair, unsure where to look or how to react. He was seated with Sansa on his left and Bran on his right side. Across the table from him was Arya, who sat next to Robb. Rickon was seated to his mother's left at her end of the table where she could keep him under control, while Eddard headed the other end of the long table. Each place setting had been set with what appeared to be service for three courses, which began with an entrée of seared scallop.

"Sandor," Eddard addressed him as the meal commenced. "I believe congratulations are in order, Sansa has told us about your scholarship to the University of Valyria. You must be very proud of yourself."

Sandor hid his surprise, and dismay. The conversation was starting with the trump card he'd been planning to save for a more opportune moment, but now he would have nothing else to say about himself.

"I'm just grateful I can keep playing football," Sandor said in response to the eyes watching him.

"It's a fantastic achievement," Eddard continued, "surely your family must be very proud of you, too."

Sandor knew for a fact that his brother couldn't have cared less about whether he went to college or not, and his father had mentioned nothing further about his acceptance since their brief exchange of emails.

"I didn't do it to make them proud," he eventually muttered.

Sansa's father gazed at him curiously following his comment, and it wasn't until he noted that everyone wore similar expressions that he realized he'd said something unusual. Oh, fuck! I should have just nodded and agreed.

"I understand your father works for Casterly Rock Drilling & Excavation," Eddard began again, moving on. "What does he do there?"

Sandor was not surprised that Eddark knew that bit of information about his father. This man was the father of his girlfriend after all, a very protective father who'd already seen his daughter mistreated by one boyfriend, and who would likely do anything in his power to prevent it happening again.

"He's a site manager."

"That's quite a lucrative role in the industry."

"I'm not sure how lucrative it is," Sandor said with a shrug, "but, it does take him away from home most of the time. He's overseas right now."

"That must be hard on you," Catelyn commented, making the assumption that Sandor missed his absent father.

"I'm used to it." Sandor shrugged again.

"Do you live with your brother?" Catelyn wondered.
"Not right now, ma'am. He's a senior at King's Landing College, and once he graduates he plans on moving back home permanently."

"Oh, so you have an older brother – do you have any other siblings?"

"No, ma'am."

"And, your mother…may I ask about her?"

Sandor lowered his fork and stopped eating. "My mother is dead."

Silence fell over the table as everyone paused to look at him once again. Arya's eyes had widened, curious to learn about something of himself that he had never discussed with her. Sansa sat beside him giving him an encouraging look, while the three Stark brothers continued to listen politely.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," Catelyn said gently.

"It's okay." Sandor waved off her apology. "She and my sister died a long time ago."

"Sister?" Catelyn shot her husband a look, as though to say 'why didn't you warn me'.

Sandor felt the sudden shift in the mood around the table, and he knew he'd just said something that made them all uncomfortable. Well, shit. Sandor cursed himself angrily. Now I've done it.

"You had a sister?" Arya asked, no longer able to contain her curiosity.

"I did,"

"What happened to her?"

Sandor now felt he had no choice but to answer. "There was an accident when my family went out to the river one day, and she fell into the water, but she was only three and couldn't swim. My mother went in after her…but the current was too strong and they got swept away…it was too late when help finally came."

"Oh, Sandor!" Sansa's hand was suddenly gripping his own. "I'm so sorry. I really am."

Sansa looked stricken, and belatedly he realized he'd never told her how his mother and sister had died. The faces of her family members were similarly shocked. Yep, I've officially ruined dinner all before the main course.

"How utterly devastating their loss must have been for you and your family, Sandor," Eddard remarked quietly.

"It was thirteen years ago," Sandor said with a shrug. "I was six, so I guess I was too young to really understand what was going on at the time."

"We're so sorry that your mother and sister are no longer with us." Catelyn looked at him kindly. "No matter how long they've been gone."

Ah, he thought. There was a far less jarring way to say that someone was dead. And, would have been far less awkward. Eddard chose that moment to change the subject, but his next question made Sandor no less uncomfortable.

"Now, there is something I would like to know." Eddard glanced between Sandor and Arya. "I've heard that the two of you have been friends for some time, but I never learned how you met. After
all, Arya is only a freshman. What brought you together?"

Arya looked as taken aback as Sandor felt at the unexpected question, but he managed to answer first.

"We had a…mutual interest." Sandor figured it was true enough, both of them had shared an interest in beating Joffrey to a pulp.

"What might that have been?" Eddard pressed.

"Football," Arya quickly replied, "yes, it was football. I like to watch it, and he's a star linebacker."

"That reminds me," said Robb Stark unexpectedly, "I first met Sandor at one of KL Prep's games when Jon, Theon and I came down for Arya and Sansa's birthdays last October."

Robb's corroboration appeared to convince Eddard, but Sandor once again suspected that Robb knew far more than he was comfortable with. Just how much has Sansa divulged to her brother?

"Football seems to be a very important part of your life," Eddard observed, "and knowing that you won a football scholarship to The University of Valyria makes me now regret not having gone to see any of the KL Prep matches."

"You'll have plenty of chances to watch him play for the Dragonlords, father," Sansa informed him. "It won't be much trouble to fly to Valyria City to watch the occasional game, right?"

Eddard gave the suggestion some thought for a moment, before nodding in agreement. "You're right. There's no reason why we couldn't do that."

"You won't regret it, father." Sansa grinned at her father. "Sandor is amazing on the field!"

"I'll look forward to it." Eddard smiled.

Sandor inwardly grimaced, embarrassed by Sansa's unabashed praise. He was glad that she was so enthusiastic, but he needed more time to get used to it.

"When do you move into dorms, Sandor?" Robb asked him.

"Late August," he replied, "but I can't remember the exact date."

"That's right, you're moving away." Arya looked as though she'd just connected the dots to some puzzle. "You and Sansa will be in a long-distance relationship then, huh?"

Sansa sighed heavily beside him and he glanced at her in time to see the downward slant of Sansa's mouth. Sandor shot a glare towards Arya. Way to go, little bitch.

"We can't help that," he grunted roughly.

"We know what it means for us," Sansa stated, "don't we, Sandor?"

Sandor responded with a terse nod, yet even as he did so he did not truly believe that they knew exactly what a long-distance relationship entailed for both of them.

"That's very mature of you, Sansa. Sandor is a few years older, so perhaps his maturity is rubbing off on you." Catelyn eyed them both with an expression that Sandor found hard to read. "You are nineteen years old aren't you, Sandor?"
"That's correct, ma'am."

"You're one year older than most students in your grade – did you perhaps start schooling a year later than usual?"

"No, ma'am." Sandor cleared his throat. "I repeated the first grade after...after I was injured. I was in hospital for some time."

"And, may I ask how you were injured? Of course, you don't have to answer if you would prefer not to."

"Mother, I think we should move onto another topic," Sansa suggested after glancing at his face. "It's all right," he spoke up quickly, "I'll answer it. I...fell head first into our fireplace when I was a kid."

It wasn't the truth, but he'd told no one other than Sansa the real story, and he wasn't prepared to see the looks of horror and pity from her family. Although, they seemed horrified enough by what he'd just said. As much as he did not want to lie, there was a limit to what he was willing to disclose about himself.

"Oh, how awful!" Catelyn exclaimed.

"So that's what happened..." Arya stared at his face intently.

"You certainly have been through a lot," Eddard acknowledged, an expression of understanding on his stern features. "I see now that your maturity is not due to your age alone."

Sandor met the man's gaze across the length of the table, and though he wasn't certain, it seemed that Eddard Stark may just have offered him praise.

Conversation progressed to safer topics, and as Rickon told them about the latest cartoon series he was watching Sandor took a moment to breathe. He'd prepared for discomfort and awkwardness that night, but he had not expected to be feeling so acutely exposed. He'd told Sansa's family more about himself in that short time, than he'd ever shared with anyone, including Sansa. Now he felt vulnerable, like he was sitting there naked while everyone else was fully clothed.

The main course that evening was seared lamb cutlets with vegetables, and as the meal progressed without incident he thought that he might be able to get through dessert just as smoothly. He was allowing himself to breathe a little deeper when he heard the doorbell chiming softly in the background, and shortly after the housekeeper who'd been serving their meals all evening scurried by to answer the door.

"Were you expecting anyone, dear?" Catelyn asked her husband.

Eddard shook his head. "Not tonight."

"Hmm...I wonder who it could be."

The housekeeper returned a moment later and Sandor watched as she discreetly approached the head of the table to mutter something into Eddard's ear. The man looked surprised, but pleasantly so.

"Please let him in," Eddard instructed the housekeeper. "And, kindly offer him dinner if he hasn't already eaten."

Sandor glanced at Sansa to see if she had any idea who the newcomer might possibly be, but she only shrugged. Sandor was mentally steeling himself to meet a Stark acquaintance, however the
expressionless façade he'd donned cracked the very moment the new guest walked into the room.

"Good evening everyone," said Willas Tyrell. "I'm terribly sorry for interrupting your dinner."

"Hello, Willas." Catelyn smiled at him graciously.

"It's quite all right, Willas. You're more than welcome." Eddard motioned him towards the table. "Please, do sit down and join us."

Sansa had let out a tiny gasp that only Sandor heard, yet that one sound conveyed her shock and disappointment at the sudden intrusion. Sandor could only watch in silence as Willas greeted everyone in turn, and as he took the empty seat next to Arya, directly across from Sansa.

"Hello, Sansa." Willas continued to smile. "Margaery showed me your photos from Spring Fling, and you looked gorgeous."

"Thank you," Sansa bit out from the side of her mouth.

"Sandor." Willas regarded him with a curious expression. "I was not expecting to see you here tonight."

"Likewise," Sandor grunted.

He thought he had already endured enough suffering throughout the first two courses of dinner. However, he now realized that Willas Tyrell's arrival had opened the gates to an all new hell that even Dante himself had not seen. This level of hell, Sandor thought, was reserved for unworthy scum like himself who sought to possess beautiful innocents like Sansa. Willas Tyrell's presence was a brutal reminder of just how much he didn't belong in Sansa's world…or deserve to be by her side.

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Sansa

Things were going well, or so she had thought. There were some awkward moments for sure and Sandor had struggled to relax, but overall he'd been willing to talk about himself far more than she could have imagined. Learning about how his mother and sister had died had been a shock for all of them, but she had been proud of him for being so honest. Sandor had appeared to finally be relaxing in the presence of her family – until Willas had walked into the room.

Willas had smiled and greeted her family, and now he sat across the table from her acting far too comfortably while she could feel Sandor turning to stone beside her.

"I presume that you and Sandor are acquainted, am I correct?" her father had addressed Willas.

"Sandor and I have met on several occasions, and I've even had the pleasure of watching him play on the field," Willas had replied.

"So, what brings you here tonight?" Robb asked him, saving Sansa the trouble.

Willas turned to her brother. "Good to see you too, Robb. I'm fine, thanks for asking."

Robb grinned. "I know you're doing fine, so I didn't ask. I saw you at the White Town Club just last weekend."

"You went up north last weekend, Willas?" Catelyn asked him.

"Oh, just for one night to celebrate a friend's birthday." Willas indicated towards Robb. "It was a
mutual friend of ours, so we ran into each other at the party."

"The weather up there should be milder now. Most southerners can't stand the cold of the north."

"It was cold, but at least the sun was shining."

Sansa cleared her throat. "You were saying, Willas? What brought you here tonight?"

"It's work, actually. I was investigating something for Ned and he asked me to drop in as soon as I had results."

Willas reached into his shirt pocket and produced a small USB flash drive, which brought a smile to Eddard's face.

"You've already found the problem?" her father asked.

"I have." Willas nodded. "And, as you asked, I came as soon as I solved the mystery."

"I see father's really putting you to work," Robb commented, "I don't regret turning down the job in this case."

"What was causing the discrepancy with the numbers, Willas?" her father inquired, excited about Willas' news.

"The spreadsheet and tables had not been formatted correctly, and there were a few erroneous formulas. Combined, the reported numbers were being skewed quite substantially."

"So, that was the problem..." Eddard rubbed his chin. "You're a genius, Willas."

"It was nothing."

"Could we perhaps save the business talk for another time?" Catelyn suggested in deference to Sandor. "We have a guest with us tonight."

"You're quite right, dear." Eddard nodded in agreement.

"Yes, of course." Willas smiled again. "I was in such a rush to bring my findings that it did not even occur to me to call first. Now it appears I've intruded into quite a special occasion."

"It was my oversight for not informing Willas about tonight, and I did ask him to make this task a priority. It is I who should be apologizing, Sandor." Eddard directed his apology directly to Sandor. "I hope you can forgive me this time."

Sandor looked taken aback by the apology, but Sansa was pleased to see that her parents were not taking their first meeting with her boyfriend lightly.

"It's no problem, sir." Sandor cleared his throat. "There's nothing to apologize for."

Dessert was served in due course, and once everyone had eaten their fill of lemon and raspberry friands topped with Chantilly cream they all moved to one of the sitting rooms where Sandor was drawn into a conversation about football with Arya and Robb. Sansa's father and Willas momentarily excused themselves so that they could go over the spreadsheets her father had asked him to fix, and Sansa couldn't help but feel relieved when Willas was no longer in the room. She kept expecting something to happen that might provoke Sandor somehow, but she then felt ashamed for not giving her boyfriend enough credit. The evening will soon be over, and nothing is going to happen. I'm over-thinking things just because Sandor and Willas are under the same roof.
"Sansa," her mother called to her from across the room where she was assisting the housekeeper with tea and coffee.

"Yes, mother?"

"Would you please fetch my sweater from upstairs for me? It's the blue one draped on the stool by the dresser."

"Sure."

Sansa glanced over at Sandor to see that he was still engrossed in conversation with her brother and sister, before she went to fetch her mother's sweater. She passed her father's office on the way and briefly heard the murmur of voices behind the closed door, indicating that he and Willas were still busy with work. On her return however, with her mother's sweater in hand, she was surprised to encounter Willas at the foot of the stairs.

"Hello, Sansa." Willas offered her one of his smiles that she used to find charming. "How are you enjoying your evening?"

"Very well, actually." Sansa glanced towards her father's office.

"Your father has returned to the sitting room to join the others," Willas informed her, correctly reading her thoughts. "I didn't want to keep him longer than necessary. After all, tonight seems to be an important occasion for both you and your boyfriend."

"So, you're finished with work?" Sansa ignored his reference to Sandor. "You'll be leaving then?"

"I will be, shortly." Willas nodded. "I've been hoping to speak with you for some time, but we never seem to get the chance. But, now that I have you here, won't you give me just a moment of your time?"

"I'm listening," Sansa told him, "what did you want to speak with me about?"

"Could we step somewhere a little more private?"

"There's no one here but us. Here is fine." Sansa did not want to take him any place that was secluded.

"I don't understand why you're being so stand-offish with me," Willas declared. "Have I done something to warrant your disaffection?"

Sansa sighed. Willas hadn't, he really hadn't, and from his perspective it was hard to understand why she was treating him so coldly. He'd never touched her, made a pass at her or said anything remotely inappropriate to her, and yet her behavior towards him was bordering on rude at times. All because she was trying to avoid a scenario with Sandor that might not even eventuate.

"Okay," she acquiesced. "I apologize. I've just been thinking too much about something Margaery said."

"Oh?" Willas raised his brow. "What did my sister say?"

Sansa shook her head, embarrassed. "It's nothing."

"Did my sister tell you about how I'm interested in you, and how I wanted to ask you out after you ended things with Joffrey?"
"Oh, my god…" Sansa's embarrassment deepened.

"Though it is all true," Willas continued, "I don't believe I've done anything to make you uncomfortable around me."

"I didn't want to do anything to encourage you," Sansa corrected him. "I'm with Sandor."

"I know that." Willas did not appear at all perturbed by her statement, looking just as unaffected as when Margaery had acknowledged that Gendry possibly had feelings for someone else. "I knew from the moment that you ran after him at the championship that you were attracted to him, but quite frankly I am surprised that the two of you have lasted so many months together."

Sansa frowned. "Why is that so surprising?"

Willas appeared to be considering his next words carefully, but at this point Sansa figured that anything he said would just annoy her.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Willas began, "but, you and Sandor are two extremely different people. I would be surprised if the two of you had anything at all in common."

"Opposites attract," Sansa heard herself say. "Didn't you know that?"

"Perhaps they do," Willas agreed, "but for how long? Your differences may be a novelty now, but in the long run they will only serve to drive you apart."

"Why are we even having this conversation?" Sansa demanded. "Who I date doesn't concern you."

"I'm not concerned about who you're dating right now," Willas corrected her. "I'm much more interested in your future…maybe three or five years from now, to be exact."

"Why?" even as she asked, she wasn't sure she really wanted to hear his response.

"By then you'll be ready for a real relationship," Willas replied smoothly, "one with a view to something more…permanent."

It took her half a second to realize what he was really saying, and another half a second for her to react.

"What?" Sansa's jaw dropped. "Do you have any idea how crazy you sound right now?"

"What's crazy about it?" Willas frowned. "One day you're going to get married—"

"One day far, far into the future," Sansa interjected.

"The future does seem far away when you're still in high school," Willas commented thoughtfully. "But, trust me, time flies by faster than you think and your future will be here before you know it…and I want to be part of your future."

Sansa blinked. "Like I said before, I'm with Sandor."

Willas gave her another smile, but there was something in his eyes that made her feel as though he was humoring her.

"I'm a patient man," he said quietly, "I can wait."

"For what?"
"For you to grow out of this phase," he replied, and shifted his stance, full of confidence. "So, go on and date the bad boys you find so attractive now, and one day when you're ready to be with a grown man with a good name, I'll be right here."

"You're too sure of yourself." Sansa shook her head, as though to dispel what she'd just heard. "You can't possibly know how I feel."

"I've seen it before," Willas said with a shrug. "I have watched friends from high school date people outside of our circle, witnessed as their differences tore them apart and listened as they complained about the pitfalls of dating someone who did not and could not understand the intricacies and dynamics within our society. Now, I'm watching as these same friends are now getting engaged to partners more…suited to them."

"Our kind, you mean."

"That's right." Willas inclined his head. "I don't believe there's anything wrong with that."

"And, you're telling me that you want me in your future,"

"I think we'd be very good together, Sansa."

"Because we're the same kind?"

"Among other things,"

"Why are you fixating on me? There are plenty of other girls out there prettier and smarter, from families in the right circle if that's so important to you. Girls who are probably dying to date you."

"Plenty of other girls, maybe," Willas agreed. "But, there's only one Sansa Stark."

Taken aback by his unexpected response, Sansa could only stare at him. Willas seemed pleased with her reaction, because the smile on his face grew wider.

"Are you trying to tell me –?" she began to say.

"That's right," Willas said, pre-empting her question. "I don't just want you because you're a Stark. I'm telling you that I want you, for who you are. That's why it can't just be any girl."

"Willas, I can't return your feelings."

"Not today, perhaps." His expression took on a regretful look. "But, as I said…I have a lot of patience."

"Willas...

"I'm going to excuse myself now, if that's okay with you? I've taken up enough of your time. I've already said goodbye to your father, but please extend my farewell to the rest of your family…and to Sandor."

"Sure." Sansa made no attempt to stop him. "Goodnight, Willas."

She watched as he turned to leave, familiar enough with her house that he could let himself out of the front door, still just as straight-backed and confident as though he hadn't been turned down by the girl he had designs on one day marrying. Sansa sighed, not knowing how their future social interactions would be affected by this, but at least now they knew where they stood with each other.
She looked down at her hand and saw her mother's sweater still clutched in her fingers, forgotten in the exchange. Knowing she'd been gone longer than she should have, Sansa turned to walk back to the sitting room. As she approached the hallway she thought she heard the thump of a booted foot against the marble floor, but there was no one there when she turned the corner.

"There you are," Catelyn said when Sansa re-entered the sitting room. "I was wondering what had happened to you."

"Oh, I ran into Willas in the foyer on his way out," Sansa said as she handed her mother her sweater. "He said to say goodnight to everyone."

Sansa took her seat on the couch and noted and looked around for Sandor, who was not in the room.

"Where did he go?" she asked her sister.

"Bathroom," Arya replied.

Sansa sat back and waited for him, and hoped that now Willas had left Sandor could finally relax and enjoy what was left of the evening.

Arya

There was far more to pie making than she had first thought, and while she tried her best to follow Hot Pie's instructions and directions, in the end she was relegated to tasks that did not require kneading, rolling or crimping. Presently she was spooning quantities of stewed fruit into single-portion sized pastry shells that Hot Pie had prepared earlier, making sure not to overfill the shells.

"Nice work, Arya." Hot Pie grinned as he eyed the filled shells on the countertop. "That's the last batch to go in the oven, then we can head over to the festival."

"Awesome." Arya smiled, glad she could be of some help to him.

"Thanks again for coming to help me out today,"

"It's no big deal,"

"I would say it is," Hot Pie countered, "you're giving up a Saturday to come and work at a stall with me selling pies, and you had to get up at dawn to be here."

"Anything for you, Hot Pie."

Hot Pie's application to showcase his baked creations at the King's Landing Food & Wine Festival had been accepted at the last minute, and consequently he had needed help to pull everything together with only one week notice.

"I shouldn't have hesitated!" Hot Pie had lamented earlier in the week. "I should have submitted my interest weeks ago, and then I would have had more time to prepare banners and take-home boxes and stuff like that."

"Don't think about it now," Arya had told him, "just focus on your recipes, okay? People won't be eating banners and fancy packaging. They're going to be more interested in how your pies taste, so focus on that."

"You're right. You're definitely right."
Hot Pie had decided on a selection of his specialty desserts which included salted caramel and chocolate éclairs, baked cheesecake tarts, fruit compote pies and strawberries and cream gateaux, as well as his signature savory beef and gravy pie, the bulk of which he had baked the day before. Arya had helped him with a quick design for a logo that would be printed on the posters he would hang at his booth, as well as on the small batch of business cards and paper carry bags. Arya had been with Hot Pie when he’d gone to collect his order from the copy and printing shop at Harrenhal Mall when they had run into Gendry.

It had only been three days since Gendry had rejected her feelings – and all possibility of them being together – that Arya had panicked and fled before Gendry had even muttered a greeting. She had not counted on that small incident to be news worthy, but Gossip Spyder had somehow got wind of it and reported in on the blog. Hot Pie had been curious about her odd behavior, but while she’d gone to cool her head, Gendry must have said something to him because Hot Pie had not asked her what had happened. *That, or he's probably just used to my random mood swings by now,* she mused.

She had not cried, despite the pain of Gendry's rejection and the weight of it on her chest. She had not allowed herself to cry because crying seemed to signify that she'd given up, and she wasn't willing to give up her feelings for Gendry when she'd just admitted to them. What she felt for him was not a trivial or passing emotion, and it deserved to be acknowledged. Even if only by herself.

"I don't want to feel like I'm just a substitute..."

Gendry's words were never far from her thoughts, reminding her how much pain she had caused him. Arya did not know how she could convince him that he was not a replacement, and that there was no comparing him to anyone else, when all of her past actions only worked against her. *Maybe I should just wait until I get another chance to tell him how I feel,* Arya thought. *But, he sounded so final...I don't know how to get through to him...throwing my body at him didn't work.*

Arya's face heated up when she recalled how fast their kiss had escalated to so much more, remembering the feel of Gendry's large hands on her breasts and how his lips felt as they had pressed against the skin along her neck. Gendry still wanted her physically, there was no doubt about that, but she would not allow herself to be consoled by that alone.

*I want more.* If she and Gendry were going to be together, then both of them had to be all in, with all their cards laid out on the table.

"But, how?" Arya murmured to herself, sighing heavily.

"Did you say something?" Hot Pie turned from the oven where he was pulling out the final tray of golden crusted berry compote pies.

"It's nothing." Arya shook her head. "Are you finished?"

"I'll just let these cool for a few minutes, then we can be on our way. I've already packed the display cases and tables in the van, and the venue said there will be access to electrical points at the site."

"Can we load the goods that are ready?" Arya looked at the boxes marked with a flame-red symbol for *pi* sitting in crates on another counter, eager to get moving.

"Yep, let's do that."

Arya hoped that physical activity would distract her from her thoughts, but even when they were finally speeding down the Kingsroad Expressway heading towards the Blackwater Recreational Grounds, Arya's mind was filled with nothing but Gendry. She had not intended to confess her
feelings to him the way she had that night, but seeing Gendry in Margaery's arms, and seeing his arms around Margaery in turn as they had danced on that dimly lit dance floor had triggered something in her.

At first she'd thought only of leaving the dance altogether, not wanting to make a scene but unable to watch Gendry and Margaery any longer. She hadn't counted on Gendry coming after her. He'd apologized for leaving her on her own when he had been the one who'd invited her to come along that night, but her jealousy had made her say things she wouldn't have said otherwise. Gendry had caught her off-guard once more with another invitation to escape from the school dance, and she'd jumped at the chance to spend alone time with him…and because she was Arya-Act-Now-Think-Later, she'd acted on impulse and kissed him, and once again she was paying the consequences of her actions. But, I don't regret it, she thought determinedly. Gendry needed to hear how I feel about him…I had to tell him.

The King's Landing Food & Wine Festival was being held in several large marquees that had been erected in the middle of a grassy park, with yet many more stalls and stands occupied by small businesses, artisans and hobbyists alike selling anything from gourmet chutney to organic chilli wine. Hot Pie had been designated a stall inside one of the large air-conditioned marquees where festival organizers had assisted them with unloading folding tables and display cases for Hot Pie's booth. Arya had to admire her friend. Hot Pie had a dream of his own to create baked goods beyond the pies that his mother and grandmother were renowned for, and he was doing everything he could to achieve that dream.

It did not take long for them to set up, and once they had laid out his display on the cloth covered table and in the refrigerated cabinets, all there was left to do was wait for the official opening of the festival, which had been scheduled for 9 a.m.

"I haven't done enough," Hot Pie said in a panicked voice as he looked around at the neighboring stalls. "Look what I have to compete with!"

Arya had seen that many of the other stalls had been decorated and adorned with bigger and brighter signage, menu boards, bunting and fancy lighting. In comparison Hot Pie's booth was aesthetically minimal with plain, red table cloth covering the display tables, stainless steel and glass display cases, and only the simple posters with the $\pi$ symbol emblazoned on them to identify his stall.

"You don't need gimmicks to sell your pastries," she assured him, "trust me."

"I hope you're right." Hot Pie checked the time. "Five minutes till the gates open…I hope I baked enough stuff."

Arya did not bother to point out to Hot Pie that his booth was actually quite strategically placed next door to an artisan coffee roaster who had set up a mini café within his allocated area. They sold no food, only drinks. And, what goes better with coffee than a delicious pastry? Arya hid her smile. Her hunch was proven correct when they were inundated with customers almost as soon as the gates opened, Hot Pie's creations proving popular with the breakfast and coffee crowd. By mid-morning Arya had needed to run to the cold-storage room to re-stock, much to Hot Pie's delight.

Hot Pie was a natural salesman, genuinely happy to greet people and even more excited to talk about his pastries. Arya had been delegated to boxing and bagging purchases while Hot Pie handled the actual sale and money handling side of things. It was all new to her, and while she had not expected it, she found herself actually having fun. It was an experience she never would have had without Hot Pie.

During a lull towards midday, Arya sat next to Hot Pie sipping coffee from a paper cup and nibbling
on an éclair while they caught their breaths.

"Did your brothers end up coming down for Spring Break?" Hot Pie asked her.

"Robb did, so he could see Jeyne Westerling, that girl who won him at the auction," Arya told him. "Jon couldn't come down because he was assisting his college professor with something, but I suspect the real reason is because of this girl called Ygritte who he's been seeing recently, and Theon decided he was going to try and meet with his long-estranged father."

"How did that meet the family dinner with Sandor go?" Hot Pie wondered.

Arya snorted with laughter. "Awkward as fuck."

"I'll bet." Hot Pie grinned.

"Sandor's not the most social creature at best," Arya said as she pictured Sandor's expressions as he'd conversed with her parents. "But, he was so wound up and it was like everything he said just came out so much more awkward than it had to be."

"So, he was being his usual blunt self then?"

"Yep,"

"How did your sister react?"

"She seemed okay, I guess." Arya was just glad that Sansa was happy.

"That's good. I'm glad it's working out between Sandor and your sister."

"Me too."

Hot Pie gave her a glance from the side of his eye. "And, how about you?"

"What about me?"

"Have you spoken to Gendry since we ran into him the other day?"

Arya stopped eating. "No…have you?"

Hot Pie gave her another look, a look full of judgment.

"What?" she demanded.

"How long are you going to keep trying to hide it from me, Arya?" Hot Pie raised his brows tiredly. "I know you're in love with him, so you may as well stop pretending."

Arya's eyes widened. "How did you find out? Did Gendry say something to you?"

Hot Pie's mouth tilted into a smile when Arya made no attempts at denying it. "He didn't have to say anything to me. I eat lunch with you every day at school and believe it or not, I do pay attention to your moods and for the past month I've seen how you look at him differently. The way you act when you're around him as all different now, too."

"Oh, man…" Arya gulped her coffee.

"There's plenty of questions I wanna ask, including when and how you figured out that you feel like
this for Gendry, but right now I want to know what happened between you two. Why did you run away from Gendry that day at Harrenhal?"

Arya frowned. "Gendry didn't tell you anything?"

"He told me to mind my own business, and if I knew what was good for me I wouldn't ask you about it either." Hot Pie shrugged. "Obviously, I care nothing for my own self-preservation."

Arya sighed. "Long story short…I told him how I felt, and he turned me down."

"WHAT?" Hot Pie squawked, nearly toppling off his stool. "I don't believe…why would he…oh."

Hot Pie's expression went from disbelief to regretful in the space of a heartbeat.

"What's wrong, Hot Pie?" Arya stared at him intently. "Do you know something?"

It was Hot Pie's turn to sigh. "Look, Arya. There's obviously so much that I don't know, but because I care about both of you there's one thing I really have to know, and you have to promise to tell me the truth, okay?"

"I promise," Arya said without hesitation. "Ask away."

"Do you really love him?" Hot Pie asked, his eyes carefully reading every line on her face. "And, I mean honest to God, swear it on your life – do you love him? Really love him?"

Arya saw that this was a crucial moment and Hot Pie, who'd been caught between her and Gendry the whole time, and who'd seen everything unfold while lending a sympathetic ear to them both, needed a sincere answer just as much as Gendry did.

"I really do," Arya told him, unaware of how huge her grey eyes appeared at that moment. "I love Gendry."

"Good." Hot Pie's expression was serious. "That's great, Arya. I'm very happy for you."

"But…?"

"But, to be brutally honest…I don't know that there's a damned thing you could say to him that will convince him that you love him."

Arya's heart dropped, just the same way it did on the night Gendry had rejected her.

"What will it take, Hot Pie?" Arya asked with a tight desperation in her voice. "What has to happen for him to believe that what I feel for him is real?"

Hot Pie shook his head. "I don't know…maybe you could try waving a magic wand to make him snap out of his belief that you could never come to have romantic feelings for him."

"He believes that?"

"Can you blame him?" Hot Pie have her a meaningful look. "All this time he's been hurting because he believes that he'll always be second place to Jaqen in your eyes. That's not something one can easily get over, you know?"

"Yea…I know." Arya murmured into her coffee cup.

She could understand how Gendry felt, to a degree. She'd once suffered from an inferiority complex
too, having compared herself to Sansa one too many times in the past. While it was not exactly the same, she recalled how it felt to believe she would always be second best in her parents’ eyes next to perfect Sansa. It had taken her a long time to realize that she did not need to compare herself to her sister and that her parents loved her unconditionally for who she was, before she learned to love and accept the parts of her that made her different from Sansa – the parts that made her Arya.

"Maybe, just give him some time," Hot Pie suggested, "he'll come around."

"Yeah…maybe."

Was time really what Gendry needed? If he had enough time, perhaps he would eventually come to see that there was no comparing the feelings she held for him, to what she thought she felt for Jaqen. *Gendry is second to none, and I will make him believe it.*

Hot Pie sold out of goods an hour before the official end to the Food & Wine Festival, much to his utter surprise. He received inquiries from several interested parties about possible repeat orders, including the coffee roaster who was opening a café in a few weeks and seemed very enthusiastic about working with Hot Pie. Arya helped him to clean up and pack away equipment, and while she waited for him to finish speaking with the festival organizers, she was distracted by the sound of her phone ringing.

The name that appeared on the screen took her by surprise. *What does she want with me?*

"Hello," she said into the receiver warily.

"Hello, Arya," Talea Brusco greeted her. "Thanks for picking up."

"Sure…no problem." Arya's voice conveyed her bafflement, unsure why she was receiving Talea's call.

"I know you're wondering why I'm calling, so I'll make this quick." Talea took a breath and sighed, suggesting heavily that whatever she had to say would be said reluctantly. "Jaqen wants to talk to you."
Hey Peeps!

How are y'all enjoying Spring Break so far? I hope everyone's havin' a great time, because I know I am. I've just been to the King's Landing Food & Wine Festival and guess who I saw working behind the counter at a stall? Arya Stark, that's who! Had I not seen it with my own eyes I would not have believed it! She was helping out her good friend, Hot Pie, who was selling his own handmade creations under his brand, Pi. I managed to get my hands on a salted caramel éclair before they sold out, and boy was it divine!

Epic Day Out is also happening in Essos City today. The Brotherhood Without Banners are part of this year's lineup, which makes this the second major festival that our favorite as-yet-unsigned band has been invited to. You guys should be proud of yourselves – I mean you, Beric Dondarrion! LOL! If your set at the Tourney was anything to go by, I'm sure you'll rock at EDO too!

Another local favorite set to play at EDO is none other than owner and operator of Forel's Music Shop, Syrio Forel himself. If you didn't know it already, he was kind of a big deal in his day, and I'm regretting not being able make it to Essos to see him play his first gig in about ten years. If any of you will be at EDO today, please take videos of the BWB and Mssr. Forel for me!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

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Gendry

They had a gig to play at the Essos City Epic Day Out, locally known as EDO, and the Brotherhood Without Banners were among the headlining acts for the biggest outdoor music festival held in Essos City, which was located two hours away from King's Landing. Epic Day Out was dedicated to showcasing indie and unsigned musicians, in contrast to the Tourney Fields Festival which headlined famous and international artists. The vibe at EDO therefore, was infinitely more chilled than at the Tourney, and the people who attended were there for the music and not just because it was the place to be at, or be seen at.

Gendry noted that while they had the basic amenities like a dressing room and a separate zone for artists, there was no fancy tent filled with flat screens and lounges let alone a gourmet buffet. There was also no VIP area either, yet somehow he found himself having more fun than he had at the Tourney.

"It's because we're not under the same pressure like at the Tourney," Edric surmised. "Don't get me wrong, I loved the gourmet buffet as much as you did, but indie festivals like this are more our thing, I think."

"Does that mean we're going to be unsigned forever?" Gendry wondered.

"Do not let Beric hear you say that," Thoros warned them. "Ever."

Their set was slated for two in the afternoon and with a couple of hours yet to wait, Gendry and Edric chose to pass the time by hitting the food trucks and watching the acts that played before them.
"Where are Hot Pie and Arya today?" Edric asked as they ate pulled pork sandwiches at a picnic table covered by a large umbrella.

"Hot Pie has a booth at the Food & Wine Festival back in King's Landing and last I heard Arya was going to help him man the booth," Gendry replied with his eyes fixed on a point somewhere ahead of him.

"For real? Arya Stark is going to be working behind the counter?"

"Apparently so,"

"Man! It sucks it had to be on the same day. It would have been fun to see that." Edric shook his head. "Have you seen either of them at all this week?"

"You mean, to hang out? No." Gendry wiped his hands on a napkin and took sip of his freshly blended watermelon juice. "Between band rehearsals and working at Tobho's shop I've been kinda busy."

Gendry purposely failed to mention the part about bumping into Arya and Hot Pie at Harrenhal Mall some days before, or how Arya had turned and fled with barely a word after seeing him.

"What was that thing about Arya running away from you…that thing mentioned on Gossip Spyder's post?" Edric asked, almost predictably.

"An apparition." Gendry forced himself not to grimace. "Who knows what that person thought they saw?"

Edric did not look satisfied with his answer, but he let it slide, thought not entirely without comment. "Fine, stay all mysterious and shit."

"It's nothing worth mentioning," Gendry said truthfully.

"If you say so," Edric shrugged. "You and Arya have not had the most straightforward relationship in a long time, but whatever it is this time I'm sure you two will figure it out."

Gendry could only hope that he was right. Edric had hit the nail on the head about his relationship with Arya. Things always got complicated between them, yet somehow they'd found a way to remain friends. However, as their feelings for one another continued to languish within the hazy not-together-but-more-than-friends zone, it was getting increasingly harder to keep their friendship intact. As it was, he was still consumed by the feeling that he'd just made the biggest mistake of his life by ignoring his instinct and turning Arya down.

"I want to be with you."

Arya's words had, and continued to make his pulse accelerate with anticipation, excited for the possibility of finally having the kind of relationship with Arya that he'd dreamt of for so long. Yet at the same time, the voice of doubt and as yet unhealed heartbreak was shouting warnings inside his head. How do you know for sure that she really has feelings for you? Would she still feel this way about you if Jaqen wasn't leaving? You've been hurt badly before, don't let her hurt you again. His heart was weighing in on the argument too, and making a very convincing case in Arya's favor. What if it's real and she truly wants to be with you? What if you miss this chance to be with her because you're too much of a coward to take a chance? She took you by surprise that night, give her another chance to tell you how she feels when you're calmer. You need to trust her. Believe her. You owe it to yourself. Happiness is right in front of you, you just need to put your faith in her.
His libido too had something to say in Arya's favor, refusing to let him forget about the feel of her kisses against his lips, the weight of her on his lap and the softness of her skin under his hands. Arya may have initiated their intimacy that night, but it was he who took it that next step. He'd kissed Arya before, but she had never responded to him as freely or as eagerly as she had that night. She had been holding nothing back, neither had he, and in those brief moments they'd been consumed by each other he had glimpsed what it could be – how perfect they could be together. *It can all be yours*, said his heart once again, *just reach out and grab it.*

"But, *can* I really do that?" he muttered to himself quietly.

He was incredibly sensitive about feeling second to Jaqen, and he feared that if he were to get together with Arya he would find himself constantly comparing himself to her ex-boyfriend. He feared that he would always feel second best, and that he wouldn't be able to get over the fact that Arya had chosen Jaqen before him. What he feared even more was that his doubts would one day grow to become something dark and destructive.

"Are you ready to go back to the dressing room?" Edric asked him, breaking into his thoughts. "Beric will start having a breakdown if we're missing for too long."

"Yeah." Gendry finished his drink and mentally peppeled himself up for the show ahead. "Let's go."

Beric was dressed and waiting for them when they entered the dressing room, but to Gendry and Edric's surprise their leader was sitting on the couch quietly chilling with Tom and Thoros. There was an hour before their show, giving Gendry and Edric plenty of time to change outfits and fix their hair before the *Brotherhood* were called to the stage.

The number of concert goers at EDO was probably half that of the crowds at the Tourney, but by no means did that mean it was a poor turnout. The mosh pit was jam packed and the audience stretched right towards the furthest barriers of the concert stage area. The noise and the cheering that welcomed the *Brotherhood* as they took to the stage was also among the most energized they had ever received. Beric had chosen specific songs for their line-up that day, motivated to play different numbers from what they had performed at the Tourney, including new music as wells as revamped older material that Beric had not deemed ready for public consumption until now. Gendry found himself singing more because he and Beric produced a vocal combo that was out of this world, and that it would be a sure hit with the ladies. Seeing that the first ten rows in front of the stage seemed to be predominantly female fans, all screaming his name, Gendry had no choice but to believe it.

At the end of their set they returned to the dressing room to change and retrieve their equipment, with plans to stick around to catch the remaining shows for the day. Beric was determined to schmooze with the music industry influencers and heavyweights who were in the audience, and he invited the guys to join him in the performers lounge when they were ready.

"Whose show are you waiting to see?" Thoros asked Gendry.

"Syrio Forel's show," Gendry replied. "I've heard a lot about him being a classical guitar virtuoso, but I've never actually heard him play."

"Apparently, performing in public tires him out too much, so he doesn't do it often." Tom told them.

"Now I'm really looking forward to it." Gendry checked the time on his watch to make sure they wouldn't miss it. "Syrio has the best guitar shop in this city. It would be strange if he didn't know his way around a fretboard."

As it turned out Syrio Forel had been a recording artist himself, once upon a time. Having released
six studio albums in his twenty years as a professional artist, he also toured the classical music scene around the world and played in some of the most prestigious concert halls in front of the most discerning of audiences. He eventually chose to retire from the scene due to health reasons, taking up a teaching position at the conservatory for a few years before eventually opening his guitar store. The crowd that had gathered to watch Syrio's show was an eclectic mix of people, ranging in age from teenagers to octogenarians, though on closer inspection it seemed to Gendry that a significant portion were actually women in their forties and fifties.

"Check that out!"

Thoros discreetly pointed to a silver-haired grandmother nearby who was wearing a t-shirt bearing the handsome visage of a decades younger Syrio Forel. Looking around, they saw many more women wearing t-shirts with Syrio's face on them.

"Syrio still has this many fangirls?" Edric laughed. "He's my new hero."

"Something to aspire to, hey gentlemen?" Thoros wiggled his brows.

Syrio was incredible to watch on stage and listening to him play on his classical guitar was like having angels playing harps in his ears, Gendry thought. The man knew his way around a fretboard, and then some. At one point Syrio was joined on the stage by a band of silver-haired musicians to accompany him as he played a medley of his greatest hits, and by the time the last note had been played the seemingly gentle grandmas in the audience were screaming and cheering wilder than any fangirls had ever cheered for the Brotherhood.

"Something to aspire to, indeed." Gendry had chuckled to himself. They all joined Beric at the performers lounge after Syrio's show, where Gendry shook hands with a couple of guys who worked for an independent label, and with a woman who hosted a radio show broadcast on a popular FM station right across the west coast, known for playing indie and alternative rock. Gendry was pleased to note that they seemed genuinely interested in him as a musician, and not just because of his Baratheon ties.

Food and drinks were ordered, Beric successfully convinced the radio show DJ to play one of their tracks in her one of her up-coming shows, and the guys from the indie label agreed to a formal meeting with Beric down the track, exchanging contact details in the process. Everyone was in high spirits and were making a toast to their future success when Gendry's phone began to buzz, and he excused himself to answer the call from Tobho.

"Ellen wants to know if you'll be back in time for dinner," his foster-dad told him, "she's making lasagna."

"Yes!" Gendry exclaimed. "I'll be back by eight the latest. I am not missing out on Ellen's lasagna."

"I'll tell her that." Tobho chuckled. "Drive carefully on your way back."

Gendry hung up and put his phone back in his pocket before making his way to rejoin his friends. The marquee designated as the performers zone had been set up close to the concert stage, similar to the VIP area at the Tourney, but with less bells and whistles. Gendry had to re-enter the marquee via a hidden doorway not accessible to the general public and there were few people in the area.

As he approached the doorway a tall figure walked through it, easily recognizable with his platinum and red streaked hair. Gendry came to an abrupt stop, as did Jaqen H'ghar.

"I had a feeling we would encounter one another sooner or later," Jaqen said, eyeing him coolly.
The doorway was narrow, and with no way around him, Gendry returned his gaze just as coldly.

"I didn't know you guys were performing today," he remarked.

"We are not." Jaqen shook his head. "I am here at Syrio's invitation."

"Give my regards to Syrio. His show was awesome."

"I will be sure to pass it on."

Gendry assumed the conversation was over, expecting Jaqen to step aside and let him through, but the guy remained standing in the doorway.

"Care to move?" Gendry glared at him.

"Arya is not with you today," Jaqen stated, puzzled.

"No, she's not," Gendry said, almost defensively. "She's not bound to me."

"You are not...together?" Jaqen continued, still looking puzzled.

"Together?" Gendry echoed, before he grasped Jaqen's meaning. "That's none of your business."

"Together?" Gendry echoed, before he grasped Jaqen's meaning. "That's none of your business."

Jaqen's eyes narrowed at his tone. "How is she?"

Gendry continued to glare at him. "Why do you care?"

Jaqen had no right to be asking after Arya, in his opinion. This was the guy who'd chosen fame at the cost of his relationship with Arya. This was the guy who had come between him and Arya in the first place. This was the guy who was the cause of all of Gendry's current self-doubt – if it hadn't been for this guy, Arya's heart would not have been broken, and she would never have come looking to Gendry to fill the gap in her heart that Jaqen had left behind.

Jaqen seemed confused by Gendry's hostility. "Perhaps we should talk. You seem to be misunderstanding something."

"What could you possibly have to say that I would want to hear?" Gendry scoffed. "In case you couldn't tell, I don't like you, and I don't think very much of you as a person, let alone as a man."

Jaqen's eyes now mirrored Gendry's hostility, his own distaste for Gendry evident in the curl of his lip.

"I no longer need to hold back, so go on and keep insulting me so that I might have a reason to hit you."

"You're saying you held back that time, for Arya's sake?" Gendry smirked. "The gloves are off now that you're no longer with her, huh?"

"Just what is it that you are accusing me of?" Jaqen demanded.

"You seriously don't know?" Gendry's eyes narrowed further. "You're the one who broke up with Arya and you have the nerve to ask how she is? How do you think she feels knowing you dumped her so you could become a famous rockstar? Tell me, were you ever truly serious about her? Or, were you just really good at pretending?"

Jaqen looked dumbfounded. "Is that what Arya told you?"
"She didn't have to say anything," Gendry snarled. "You should know her better than that. I couldn't work out why the two of you broke up so suddenly, but when I heard you were moving to New York it all made sense. There's no room for Arya in the new life you'll be leading, so you got rid of her. That's what you did."

"You have no idea what you are talking about," Jaqen growled angrily.

"Don't I? Then maybe you can tell my why Arya walked around for weeks with shadows under her eyes? She wasn't herself for ages and she only just started to smile again. Still, I can see that she's still struggling inside, and it's all because of you."

"You are," Jaqen began with the most condescending smile on his face, "by far the dumbest fuck I have ever met."

"What did you call me?" Gendry's blood began to boil.

"I called you a dumb fuck," Jaqen repeated. "You really are so stupid that I almost pity you."

Their voices had been steadily rising and drawing an audience. Both of them were recognized and word quickly spread throughout the marquee. Moments later Edric and Beric were pushing their way through the gathering crowd, as was Ky, the bassist for the Faceless Men.

"Stupid? I saw right through you from the very beginning," Gendry hissed. "I knew Arya was making a huge mistake when she hooked up with you, and I was right."

"What did you say?" Jaqen demanded, his voice coming out dangerously low, clearly triggered by something Gendry had said.

"I said that you are the biggest mistake Arya ever made in her life--"

Gendry had barely uttered the insult when Jaqen's fist connected with the side of his face. There was a gasp and shouts from the people who'd gathered to watch while Gendry stumbled backwards into the wall behind him, caught off-guard by the swiftness of the blow.

"Arya and I were not a mistake!" Jaqen bit out, his voice laden with emotion, and tight with restraint. "Never say that again."

Ky moved and grabbed Jaqen's elbow to hold him back, while Edric was suddenly next to Gendry with a firm grip on his arm, beginning to pull him away from the scene in case he chose to hit back.

"Come on, man," Edric murmured, "let's get out of here."

"I still have things to say to you," Jaqen declared, straining against his friend's hold. "Though you do not deserve her and I truly loathe having to be the one to say it, but I will tell you this for her sake."

"Then spit it out!" Gendry snapped, refusing to allow himself to rub his aching jaw, not wanting to show weakness in front of Arya's ex-boyfriend.

"Arya broke up with me because of you," Jaqen stated with a bitter expression on his face. "There is no other reason."

Gendry frowned. "I don't understand."

"It was always you," Jaqen continued, "whatever she felt for me, her feelings for you were always stronger. Do you understand now?"
Gendry understood the words that Jaqen was saying, but comprehending them in the scheme of all he had thought was true was rendering him numb and near speechless.

"How?" he managed to utter.

"That is a question you must ask her."

"Is…is this true?"

"It is your loss if you do not believe me," Jaqen said with a careless shrug.

"But…she chose you, over me." Gendry shook his head, still unable to grasp the reality of the matter.

"She did," Jaqen agreed, his tone now softening somewhat. "And, she even came to love me in her own way, if you must know the truth. But for reasons that escape me she seems to feel strongly about you, and I must accept that what she felt for me is not the same as what she feels for you. Must I spell it out for you any clearer, or are you still too stupid to understand?"

Gendry overlooked the continued dig at his intelligence. "No…I get it."

"Then we are done here."

Jaqen gave him a look of disdain before finally allowing his friend to lead him away.

"Hey!" Gendry called him back.

"What?" Jaqen spoke over his shoulder without turning around.

"I never did apologize for hitting you in the face that time."

Jaqen eventually turned to look at him, sparing a brief glance at his own hand that he'd used to punch Gendry's face moments before. In the end, he nodded once in Gendry's direction with a pointed looking at his reddened jaw.

"Let us say that we are even."

Jaqen finally walked away with his friend close behind him. Gendry did not relax his guard until Jaqen's back disappeared from his view.

"Are you okay, dude?" Edric asked him as the watching crowd began to disperse.

"I'm fine," Gendry replied, allowing himself to touch his jaw, wincing.

Jaqen had not held back when he'd punched him. The smug bastard was lightning fast too. Unlike Joffrey, Jaqen knew how to throw a real punch.

"Who started it?" Beric asked. "You're lucky security hasn't thrown us out."

"It doesn't matter," Gendry shook his head.

"You sure you're okay?" Beric repeated Edric's question. "That was a solid smack to your face, man."

Gendry started laughing then, beginning with a quiet chuckle that grew into a full-fledged belly laugh.
"What's so funny?" Edric watched him, concerned. "Did Jaqen knock a screw loose in your head or something?"

"It's nothing." Gendry held onto his side. "I've just realized that he was right. I really am the dumbest fuck on the planet."

He'd been looking at the situation all wrong, and it took Arya's ex-boyfriend to make him see that. The irony was not lost on him, but for the meantime he had what could potentially be the most meaningful moment of his teenage life thus far ahead of him.

*It's my move,* he thought.

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**Jaqen**

The knuckles on his right hand were still hurting, even a day after he'd rammed his fist into Gendry's face. He'd only ever punched boxing bags before, but he owed Gendry for the busted lip he'd suffered from their run in at the *Heart of Fire* all those months back, and punching Gendry in the face, finally getting back at the pretty boy, was much more satisfying than hitting a boxing bag.

"I did what was right," he told himself, not necessarily referring to the punch.

Clearly, Arya had not told Gendry any of the details about their breakup, and while he was grateful for her silence, it had allowed Gendry to jump to his own conclusions. All of which were wrong, and he suspected that the misunderstandings were causing more issues between Arya and Gendry. He had been loathed to reveal the truth to Gendry, but he could not stand idly by and allow Gendry's bull-headedness to cause Arya unnecessary anguish.

He had grieved after their breakup. To a degree a part of him still mourned the loss of the intimacy he'd shared with Arya. However, he was a pragmatist and it made no sense to him to wallow in self-pity and heartbreak when he needed to be strong and whole to face the challenges that were heading his way. Professionally he needed his wits about him if he was going to go head-to-head with the recording industry heavyweights, plus the guys in the band were relying on him. In the weeks and months since his split with Arya he had done nothing but work, composing like mad because heartache seemed to fuel his creativity, so he'd used that fuel until it was nearly all burnt out. What he was left with now, what he chose to keep, were only the good things about his time with his lovely, doe-eyed girl.

He had seen her briefly at the Tourney, his eyes clashing with hers across the crowd. Her eyes had been wide with shock at first, perhaps in surprise at seeing him so unexpectedly, perhaps with guilt as she'd stood beside Gendry in the audience, but he had not wanted that wounded look to be his last memory of her face, so he'd performed as he never had before. He'd wanted Arya to see that he was okay, that she didn't need to bear any guilt towards him, singing with more emotion than he ever had and hoping that maybe she would see that he was moving on…and that he would be just fine.

By the end of their final song Jaqen had met Arya's eyes again, and he'd watched as her expression morphed from stricken, to hopeful, and it was more than he could have wished for. Hope, meant that she too was looking ahead, and not wallowing in the past with guilt and regret.

"Jaqen, are you awake, my boy?"

Jaqen snapped out of his thoughts as Uncle Otto knocked on his bedroom door.

"Come in, uncle."
Uncle Otto stepped into his room a moment later, carefully stepping around the suitcases and boxes laying open on his bedroom floor, evidence that Jaqen really was moving to New York in a few days, and out of Umma and Uncle Otto's house.

"Your Umma wanted me to check on how your packing is coming along," his uncle said as he eyed the mess of clothes, books and other personal effects strewn over Jaqen's bed, desk and floor. "She wants to help, you see…but your aunt says she may end up crying."

Jaqen sighed, already missing his aunt and uncle. They had raised him as their own for sixteen years, and never once had he been away from their side for more than a few days at a time.

"I am not leaving the country, uncle. I will come to visit often, and you can both come to New York to see me any time."

"Your Umma knows this," Uncle Otto agreed, "I know this…but, you know what we mean."

Jaqen did. "Thank you, uncle. For everything you and Umma and have done for me, thank you."

Uncle Otto patted him on the shoulder affectionately, before he shook off the nostalgia and smiled.

"So, do you need any help?"

Jaqen looked at the mess around him helplessly. "I think I may need some more boxes."

Uncle Otto chuckled. "I will go and pick some up for you today."

"I would appreciate that,"

"You are going to see Syrio this morning, correct?"

"Yes." Jaqen checked the time. "I had better go now, in fact."

"All right. Give him my regards and apologize again that I wasn't able to see his show yesterday."

"I shall tell him."

Jaqen relished the drive to Trident's Bend, wishing that he could take his Jeep with him to New York, but the apartment that he would be sharing with Ky, Jorge and Izembaro came only with one car park, and when the guys had drawn straws for it, Izzy had won. Izzy had also agreed to chauffer them around when required as part of the deal.

"This is really happening!" Ky had shouted in excitement when they had received their travel itinerary.

*By this time next week, we will all be in New York City,* Jaqen thought.

He arrived at Trident's Bend a little past eleven, parking his Jeep in a bay opposite *The Hollow.* As he got out he caught a glimpse inside of the burger joint, unable to help but recall the day he had first met Arya. She'd worn her hair in a long ponytail back then, and dressed like a teenage boy, but there'd been no disguising that she was in fact, quite lovely. He began to walk away, heading towards Syrio's shop, but he'd barely taken three steps when his feet came to a sudden stop on the pavement. Suddenly he was looking right into a pair of grey eyes, set in a face that was different from the memory he'd just been picturing, yet the same. The long ponytail had been replaced with a stylishly cut emerald green ombre, and the baggy clothes exchanged for fitted denim and a leather jacket…and she was lovelier than ever.
"Jaqen," Arya greeted him, somewhat breathlessly.

It was, he realized, the expression on her face that was different. She had been scowling at him the first time he had met her, but now she was offering him a smile instead. The smile was unsteady, unsure, but warm nonetheless.

"Arya," he returned, "how are you?"

"I've been okay. How are you?"

"Just fine," he replied, and looked around her.

"I'm alone," she told him, as though she'd read his mind. "I, uh…came to do some shopping."

She was clearly lying, but it was not his business why she was there. Still, she had appeared before him right at the moment he had been thinking of her, and right when he'd been hoping for the chance to tell her what was truly on his mind.

"In that case, do you have a moment to spare? May we speak a little while?"

"Of course," she agreed right away. "Um, do you want to sit inside and get something to drink?"

Arya pointed to the café nearby. Jaqen indicated for her to lead the way, and shortly the two of them were seated across each other with cups of coffee on the table between them. Neither of them said anything for some minutes, but the silence was neither awkward nor uncomfortable. Jaqen had not been certain how he would feel if he ever faced her again, but he had not expected to feel as calm as he did then. The near-overwhelming heartache that he’d experienced in the first weeks after their breakup had dulled for the most part, though the ache that remained in his chest was greatly attributed to the fact that he had missed her.

"I am glad we ran into one another today," he said at length, "I had been hoping I would get the chance to say a proper farewell to you before I left."

"I heard that you guys will be leaving sooner that you had planned." Arya toyed with the handle of her coffee cup.

"That is correct," Jaqen confirmed with a nod.

"When are you leaving?"

Arya's eyes flicked over his face, perhaps noticing the shadows under his eyes. He had been very busy in the weeks leading up to the move, and he admitted that he could have slept more, or eaten better.

"This coming Thursday," he replied.

"Thursday," Arya repeated with some surprise. "So soon."

"Red God Records wanted us to relocate as soon as possible, and we saw no real reason to wait. Jorge and Izembaro have sorted out their situations, and Ky and I will complete our senior year by correspondence. Everything just fell into place."

"How are your aunt and uncle handling the fact that you're moving to the other side of the country?" Arya wondered.

Jaqen smiled wistfully. "They are very supportive, as they have been with everything I have done,
and I know they are proud of what we have achieved. But, as you can expect, I know they will miss me."

"They can always make a trip out to see you,"

"That is precisely what I suggested." Jaqen nodded. "They both could do with time away from the House of Black & White, so a holiday out east may be good for them."

"I'm really happy for you, Jaqen." Arya smiled at him, genuinely pleased for him. "You're about to realize your dream. You, Ky, Jorge and Izzy have worked so hard for this, and you all deserve it. The Faceless Men are awesome!"

"Thank you."

"Just make sure you take care of yourself." Arya's eyes wandered over his face again. "I know you're a workaholic, but sleep and food are necessary to life, okay?"

Jaqen chuckled, touched by her concern. He would miss her.

"Arya," he began again, then paused as he tried to find the right words to express his feelings while she gazed at him expectantly. "I really am glad to see you today."

"I'm glad to see you too," she said quietly.

"I wanted to tell you that despite the way things ended between us, I do not regret that you and I got together. We may not fully understand why, but I believe that Fate had her reasons when she chose to bring us together, no matter the length of time. You have changed me…as I believe I have changed you. I also want you to know that I am no longer angry."

She appeared surprised, but it seemed he had opened a gateway of sorts, because she was shortly confessing her own thoughts and feelings to him.

"Jaqen, I truly am sorry for what I put you through at the end." Arya's expression became remorseful. "I'm not making excuses for what I did or how I behaved, especially on the night of the auction, but I know that I hurt you…when I think of how you had to find out about it through photos and hearing people talk about it, I can't even begin to tell you how awful I feel. You didn't deserve that."

Jaqen held his breath. Arya still did not know that he was there that night, but she did not need to know how his world had seemed to crumble before his eyes as he'd watched her walk away on Gendry's arm. It would change nothing, but he was glad to hear her apology.

"…It doesn't have to be now," Arya continued to say, "but one day, I hope that you can forgive me."

He was ready to accept her apology, too.

"You have it," he said without hesitation. "You have my forgiveness. I told you that I am no longer angry, and I meant it. I have done a great deal of thinking and reflecting on what has happened, and it will do neither of us any good to remain angry about things we cannot change."

"You are amazing, Jaqen." Arya looked at him with wide eyes. "I always knew it, but you really are amazing…and I can't thank you enough. Your forgiveness means a lot to me."

"And, it means a lot to me that we are sitting here conversing normally and smiling as we are," he told her truthfully. "It would have haunted me if the last words we were to exchange face to face
were to be, well...the things we said, that day by the river. It means a great deal more to me that we may part as friends."

Arya's expression could not hide how pleased she seemed by his words. She grinned at him widely, baring all her little pointy teeth.

"Friends," she agreed, "I would like that too."

They talked for a while after that, unencumbered by feelings and thoughts neither believed they would get to say to the other. Arya told him about her experiences working behind the counter at the Food & Wine Festival, while he told her about what he was most looking forward to seeing and doing in New York. He liked to think that this was part of some cathartic process, but he was honest enough to admit to himself that he was building his memories of her, soaking in her presence and drinking in her image because he did not know when he was likely to see her again.

Before he knew it, both of their coffee cups were empty, and he was running seriously late for his appointment with Syrio. Their time was up. Jaqen sighed and prepared to stand from the table.

"You have to go," Arya stated, observing his movements.

He nodded, reluctantly. "I must go."

"Good luck with everything," she told him. "I'll buy all your music, and...and I'll go to your concerts."

"I shall look forward to seeing you in the crowd."

"Then, this is goodbye."

There seemed such a definiteness in Arya's tone that Jaqen was compelled to shake his head.

"It is goodbye, for now," he corrected her. "Let us just say, see you again soon. Okay?"

Arya smiled at him softly, and he allowed himself to believe that part of her would miss him too. He stood up before he got too emotional, and Arya followed suit, standing to face him at the edge of the table, still wearing the gentle smile that would remain in his mind long after he had walked away.

"See you again soon, Jaqen."

His friends would probably call him foolish for still harboring a soft spot for her, but sometimes there was just no explaining the ways of the heart. There would, he acknowledged, always be a spot in his heart for her. The pragmatist in him understood that he and Arya were in different stages in terms of maturity and station in life, but he couldn't help but wonder how things could have been between them if they had met at another time and place.

Again, he reminded himself that Arya was only fourteen and he was barely nineteen. Both of them had lots of growing up yet to do. He was still discovering things about himself he never knew, like his capacity to love a girl beyond the romantic kind of love. He had also believed that Fate only had two faces; black and white. Yet he was coming to learn that in reality, Fate liked to wear many faces in a myriad of colors.

Without a doubt Arya was making similar discoveries about herself. If Gendry needed to be in her life in order for her to grow, then so be it. She still had so much to learn about relationships and what it meant to truly love. And, if he was not destined to play a further part in her life, then Jaqen was willing to accept it. However, if Fate was kind and their paths ever crossed again, years from now in
another time and place…if she still thought about him…if part of her still wanted him, then nothing and nobody would be able to stop him.

Jaqen finally returned her smile, conveying his affection, regret and hope in one expression that left her wide-eyed.

"See you again soon, lovely girl."

With a last burning look, Jaqen walked out of the cafe…and, he did not look back.

Arya

Her shoulders felt lighter than they had in many weeks, finally unburdened by the guilt she had been carrying around about her breakup with Jaqen.

"Jaqen wants to talk to you," Talea Brusco had told her over the phone the previous day. "I'll admit that I don't know everything that went down between you and Jaqen before you broke up, but I hate that you hurt him like you did. I personally don't get why he would want to see you again, but it seems to be important to him so I'm going to make sure he gets his wish. He's going to be at Trident's Bend tomorrow morning, and if you still have a shred of decency in you, then you'll be there to meet him."

Arya had been stunned by Talea's demand, but she'd agreed to it because she'd sensed an urgency in Talea's tone.

"Don't tell him that I'm the one that told you to meet him," Talea had added, "he'll kill me if he knew I was meddling."

"He doesn't know I'll be there?"

"His pride won't let him call you," Talea had said with a sigh. "If I don't this, it'll never happen."

Arya had been apprehensive about appearing in front of Jaqen unannounced, ambushing him as it were, but she now had no regrets about coming to Trident's Bend that day. She and Jaqen were able to clear the air between them, and she hoped that he was able to attain some kind of closure from their meeting, just as she had. In the end she was able to farewell him, still awed by his intensity and the promise of greatness she saw in his smile.

Afterwards, Arya had stayed at the cafe long enough to watch Jaqen leave, then she too had left, having achieved what she'd come to do, unexpectedly and remarkably. Now, if only my issues with Gendry could be resolved just as miraculously, I'll be one happy girl, Arya thought. But, miracles rarely happen when you want them to.

Arya had her phone in her hand about to order a ride when it began to buzz in her palm. She nearly dropped it onto the concrete when the name of the caller came up on the screen.

"Breathe, she told herself. Stay cool!

"Hello,"

"Arya," Gendry's voice was husky as he'd said her name. "Are you busy right now?"

"No, I'm free," she replied, unable to hide her curiosity. "What's up?"

"I need to see you," he stated.
Arya heard something in his voice. There was excitement in his tone, combined with another emotion she felt too uncertain to name.

"Where are you?" she asked him.

"On my way back home from Tobho's shop," he replied, "I was helping out at work this morning. Can I meet you somewhere? I really do need to see you."

"I can be at your house in twenty minutes, if that's okay with you?"

"That's perfect," he said, and Arya would swear he'd been smiling. "I'll see you soon."

Arya ordered an Uber and five minutes later she was on her way to The Forge Estates with her mind racing a hundred miles a minute wondering why Gendry needed to see her so badly. Of course, she wanted to imagine that it was because he'd changed his mind about them, but the memory of his rejection still stung and she tried not to get her hopes up. What other reason could it be? If it wasn't something this important he would have just told me over the phone.

It was with her heart in her throat that she found herself standing at the bottom of Gendry's driveway, nervously looking towards the knight statues that flanked his front door. By the time she'd walked to the doorstep she realized her mouth had gone dry. The wooden door that had been carved with hunting scenes swung open before she could reach for the doorbell, and all of a sudden she was tilting her head, looking up into Gendry's deep blue eyes.

"Hi," she squeaked.

"Hey," he greeted her, "come on in."

Arya stepped over the threshold and waited as he closed the door after her. Gendry was dressed casually in jeans and a dark blue sweatshirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His hair, as it always seemed to be in recent months, had been styled and slicked back from his face, but at some point he must have raked his hand through it. He looked gorgeous, hotter than ever actually, she thought. Gendry in a suit was a sight to behold, but to her he was most attractive in denim and cotton, unpretentious and unadorned.

"Thanks for coming over," Gendry said as he turned to face her, and only then did Arya notice the shadowy discoloration that marred his left cheek.

"What happened to your face?" she asked in alarm.

Gendry reached up to rub his jaw. "Oh, this? I just had the sense knocked into me."

"Huh?"

"It's nothing," Gendry said with a shrug. "Can I get you a drink or something?"

"Just water, please." Arya desperately needed to soothe her parched throat.

"Sure."

Arya followed him through the hall that ran the length of the house, expecting to see members of his foster family around, but no one else appeared to be at home. She stood by the kitchen island as Gendry opened the fridge to retrieve a bottle of spring water, which he subsequently poured into a
"Thanks," she said when she accepted the glass from him, feeling a tingle run from her hand all the way up her arm when his fingers briefly brushed hers. "Where's...where's everyone?"

"Tobho was still at the shop when I left earlier, and Ellen took the kids to a Pirates & Princesses themed birthday party for a cousin of theirs who is turning six."

"That's cute." Arya smiled. "You didn't want to go with them?"

"They didn't have a Queen Elsa costume in my size, unfortunately," Gendry had replied with a look of dejection on his face so comical that Arya was forced to laugh, causing him to raise his brow. "What, you don't think I could rock an Elsa costume?"

"I'm sure you'd make a bangin' Elsa." Arya continued to laugh. "You'd probably also make all the kids cry."

"You're probably right," Gendry agreed, and laughed with her.

A curious fluttering had begun in her chest as Gendry continued to smile in her direction, once again feeding her hopes that he had changed his mind about them, increasingly making it harder for her to curb her excitement. Arya finished her drink and set the glass back onto the countertop, noting that Gendry's smile was fading into a serious, determined expression.

"We need to talk," he said, the barest hint of nervousness in his voice. "Let's head out into the garden, okay?"

Stepping out of the French doors leading out from the kitchen into the sun-drenched garden behind the house, Arya marveled at the masses of flowers that bloomed abundantly in well maintained beds. Gendry led her to the swing-seat that overlooked a sunny corner of the yard filled with red, burgundy and fuschia roses, some as big as saucers.

"The flowers are gorgeous," she felt compelled to say, not usually impressed by such things.

"I'll let Ellen know. She's always wanted a garden like this, but we never had room for more than a few potted plants in the apartment complex back in Flea Bottom. Now, she's out here working on the garden most afternoons."

Gendry sat beside her on the swing, planting his feet on the ground firmly so that his weight wouldn't cause them to sway excessively. Perhaps she was too aware of him, but suddenly he seemed larger than normal. With him being so close to her she could feel his warmth against the left side of her body, his scent filling her nostrils with a warm earthiness that was entirely his. He smells so, so good! Arya thought. She recalled the night of her birthday party and how she had sat in this very swing with him, remembering how she had so easily wrapped her arms around his waist without regard for consequence as she'd thanked him for organizing her party, amazed she'd once been able to touch him so spontaneously.

"It seems like such a long time ago now," Gendry suddenly said, "your birthday party, I meant. I was just thinking about that night."

"It was a great night, wasn't it?"

Arya was not surprised that he was thinking about her party, too. She remembered how unhappy she'd been about moving to King's Landing, recalling her many misgivings about the relocation at the time. But meeting Gendry, Hot Pie and subsequently all the guys from the Brotherhood had been
the ray of light in her otherwise gloomy outlook. It was the first time she had believed that moving south was not such a bad thing and the party that Gendry had thrown for her had been pivotal in that regard.

However, there was one other reason why the night had been so memorable for her, and she wondered if the memory would have the same significance to Gendry, as it now did to her.

"It was an awesome night," Gendry agreed with a nod. "But, I do have one regret from that night."

Arya tilted her head to look at him, taken aback by his comment. "What would that be?"

Gendry met her gaze, his blue eyes stormy as they searched her face. "I kissed you that night. Do you remember?"

Her mouth gaped, because the kiss was the very memory she was remembering. It was the first kiss she had ever received from a boy who wasn't family, and the first kiss between them that had hinted at what they could become, brief and chaste though it had been. Had she recognized what those tendrils of something hot and promising had signified, things between could have turned out so differently.

"Of course, I do," Arya replied, shocked that he even had to ask. "But, why would you regret that?"

"Because I lost my nerve," he told her. "I held back. If I could go back and do things over again, I'd do it properly...like this."

Things seemed to happen in slow motion then, but though time appeared to have slowed down Arya found herself unable to move or speak as Gendry lowered his head down to hers. She felt his arm slip around her waist while his other hand curved behind her neck, his palm cradling the base of her head. There was no hesitancy in his kiss when his mouth met hers, only a vivid need to convey to her the emotions he couldn't express with words.

His tongue found hers, and Arya snapped out of her daze when she felt him shiver against her, responding by looping her arms around his neck so that she could pull him closer and wind her tongue with his. Gendry's arm tightened around her, just as she felt the hum of his sigh against her lips. She knew then that somehow, she'd been gifted a miracle. She knew then...that this was just the beginning. Of the kisses they had shared before, this marked the first time that both knew exactly where they stood with each other. Gendry wanted her, there was no mistaking it, just as she wanted him. And the realization had her trembling in his arms.

When he pulled back to look at her face, she saw that his expression was fierce.

"This is how I should have kissed you all those months ago." Gendry pressed his forehead against hers. "If I had kissed you like this, then right from the start you would have known how I felt for you. I know that we can't change what's happened, but from now on...it's you and me, Arya."

"Yes!" Arya's heart did a somersault in her chest. "It's you and me, Gendry. As long as you want me!"

"I almost can't believe this is happening right now." Gendry pulled her head to his chest and squeezed her body tight against him. "I thought I was ready to give up on you...on us, but I really wasn't. I was so far from getting over you...and fuck, holding you like this just feels so damn right!"

Arya returned the pressure of his hug, happily burying her face into his chest and breathing in the earthy scent of him. "It all starts now. Everything starts now. And, just so you know...I'm never letting go."
"Is that a threat or a promise?" Gendry chuckled.

"It's a threat, of course."

"Of course, it is. I should have known not to expect any less from you."

"Think you can handle me?" Arya tilted her head back up to look at him, joking, but mostly serious.
"I'm a handful and a half, and I tend to make a mess of things without even trying. I also eat a lot and require food at least every couple of hours."

"And here I thought I was getting myself a girlfriend, not a pet."

"Gendry!" Arya poked him in the ribs, which made him yelp.

"Okay, okay!" Gendry laughed, grabbing her hand to prevent further pokes. "I want all of you. Got that? I know you're a huge pain, but that's part of who you are...and I fell for all of what makes you, you."

"That's exactly how I feel about you," Arya said, suddenly feeling choked up. "I took for granted all of the things about you that I ended up falling for. I'm never making that mistake again. As long as I'm with you, I won't ever take you for granted. And, I want to say I'm sorry for how I treated you. I'm going to do everything I can to make sure I never hurt you like that again."

"I'm sorry, too." Gendry's grip on her hands loosened, and slowly he changed his hold so that their fingers twined together. "I want to say that I'm sorry about what I said to you that night on the cliff. I made a lot of assumptions about you and Jaqen, and I said some things that were terrible and completely unfair. I was wrong."

Arya didn't know what had happened to cause the turnaround in him. He'd been so adamant that night that he was no longer interested in a romantic relationship with her, convinced that she was seeking him out as a filler for Jaqen. There were so many questions between them, but at that moment her focus was ensuring that Gendry understood – to the point that there could be no room for doubt – who was the sole occupier of her heart.

"I meant it when I said that I truly want to be with you. You know that, right?"

Gendry nodded. "I know that now. I was an idiot for not believing you, and an even bigger idiot for doubting you, or your intentions."

"There's only you for me." Her eyes bore into his, wanting him to see her heart through her eyes.
"Deep down, it has always been you, and I'm so sorry I didn't realize it before...before I caused you so much unnecessary pain."

"You're not solely at fault," Gendry said quietly, "I let my jealousy get the best of me more than once, and I couldn't leave you alone even when I knew I should. Subconsciously or otherwise, I made things difficult for you and Jaqen, and I'm apologizing for that."

"Subconsciously, or otherwise...when it came to what really mattered, you mattered the most." Arya's voice shook as she confessed the most important truth to him, hoping that he understood the magnitude of her statement.

Gendry closed his eyes briefly as he took in her words, and when he opened them again his eyes were dark with emotion.

"I know," he acknowledged. "I know."
And, then he kissed her once again.
Episode 43 "Happy Together"

Gossip Spyder

Spring Break is officially over and I know that many of you will be suffering from withdrawals as badly as I am! However, there are still plenty more events ahead on the King's Landing social calendar to look forward to. The Easter Banquet will be held this weekend at City Hall in order to raise funds for the Children First Foundation, a charity dedicated to the care of King's Landing's most vulnerable young citizens. Traditionally the event is sponsored by big businesses and this year the sponsors include Stark Industries, March Reaches & Holdings, Evenstar Jewellers, SB Imports, The Lannister Corporation, Dondarrion Investment Group, and of course Baratheon Incorporated. Tickets to the banquet are $8,000 per head, with entire tables selling at the bargain price of $75,000. I have heard that this year's menu will include Homard lobster and Italian White Alba truffles… Yummmm!

Prom Season is also well underway with the theme for this year's prom set to be announced this week. The venue this year will be the King's Landing Theatre Grand Ballroom which, as I've heard, was chosen because of the as yet to be disclosed theme…hmm? Any guesses what it might be? I'm betting on a Masquerade Ball!

Nominations for Prom Court are going live online this week, with voting remaining open in the coming weeks. I am fully expecting Myranda Royce and Mya Stone to be elected to Prom Court, with Lothor Brune also appearing to be a popular nominee. Also, if you are still stuck on ideas for the perfect promposal, head on over to my blog for a comprehensive guide of cute and out-there promposal ideas that will be guaranteed to impress!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Gendry

To say that he was excited about the first day back to school was an understatement. It was a new beginning in a number of ways, and for a start, Arya was back in his car riding shotgun as they made their way to KL Prep. There had been a distinct change in the atmosphere when Arya had first stepped inside his car, and from the way her eyes had momentarily darkened when they had met his, he knew that she had felt it too. They were a couple.

"Hi," she had greeted him, smiling broadly. "How are you? Did you sleep okay last night?"

"I slept well enough," he had told her, shifting his car into gear as she had strapped herself in. "Ready to go?"

She had nodded. "Let's go."

Arya had been responsible for many a sleepless night, and of course she was to blame for his insomnia the night before. He had remained awake due to his supreme elation and disbelief that she had now become his girlfriend. My girlfriend, he thought to himself. Mine. He had thought over and over about the conversation they'd had in the garden, surrounded by the smell of blooming roses around them, utterly stunned that it had not all been a figment of his imagination.
"How soon do you think it'll be before people work out that we're together?" Arya now asked him. Gendry glanced at him quickly, before fixing his eyes back on the road. "They will eventually."

"You're right."

"Does that bother you?"

"I'm kind of worried about what they might say about you," she revealed, "I mean, I'm used to shit being said about me, but I don't want that to happen to you."

"Are you forgetting who I am?" he asked her, without a hint of conceit in his voice. "I'm Gendry Waters, illegitimate son of Robert Baratheon. Just this month alone I've had my name mentioned in several local and national newspapers, and just about every form of social media available...I think I can handle it."

She rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean."

He reached across the gears and grabbed her hand where it rested on her knee, lifting it to his mouth so he could kiss her knuckles. *I can do this, now. Whenever I want.* He knew exactly what she meant, and he was touched by her concern, but he didn't need her to worry about him.

"I'll deal with it, whatever happens."

"We'll deal with it," she corrected him, "together."

"Ride or die, huh?" Gendry felt a warmth in his chest at Arya's words, sensing a protectiveness there that he had not expected.

Arya laughed at his choice of expression. "Ride or die."

"Speaking of people finding out," Gendry began as he crossed a set of traffic lights, "will you be telling your parents about us before the banquet this weekend?"

Arya laughed nervously. "I think they already know...I think my whole family know."

"How?" he shot her an incredulous look.

"All of them were giving me really, really suspicious looks at breakfast this morning."

"I'll bet it was because you were acting suspicious."

"Better than having them catch us making out." Arya stuck her tongue out at him. "Has Tobho recovered from the shock and how did Ellen react when he told her?"

It was Gendry's turn to laugh nervously, recalling how he and Arya had still been kissing and hugging on the swing seat, wholly absorbed in each other and their newly minted couple-dom when, having returned from work, Tobho Mott had made a loud noise in surprise when he had spied them from the kitchen window.

Gendry had sounded his own surprise in embarrassment, while Arya had turned a pretty shade of pink.

"You're home early," Gendry had said, smiling at his foster-father as casually as he could.

Tobho's grin had been all too knowing. "We finished that rush order quicker than we planned, but I
must say I wasn't expecting you to be home at this time of the day."

Gendry had cleared his throat and ushered Arya through the kitchen, keen to get out from Tobho's curious inspection.

"There was an unexpected development," Gendry had told him, trying to keep a straight face. "We'll be going now."

Arya had nodded at his foster-dad in passing. "Good afternoon, Mr. Mott."

"Nice seeing you again, Arya." Tobho's innocent greeting and smile had only caused the pink in Arya's cheeks to deepen.

Wordlessly, he and Arya had gone to the garage, strapped themselves in his car and had hightailed it out of there.

"Tobho has recovered," Gendry now told her, "and it seems he couldn't wait to tell Ellen all about us. Apparently, he called her while she was still at that party with Toby and Tabitha. Ellen was shocked, but not really shocked, you know what I mean? She said she suspected that I was hung up over a girl, and she's happy that the girl is you."

Arya now brought her hands up to her face, shaking her head as though to clear the memory. "That's nice of Ellen to say that, but…oh my god, that was still embarrassing!" Arya shrieked beside him. "How much do you think Tobho saw?"

"Enough." Gendry screwed his nose up, also trying to dispel the memory from his head. "I swear, I thought he wasn't coming home until later."

"It's fine," Arya assured him. "It's not like we're trying to keep it a secret from our families."

"Does that mean you'll be happy to be my date at the Easter Banquet?" Gendry shot her another glance from the corner of his eyes. "Stannis has asked me to join them at their table. He told me that they would leave a plus one for me in case I chose to bring a date. Of course, I know you're going with your family, but if you don't mind and if it's all right with your dad, I'd like it if you sat beside me."

"If I go as your date, we'd be letting everyone present at the banquet know that we're together."

"Is that going to be an issue?" Gendry's brows furrowed.

They had reached the school gates by this time, and Arya took her time to respond to him, waiting until he had parked his car and killed the engine.

"I don't mind," she finally said. "Are you sure you want to announce it that way?"

"The whole world could know and I wouldn't care."

Arya watched him through wide twinkling eyes. While the sentiment behind his words were sweet, both of them realized at the same time how cringe worthy they were and burst into laughter.

"I didn't know you were capable of lines like that, Gendry!" Arya cackled. "You're sweet."

"But, stupid? Hmm?"

"I wasn't going to say it, but it's good that you know it."
"Being your boyfriend does not exclude me from your cattiness, does it?"

"Not a chance!"

They got out of the car still laughing, and they continued to tease each other as they made their way from the parking lot to the school building. He was at ease with the world, he thought. He had, to an extent, made peace with his personal circumstances regarding Robert Baratheon, and he was dealing with being in the public eye as best as he knew how with the help of his foster family and Donald Luwin. He had gained extended family in Stannis and Shireen, both of whom he was slowly getting to know. He was even learning how to deal with having Joffrey as a half-brother, but he was coming to matter less and less as Joffrey appeared to now be avoiding him. He wasn't yet ready to have a relationship with his other half-siblings, perhaps down the track he would be, but he wasn't going to rush it. He had great friends, he was having fun as part of the Brotherhood, and most importantly… he had Arya. Nothing can shake me now.

"Hey, you still haven't given me an answer."

Gendry stepped closer to Arya as they climbed the steps from the gardens towards a covered walkway on the way to her homeroom classroom. They still had a few minutes to spare before the start of classes and as though reading his mind, Arya stopped under the walkway and leaned back against one of the columns so they could linger in each other's company a while longer.

"Haven't I? I said I didn't mind." Arya gave him a nonchalant smile.

"That's not an answer."

"Then, you're not listening."

"Will you be wearing a dress?" Gendry continued, recognizing the game she was playing.

"I haven't decided."

"Because, you look really pretty in a dress."

Arya's smile threatened to become a full grin at his unexpected compliment, but she looked determined not to give in.

"Hmm? Do I really?" she said, trying to sound bored.

"Ahuh." Gendry dropped his head lower so that only she would be able to hear his next words. "It would be great if you could wear something with a zip at the back, like that blue dress you wore last time…and if you wear your hair up, that spot I found behind your neck would be so much easier to get to…"

A split second later he was defending his torso, because Arya had just attempted to punch him – as he suspected she would! He caught her fist before it could connect with his ribs again and laughed.

"That's playing dirty!" she accused him as she tried to shrug her hands out of his grasp, her grin now splitting her face.

Gendry grinned back, but he was not going to release her without an answer. "So? Will you be my date?"

"Of course, I will! Did you really think my answer was gonna be any different?"
"It's just nice to hear you say it." Gendry released her and they resumed their former relaxed poses, still grinning at each other as they waited for the school bell to ring.

"Ride or die, remember?" Arya reminded him with a roll of her eyes. "I go where you go."

Gendry dropped her off at her homeroom class when the bell rang, running to his own homeroom class and counting himself lucky when he found the teacher had not yet arrived. Hot Pie was giving him a very knowing grin, much the same as the one Tobho had given him.

"What?" he glared at his friend as he took his seat beside him.

"Is there something you want to tell me?" Hot Pie's grin became a smirk. "Or, should I just ask Arya?"

Gendry's responding grin had come to his face against his will. Hearing Arya's name was enough to trigger his smile.

"Are we that obvious?" he asked quietly.

"Were you both trying to hide it?" Hot Pie gazed at him in disbelief. "Because if you were, you both failed. I passed by the two of you in the walkway and, not only did neither of you even notice me, I got a burn from all the sparks flying between you."

Gendry chuckled. "Stuff happened, dude."

"When did it happen?"

"Yesterday,"

"And?" Hot Pie prompted eagerly. "I need more details than that, man. After the sordid saga you guys have made me watch, I need details!"

"Teacher's here," Gendry said, "I'll tell you later."

"You'd better," Hot Pie mockingly threatened him before turning to face the teacher who was calling for attention.

Gendry wondered how he would even begin to tell his friend about what had transpired between him and Arya, when he himself had not quite gotten over how surreal it still seemed. Somehow, it had felt as though his words and actions were being dictated by some greater power, because he'd had no doubt at all about how Arya would react. It was, he knew, because he had finally accepted – no, believed – that she returned his feelings. Confident as he had been about the outcome, it had still required a hefty amount of nerve for him to reach out, pull her into his arms and give her the kiss he had always intended.

Hearing Arya confirm her feelings for him once more had filled his heart with a happiness that was entirely new to him, and caused butterflies to flutter unchecked in his belly. Butterflies in my belly… Gendry gave himself a mental shake. No way in hell am I going to tell that to Hot Pie!

Sansa

Her parents had given her the green light to invite Sandor as her escort to the Easter Banquet and she was thrilled that they had welcomed Sandor so generously. She had been under no illusions that her parents, particularly her father, had held reservations about her new boyfriend, so she had been
greatly relieved when her father had come to speak with her after meeting Sandor to tell her that her boyfriend was welcome in their home at any time.

"He is a very honest young man, for certain." Her father's brows had furrowed in thought. "He's refreshingly frank and unpretentious…admirable traits, and I can see that you like that about him."

"I really do," Sansa had reaffirmed. "Thank you for seeing past his looks. I know mother will be harder to win over, but I'm sure she'll come to see that he's a good person too."

"Being very honest, we were somewhat startled by his injuries and scars. But, knowing what we do now about his past and what he's had to endure growing up, we are impressed by how he has been able to remain inherently kind." Her father's frown had deepened then. "It would have been so easy for him to take a different path."

"Have you done a background check on him, father?" Sansa had asked outright, pleased when her father had not denied it.

"Only the basic checks," he had informed her. "And, it only confirmed what you have told us about Sandor and his family."

"He's nothing like Joffrey." Sansa had felt compelled to tell him. "No matter what his school records may say either."

"Everyone has a past," her father had acknowledged, and Sansa recognized that he was aware of Sandor's questionable history. "And, everyone has the opportunity to learn from their past experiences. Just as you are still learning from yours, I have to trust that you will learn to make the best choices in your life…as you must trust Sandor."

Sansa understood this to mean that her father was placing his faith in her and her ability to judge a person's worth. And, she must also be responsible for the consequences of her choices. After everything that she had been through, Sansa loved her father all the more for letting her step to the edge of the branch, spread her wings and learn to fly again.

She had learned about Sandor's less than spotless behavioral conduct, most of which Sandor had chosen to tell her voluntarily. The conversation had come up when Sansa had told Sandor of the said background check, in the interest of transparency.

"I had a feeling that father might have carried one out," she had told him, "it's his way of ensuring we're safe."

Sandor had nodded. "That doesn't surprise me."

"You're not mad about it?"

"Why would I be?" he had returned flatly, resigned to their reality. "Guess it saves me from having to answer more questions."

"Well, when you put it that way…"

"But, I'm sure he would have dug up some things about me that you don't yet know." Sandor had sighed. "You're gonna hear about them eventually, so you may as well hear about them from me."

He'd been involved in frequent fights with other students in the past, many of which had not gone beyond posturing and verbal exchanges. Sometimes they got reported to the school and the principal had been forced to intervene – in case some wealthy kid's family got their noses out of joint and
withheld donations from the school. Almost always, the instigator was Joffrey.

"The really nasty stuff never got reported." Sandor's expression had been bitter. "Robert Baratheon paid a premium for silence."

"Didn't you ever refuse?" she'd asked him. "I don't understand why you just didn't tell Joffrey to go to hell."

"If I had said no, Joffrey would simply find someone else to do his dirty work…Trant and Blount, usually. At the time, I thought that if I did these things myself, I would have some control over the outcome."

"Were the teachers aware of what was really going on?"

Sandor had nodded gravely. "People talk. The teachers definitely talked. Even if there was no official complaint made, the teachers almost always knew that Joffrey was behind every single punch I threw. The school doesn't care as long as rich parents keep pouring money into their account… Robert Baratheon was the biggest contributor for a reason…Only Coach Selmy had any faith in me, though. That man needs a statue built in his honor."

"Aren't you worried that Joffrey will continue to hurt people through guys like Trant and Blount?"

"I was, for a time." Sandor had turned thoughtful. "But, I'm not so worried now, because I finally realized something."

"What's that?"

"People aren't as intimidated by him now that I'm no longer at his side to do his bidding. I realized that my presence around him was just perpetuating more violence instead of deterring it. He has no real power without me."

"How do you mean?"

"Joffrey found it easy to threaten and push people around when I was with him, so he did it constantly because he seemed to get a buzz from the power trip it gave him. I'm sure he uses Trant and Blount the same way, but let's face it, I'm the Hound." Sandor had grimaced. "With me around, Joffrey never had to hold back because he knew I was prepared to get bloody if he wanted blood."

"You may be onto something there."

"It makes sense though, right?" Sandor had not waited for an answer. "Ever since the Starks and Tyrells came to town the Baratheons have been really shaken up, and Joffrey is just one example."

"Enlighten me,"

"The reason I'm not hanging around Joffrey anymore is all to do with a Stark…you, little bird. Not having me around to wield like a fucking weapon is a serious blow to his threat factor, and the fact I'm now dating you is a doubly massive blow to his ego. Joffrey's been forced to stay out of trouble since your public breakup, and I'm sure it's ticking him off that your popularity has since eclipsed his. Margaery Tyrell has been the real power player recently, which is more salt on his wounds, but Gendry Waters being revealed as Robert's eldest son has pretty much annihilated whatever lingering popularity Joffrey may have had – in fact he pretty much self-destructed when he picked a fight with Gendry on the quad that day, over Margaery Tyrell no less."

"You're very observant, aren't you?"
"I just don't like the way other people go around pretending their shit don't stink." Sandor had shrugged. "I call it as I see it, and the way things are, there's about to be some real big changes coming to King's Landing, and not just for the Baratheons. Just wait and see."

Sansa had shared none of what Sandor had told her with her father because it had not been necessary. It appeared that Ned Stark's ability to understand people allowed him to see that there was more to Sandor Clegane than met the eyes, and the young man who had put himself at risk to save his daughter from a mob riot had earned a good amount of his respect. Ned Stark would not have allowed her to invite Sandor to the Easter Banquet otherwise.

She also believed Sandor's intuition about a change sweeping into King's Landing, because she had sensed it too. Even though her family had not been in the city for that long, she was aware that the influencing powers within their society was shifting from the people and families who had once laid down the unwritten laws they abided by. She was aware too that her family had played a hand in disrupting the status quo, but she did not yet know to what extent her parents would continue to exert their influence. Sansa had a feeling that the Easter Banquet was going to be the setting for something monumental, and she was more than curious to see what that might be.

Sansa heard Sandor's Mustang pulling into the driveway, and with a final check of her reflection in the mirror by the hall, she went to greet him. He was picking her up for their first day back at school and the ride in the car was the perfect opportunity to speak to him about being her date to the banquet.

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**Sandor**

He was far from excited about going back to school, and it must have shown on his face because Sansa giggled when she stepped into his car and laid eyes on him.

"A smile couldn't hurt," she told him.

"Just when my body got used to having the extra hours of sleep in the morning, now I have to get my ass up at six again."

Sansa laughed. "You want to hear something interesting?"

"Go on,"

"Arya and Gendry are together now."

"Really?" Sandor asked skeptically.

"He dropped her home last night and I just happened to see them kissing before she got out of the car."

"You just happened to see them?" Sandor again sounded skeptical.

"Okay, so I saw his car approaching the gate via the security monitor we have in the kitchen and I got curious."

"You spied on them," Sandor stated.

"I prefer *casually observed,*" Sansa corrected him, "but anyway, I'm sure I know what I saw."

"If you're right, then it's about fucking time," Sandor grunted.
"I know I'm right. Arya was practically effervescent at breakfast this morning. I wanted to ask her, but I'm hoping she'll tell me when she's ready."

"Good for her."

Sansa gave him a shrewd glance, which he saw from the corner of his eye. "You really do mean that, don't you?"

"If she'd picked him from the start she wouldn't have had to go through so much shit." Sandor shrugged. "I'm happy she's finally out of her misery."

"Me too." Sansa smiled. "It means she'll have a date for the Easter Banquet this Saturday."

"Easter Banquet, right," Sandor said, disinterested in an event he had no interest in attending.

"I was hoping…" Sansa began in her sing-song voice that let him know she was about to say something that would horrify him, "…that you would like to come along and be my date on the night."

Sandor kept his mouth closed, refusing to give her an immediate answer because he knew that if he opened his mouth now, all that would escape were expletives. He did not want to go, but Sansa clearly wanted him to go with her, and he didn't know how he could get out of it.

"What time does the banquet start?" he eventually asked, keeping his voice carefully neutral.

"Six-thirty."

"And, the dress code?"

"Black tie."

"As in, tuxedo?"

"Yes."

_Aha! An excuse!_ Sandor thought. "I don't have–"

"I've taken care of it," Sansa quickly told him, having pre-empted his reaction. "I've already ordered a tux for you."

"You know my size?"

"I called the tailor who made your suit and asked if they still had your measurements on file. Turns out they did, so I asked them to make a tux for you."

He bit his tongue to curb his desire to swear once again. It really had been one thing to attend society parties as Joffrey's sidekick, when he was under no obligation to be polite to anybody – or even talk to anyone, for that matter – and quite another to be on the arm of one of society's finest daughters. The scrutiny was going to be intense, he knew that. _But, you're going to endure it. For her…always for her._

"Guess that means I have to come," Sandor rasped, again keeping his tone as neutral as possible.

"Awesome!" Sansa whooped. "I'll give you all the details later."

"Thanks."
Sansa smiled happily. "Oh, did I mention that we'll all be at the same table as the Tyrells?"

"Will we?" Sandor remarked, this time unable to hide his distaste. "How do you know?"

"Willas told me about it the other night."

_The other night, huh?_ Sandor surmised that Willas had been at Chateau Maegor to complete work with Ned Stark once again. _I don't want to think about what else that cocky college boy has been saying to her._

"Did he now?"

"His grandmother has arranged for our families to be seated together."

"Great," Sandor growled.

Sansa missed the drop of acid that laced his tone, and oblivious to his mood she continued to chat about the upcoming banquet and how she was surprised that her father had agreed to yet another formal event.

"Father hates wearing formal suits," Sansa told him.

"Can't say I blame him," he muttered.

"And, mother wasn't sure he was prepared to sponsor another event, but she was very happy that he agreed."

"It's for charity," Sandor said, "isn't that what rich people do?"

There was a distinct bite in his tone this time, and Sansa clearly heard it. He sensed her frown, and a quick glance in her direction confirmed that she was staring at him with a less than pleased expression. He scowled in return.

"I wouldn't know about that," she said, seeming to choose her words carefully. "My family have always supported charities and I've always admired my parents for wanting to help people in the community. I don't think it's something that only rich people do. I mean, I'm sure there are wealthy people out there that don't give a cent to charity, while there are people who volunteer time and effort instead of money. Being charitable and wanting to help people isn't always about wealth."

Suitably chastised, Sandor responded just as carefully. "Yeah, you're right."

"The Baratheons are not the best example of charitable people," Sansa said thoughtfully, "while they do give a lot of money towards different causes, I think they do it because it's expected, not because they genuinely want to help."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying that, if they were the only example of charitable people you've been exposed to, then I can see why you're such a cynic."

"I know. I already said you were right."

Sandor wanted to change the subject. He was irritated for an entirely different reason, and he was fixating on something inconsequential because he couldn't directly address the true cause of his irritation. He had to be careful and reign in his temper, because all it would serve to do was upset Sansa unnecessarily. She kept throwing him glances for the remainder of the ride to school, but she
remained silent. No doubt she was trying to figure out the cause of his moodiness.

When they arrived at school they immediately noted that Arya and Gendry's names were being mentioned in conversations all the way from the parking lot to the main building. Sandor saw an opportunity to lighten the mood, and he took it.

"Everyone's talking about them," he commented, "you think they walked in holding hands or something?"

"I don't know." Sansa shrugged, her face brightening all of a sudden. "I don't think they would have done something so obvious right away, would they?"

"It wouldn't surprise me," Sandor rasped, "Gendry's the PDA type."

"Really? He doesn't look it."

"He's the type who won't be able to keep his happiness to himself. Believe me."

"You mean…like that?"

Sansa indicated the covered walkway ahead of them. Sandor spotted Arya leaning against one of the columns, and right there beside her was Gendry, standing well inside Arya's personal space. Both of them were laughing, Arya's face nearly split in two by her ear-to-ear grin. Gendry's smile though, lit up his entire face so brightly that it was almost blinding. Even if they had not walked into school holding hands, the looks they were giving each other were more than enough to get people gossiping.

Sandor grunted in amusement. "Yeah, just like that."

Sansa giggled. "Aww…look at them. They're so cute!"

"I dare you to say that to your sister's face."

"No way!" Sansa shook her head vigorously, making him look at her curiously. "She'll try to claw my eyes out again. She hates being called cute."

"Again? You mean she's come at you before?"

Sansa looked away tellingly. "We used to fight all the time when we were younger."

He had a hard time believing that polite and proper Sansa Stark with her perfect manners would ever take part in something as impolite and improper as a physical altercation with her younger sister. But there was steel beneath her porcelain skin, and he did not imagine that she would have just sat still and taken it if Arya were to come at her with tooth and nail. Instead, he imagined that Sansa would have tried to use her weight and height advantage to overpower the much smaller Arya, rolling to pin her down, hands scrambling to secure striking fists, with her red hair whirling around her like flames as her eyes blazed like the blue heart of the hottest fire. The image brought a chuckle to his throat, beginning like a low rumble in his chest.

"You're picturing it, aren't you?" Sansa demanded, indignant. "Please do not tell me that you're imagining me wrestling with Arya?"

Sandor's laughter echoed down the walkway like thunder.
Perhaps she had been deluding herself when she'd thought she and Gendry would go under the radar for at least a week, yet even though they'd abstained from overt public displays of affection, by Wednesday she knew that they had failed abysmally.

"All we're waiting for is Gossip Spyder to announce it," Hot Pie had told them at lunch that day, smiling at them like a proud parent.

The news had spread quickly amongst their friends, facilitated by Gendry no doubt, so she had not been surprised when Allyria had greeted her with a squeal when they passed each other in the hall on the first day.

"Is it true?" the older girl had asked in a hushed tone.

Arya had nodded, trying to stop her face from breaking into a smile. Beric had looked on in amusement as Allyria had hugged her.

"At long last!"

Edric had said nothing, but he'd made a point to make lewd faces at them whenever he saw them together. Allyria had caught him doing it behind Gendry's back once, and she'd reprimanded her nephew with a smack to the back of the head.

"Ow! That hurt!" he'd cried.

"If I hurt worse if Arya catches you doing that," Allyria had warned him. "I'm sure she's not above choking you out, so quit it."

"She's right, you know." Arya had grinned, and all their friends had laughed.

"All right," Edric had acquiesced. "I've been warned."

Arya knew for certain that they were being far too conspicuous when even Sandor had something to say about them.

"What did he do to finally tame you, little bitch?" Sandor had growled at her when he caught her on the way to her locker that morning, the first time he had spoken to her at school in a while.

"Who says I'm tamed?" Arya had shot back.

"You've been smiling way too much the past few days," he'd replied, "and, I don't think I've heard you swear once."

Arya had remedied that immediately, scowling at him. "Fuck you, you ugly mutt. Keep your mangled nose out of my business, okay? And, no one is ever going to tame me, got it?"

Sandor had \textit{laughed} in her face. "The Bull likes you wild, huh? Good for him."

"Get lost, asshole." Arya had fought hard to keep the scowl on her face, trying to keep from smiling back.

"I'm going, I'm going..." Sandor had raised his hands in mock surrender as he'd backed away from her. "Oh, and good for you too, little bitch. Good for you."

Gendry met her by the steps leading to the parking lot after school that day, and when Arya told him
about the encounter with Sandor, he had thrown back his head and laughed too.

"He finally said something, huh?" Gendry shook his head as he unlocked his car. "He's been giving me weird looks every time he sees me."

Arya finally laughed as she strapped herself into the seat beside him. "He would never admit it, but he's just as nosy as the rest of us."

"What about your sister? Has she said something?"

Arya smiled when she recalled the conversation she'd had with Sansa in her bedroom the night before. "Sansa couldn't help herself. She came into my room after dinner last night, on the pretense that she wanted to borrow a pen no less, and when I failed to take her baiting, she just straight out asked me."

Sansa had squealed and danced around when Arya had confirmed it, before she'd given up all pretense of borrowing anything and had made Arya tell her all the juicy details. Despite herself, Arya had allowed her sister's excitement to infect her, and both of them had talked until almost midnight, going to bed only when their mother had ordered them to.

"Your family all definitely know now," Gendry commented.

"Hmm…and there's the fact I told father about it this morning," Arya admitted.

"Really?"

"I had to tell him that I would be sitting at Stannis Baratheon's table at the banquet…next to you." Arya squirmed at the memory.

"And…what did he say?" Gendry glanced at her as they exited the school grounds.

"Not much." Arya shrugged. "He said okay, and then he just mumbled something along the lines of I should have expected it…Cat was right."

"Your mom suspected we were together?"

"Yep."

"Hmm…if your mom is choosing a dress for you to wear again, don't say anything about it needing to have a zipper at the back!"

Arya gasped and smacked his shoulder. "As if I would!"

Gendry laughed once more and the two of them settled in for the drive to Atelier's Lane where Gendry was picking up his custom-made tuxedo. Arya's dress had long been decided by her mother, who seemed to have a penchant for Christian Dior, but she chose not to tell Gendry about the zip at the back for the mean time.

"So, how come you guys don't have band practice today?" Arya asked him, not that she minded having the afternoon with her boyfriend.

"We don't have any upcoming gigs right away, and I think even Beric realized he needed a rest after the Essos Festival."

"You never did tell me what happened at Epic Day Out," Arya noted. "How did it go? I wish I could have been there."
Gendry told her about the crowds and the audience, about Syrio Forel's show and fangirls, Beric's song choices and their subsequent meeting with the independent record label.

"We also met with the host from WCFM Radio who agreed to play one of the Brotherhood's songs in her show." Gendry told her proudly.

"That's so cool!" Arya beamed. "When's the next show?"

"I'm not sure, but Beric said he'll be holding a listening party on the night of the broadcast."

"A listening party? That's so dorky."

"You'll be coming, right?"

"There's no way I'm missing it!" Arya declared hotly.

They caught up on what the other had been doing during Spring Break as they made their way to the tailor's atelier. Gendry told her about outings with his foster-siblings, and Arya told him about Robb's latest visit to Chateau Maegor.

"Robb was only home to shower and change his clothes most of the time," Arya revealed, "otherwise he was always out with Jeyne Westerling. It's pretty much confirmed that they're a couple, but because they're long distance, I think they're being careful."

"What about Jon and your foster-brother?"

"Jon couldn't come down, unfortunately. He was stuck with a project for college, and Theon had a reunion with his family. But, Jon said he'll come and visit over summer."

"It'll be good to see him again," Gendry mused.

"I haven't told Jon yet." Arya realized, wondering how she was going to break the news to him. "I'm sure he'll be happy for me, though. He likes you, Gendry."

"That's good to know. He's a great guy. Both your older brothers are. I got to know Robb a little when we were waiting backstage at the auction, and I think we'll get along."

"You will," Arya assured him. "I mean, Robb likes Sandor well enough, and he's Sandor. You don't have anything to worry about."

"That's comforting." Gendry clicked his tongue. "The bar has been set high, huh?"

Arya heard no mockery in his tone, and she turned to him curiously. Gendry seemed to mean it.

"How so?"

"Arya, the guy is badass, for one. He's been to hell and survived to tell the tale, because how else could he have got those scars if he hadn't been seriously burnt? Secondly, he's a star football player who has just won a full-ride scholarship to Valyria U...And, then there's the fact that he fought a mob to save your sister, which is a hell of a badass way to prove his devotion to her...shall I go on?"

"Is this you confessing to a man crush on him?"

"Haha...funny."

"Wow," Arya said with a shake of her head. "I never thought I'd ever hear you compare yourself to
"I'm not saying that I want to be like him, because I don't. I'm quite happy being me," Gendry corrected her. "I'm just saying that he's been through so much and achieved so much, even though he's only a year or two older than me, that beside him...I'm just an ordinary guy."

"You're not ordinary, Gendry," Arya told him sternly. "You are so far from being ordinary, and the fact you don't even realize it makes me want to smack you in the face."

Gendry parked his car in the basement garage beneath the atelier's building, securing it and killing the engine before he turned to look at her. She saw then that he wasn't speaking out of self-pity, but because he genuinely saw himself as just an ordinary guy, as though it was a fact and not a matter for comparison at all.

"So, you're saying that I'm extraordinary?" he asked, one brow lifting mockingly.

Arya knew that he was fishing for compliments now, and she saw no reason to refuse him. She removed her seatbelt and, smiling at him the whole time, she reached for his shoulders as she leaned over the gears between them, urging him to lower his head. Gendry obliged, and she pressed her lips against his in a chaste, but fierce kiss, which left him clearly wanting more when she ended it.

"I'm dating you," Arya stated. "Of course, that makes you extraordinary!"

Then she stepped out of the car as Gendry laughed after her.

"I thought we were talking about me?" Gendry followed her into the elevator and pressed the button for the floor he wanted.

"Don't get ahead of yourself." Arya gave him a teasing look. "You're just the guitarist and sometimes vocalist of one of the hottest unsigned bands around. Oh, and there might have been some mention of you having the highest ever selling price in the history of the Bachelor Auction. So what if you're also a nice guy? So what if you're one of the strongest people I've ever met? Okay, so maybe that makes you a little extra. Hmm...I guess it helps that you're easy on the eyes, too. And, even though you're the long-lost scion of one of the most notable men in the country, to me...you'll always be just Gendry Waters."

Gendry's arm was around her waist before she even knew what was happening, and a moment later he was kissing her. Not the chaste, close-mouthed kiss she'd used to tease him earlier, but a proper, soul searching, steal your breath kind of kiss that took her a few moments to recover from when he pulled away from her.

"This is our floor," he told her, grinning. "We're here."

She followed him past mannequins displaying handsome suits, and rows filled with dress shirts and silk ties, watching as he was greeted warmly by an immaculately suited attendant. Gendry introduced her to the man named Jacob, and as they were led to the counter where Gendry's tux was already packed for transport, James, the proprietor of the atelier came to greet them too.

"I'm certain you will be just as pleased with your tuxedo as you were with your suits," James stated. "I'm sure it's another masterpiece," Gendry agreed. "How much do I owe you?"

"Your account has been settled," James informed him. "You're set to go."

"Great." Gendry picked up the carry bag. "Thanks again, gentlemen."
They stowed his tux in the safety of his car before they headed back onto the pedestrian mall to find someplace to eat. It was four-thirty in the afternoon and both of them had serious munchies. They chose a place selling poke bowls and acai smoothies located above a bookstore, settling at a table that overlooked the mall below, where they could observe the people passing by.

"So, it looks like Stannis Baratheon was responsible for more than just putting your name down for the bachelor auction. Did he pick out your suits for you?" Arya asked him as they began to eat.

"In part," Gendry admitted, "but James was ninety-nine percent behind it."

"I can't wait to see you in your tux," Arya heard herself say.

"Have you been fantasizing about me, Arya?"

"And, if I have?" Arya bit into an edamame, crushing the little green bean between her teeth.

"If you tell me, I can make it happen."

Arya covered her mouth to stop herself spitting out the food she was chewing, desperately trying not to laugh.

"Well?" Gendry prompted. "Is it a shirtless fantasy? Girls love guys in suits apparently, plus I know how to walk like a runway model now, so I could do a fashion-striptease for you…how about it?"

He was wearing the most ridiculous expression on his face that had her snorting in her seat, and as soon as she'd swallowed her food she gave in to laughter.

"You're on! You better not back out, you hear me?"

"Whatever milady wants." Gendry continued to grin.

"But it's not a suit I'm imagining," Arya continued, carried away by the moment. "It's you as a sexy half-naked blacksmith, wielding a hammer, all covered in soot and sweat."

Gendry's comical smile froze and dropped a fraction upon hearing her fantasy, before the corner of his lip twitched and his smile turned wicked.

"Now, there's a side of you I never thought I'd see so soon," he murmured quietly.

Arya bit her lip. "Fuck. You tricked me into revealing my secret fantasy, didn't you?"

"Not so secret now, huh?"

He wiggled his eyebrows, making her realize just how close their faces had become during the exchange. Gendry really was good-looking, a fact she fully appreciated as his girlfriend. From her angle, she had a clear study of his jawline, the line of his neck and the breadth of his shoulders. In the past three days she had become very intimately acquainted with the line of Gendry's neck and shoulders, as he had with hers while they'd gotten to know each other in the backseat of his car.

Truthfully, she'd expected there to be more awkwardness between them, yet they'd slipped into their new relationship without so much as a hiccup. At the heart of their relationship was their friendship, but now there was an added closeness and understanding between them that they would never have known had they not taken that next step. They had evolved.

The shadowy bruise on his jaw caught her eye, as it had over the past few days. Gendry hadn't seemed eager to share the story of how he got it with her, which only made her more determined to
"You still haven't told me how you got this on your face." Arya reached out and touched the
darkened patch of skin on his chin. "Who did you fight this time?"

A micro-expression had flitted across his face at her words, letting her know that he still was not
keen to talk about it. Gendry sighed then, and Arya sensed a change in his mood.

Gendry

Gendry had winced because Arya's question, asked in a joking manner as it had been, had hit too
close to the truth. He also knew that there was every chance that she would soon hear about his run
in with Jaqen from Edric or Beric. He sighed, and this caused Arya's demeanor to change. It was
better that she heard it from his own mouth. He didn't want their relationship to begin with any
secrets between them. He'd been delaying this conversation because it meant revealing his flaws, his
fears and doubts. As these things were wont to happen, they happen when you least expect them to.

"It's funny you should say that," he began with a rueful smile.

Arya's brows rose when she understood where he was heading. "You're kidding, right? You
seriously got into a fight with someone?"

"It wasn't really a fight." He winced again. "I kind of provoked him, and he got pissed off and
punched me."

"Who was it?"

"Jaqen."

"WHAT?"

"To be fair, I sort of deserved it. But, we agreed that we were even now…because of how I hit him
in the face that time."

"You...agreed?"

"Ahuh." Gendry nodded. "And, he um…helped me realize that I was wrong about a few things. He
made me see that what you and I feel for each other is bigger than whatever doubts I had about us."

Gendry confessed his misgivings, his insecurities and how he had almost let his jealousy get in the
way, giving her an explanation for his behavior that night on the cliff top, and answering the
questions he knew she must have had.

"You must have been wondering, right?" he asked her. "I mean, I've done a complete about-face
from that night, and you deserve to know why."

Arya nodded slowly. "Of course, I've been wondering why, but I didn't know how to bring it up."

Gendry's expression became thoughtful. "In my head, I guess I was always in competition with
Jaqen. It didn't help that we both played guitar in a band. Subconsciously I was always comparing
myself against him, and when you started dating him I guess I believed that I was not good enough
for you.

When you two eventually broke up, it never occurred to me that it was because of me. I never
imagined that it was because you had feelings for me…because I still believed I wasn't as good as Jaqen. Even when you told me you wanted to be with me that night, all I could fixate on was thinking I was only second best…I let my pride and my ego get to me, and Jaqen made me see how wrong I was. I've told you this before, but I really should have believed you. I should have believed in you. Eventually, I understood that it wasn't about being first or second…it's about how we feel for each other, because your heart is not a prize to be won. Your heart…my heart, they're a part of ourselves that we choose to give to someone else, and I finally saw that you were giving yours to me."

Arya's lips quivered, and for a moment he thought she was going to get emotional right there in the middle of a busy poke joint, but instead her lips formed into a smile which widened so much it was bordering on idiotic.

"Sweet…" Arya mumbled. "So, sweet."

"But, stupid?" Gendry waited for her confirmation, feeling a tad embarrassed when he replayed his own words back inside his head.

Arya's smile softened and she reached across the table to hold his hand.

"No," she said, "not stupid at all."

Gendry turned the palm of his hand so that he could twine his fingers with her, squeezing her hand.

"You understand that mine has always belonged to you, right?" he asked quietly.

Arya returned the pressure of his hand, which he took to mean that she understood exactly what he meant.

"I know," she said with a slight tremor in her voice. "I know, and…I'll take care of it. As best as I can. I promise."

And then Arya began to speak, sharing her own feelings, thoughts and the reasons behind certain actions she'd taken, beginning with how she had met and subsequently said her farewell to Jaqen at Trident's Bend. Gendry listened as she told him about the guilt she'd been carrying regarding the pain she'd inflicted not just to Jaqen, but to him as well, and the regret she'd felt about choices she'd made.

"But, you've made peace with him now?" Gendry sensed that this was important to her.

Arya nodded. "I believe so. He said he wasn't angry anymore and I think he was telling the truth. He knew before I did that I had feelings for you, and that what I felt for him was not real romantic attraction."

"So, what did you feel for him?" Gendry tried not to feel jealous as she spoke about her ex, knowing that it was for his benefit that she was telling him at all, because he also needed to understand her past to appreciate where they were now.

"To be blunt, I was awed by him." Arya shrugged. "He was this person so completely different from anyone I had ever met, and so confident and talented and I was just blown away by what he represented…but now I know that I was more attracted to the idea of him, because he was everything I wanted to be."

"You wanted to be a Faceless Man?" he asked jokingly, attempting to lighten the mood somewhat.

Arya smiled and shook her head. "I think I just wanted some of that confidence for myself, because
back then I was struggling to understand who I was supposed to be. Don't get me wrong, I'm still figuring out exactly who I am as a person, but I think I know myself better now. I mean, I changed my hair and wardrobe because I wanted to be taken seriously and not be seen as a little girl any longer. I went to all-girl schools before we moved here and, other than my brothers, I didn't really hang around other boys. Then suddenly I was attracting attention from guys, with no real clue how to handle the attention… I was confused by a lot of things, and I guess it was easy for me to think that my awe and admiration of Jaqen, and the fact that he was interested in me, meant that we were supposed to get together. I thought that being in a relationship with him would be easy when we did get together, but things only got more complicated when I was constantly running to your side. Whether by divine intervention, coincidence, or because deep down I just wanted to be with you, I couldn't help but be with you… Does that make sense?"

Gendry nodded silently. Arya was telling him that he had always been with her. In her heart and mind, he had always been with her, and even though it had taken a while, she had finally realized what her heart truly wanted.

"When did you realize that you felt this way about me?"

Arya sighed. "There were little clues along the way. Like, the fact that I got annoyed every time you gained more female followers on Instagram and Facebook."

"Seriously?"

"Dead serious." Arya nodded. "But, I think I really started to wake up to myself when Jazmine Choi began hanging around you."

"You were jealous of Jazmine?"

"I wanted to tear her out of your arms when I saw her sitting on your lap that night after your Heart of Fire gig."

"She was not sitting on my lap," he hastened to correct her.

"She was touching you, that was enough." Arya raised her brow. "Anyway, that night at the auction, something snapped when Margaery and Jazmine got into a bidding frenzy over you, and I just knew that I couldn't let either of them have you."

Gendry found himself grinning at the ferocious expression that had suddenly come over her features. There was no doubt that she was telling the truth because only Arya could admit to something so crazy.

"So, that's why you bought me for $150K." Gendry clicked his tongue. "It all makes sense now."

Arya's cheeks turned pink. "Now you know."

"One more question." Gendry refused to let her withdraw her hand from his grasp. "Why did you choose to tell me how you felt that night after Spring Fling?"

"Margaery was all over you, and I thought I'd lose you to her if I didn't do something." Arya shrugged.

"What? Margaery was…?"

"She was, don't deny it."
"But, what does –?"

"I had to do something before it was too late." Arya squeezed his hand. "I mean, at school that day after the auction when you came and told me that you thought it was better if we stayed as friends… just when I'd finally realized how I felt about you, I was devastated when I thought I'd lost my chance with you. I was afraid you'd already moved on, but I had to take that chance that you still had feelings for me…so, I took that chance."

Gendry inhaled sharply. *Words…the words we choose to say can move a person in the most unexpected ways.*

"Arya…the things I said back then, I said them because I thought it was the best thing for both of us. You and Jaqen had just broken up, and because I thought I was just complicating things, I said those things so you wouldn't have to worry about me throwing myself at you when you had enough to think about." Gendry sighed. "I also said those things because I was determined to try and get over you once and for all. When I kissed you that night in the old forge, and you didn't kiss me back, I thought it was your way of letting me down easy. A guy can only take so much rejection, you know?"

"That's not it at all!" Arya's grip on his hand tightened even more. "That night, I really wanted to kiss you back. I really did. But, I felt so guilty so I did nothing. I'm sorry you had to feel that way. I really am."

Gendry stared at their clasped hands on the table between them, noting how Arya's knuckles had turned white with the strength of her grip, and the way the curve of her fingernails were forming crescent moon shapes on the skin along the back of his hand. So much had happened between them. So much hurt, so many misunderstandings and missed opportunities. Yet, Arya was sitting there in front of him, clutching his hand in a vice-like grip, proof that life was full of surprises. There was still so much ahead of them, and that was the beauty of it, he thought. *The past is the past, and the future is still unwritten.*

"We're here now."

Gendry covered her hand so that her smaller one was sandwiched between the two of is. Immediately, Arya's tension dissipated. The smile returned to her face, and Gendry was assured that whatever the future held, Arya was going to be there with him.
Gossip Spyder

Good morning everyone!

We've had an eventful few days so far and the week is not yet over! Firstly, the Prom committee has announced that the theme for this year's prom will be Masquerade, which means a Masquerade Ball naturally! My guess was right all along! Those of you still hunting for the perfect prom outfit can now trawl through Pinterest, Instagram and re-watch The Phantom of the Opera for outfit inspo!

Secondly, don't forget that the Easter Banquet is being held tomorrow night and my sources say that the event has been sold out! Everyone who is anyone in this city will be there, and the event has been known to draw A-list celebrities in the past. You can bet I will be there too – you just don't know where I might be watching!

And lastly, I've been saving my juiciest slice of news until the end because I know that it will surely devastate so many of you, but all week I've been hearing seriously crazy rumors going around school that Arya Stark and Gendry Waters (known BFFs) have in fact hooked up! If I had not seen them making goo-goo eyes at each other with my own two eyes I would not have believed the gossip running rampant throughout KL Prep's hallowed halls! WHAT? Did anyone see this coming?

Gendry has previously been linked to heiress Jazmine Choi with many believing they would get together after they were seen cuddling at club Heart of Fire, and I know that some of you were low-key shipping him with Margaery Tyrell after he became her knight in shining armor when half-brother Joffrey was being a pain – but Arya Stark came in last in his list of potential girlfriends…or so we thought. I guess there was a reason why the two of them had always been so close! This makes Arya's third relationship this year, and I know many of you are thinking that she did not waste time moving on from Jaqen H'ghar (she didn't waste time moving on from Sandor Clegane either!), but you gotta hand it to her for knowing how to catch 'em! Hopefully, she'll work out how to keep 'em this time – third time's the charm, hey Arya?

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Eddard

His day began much like any other. He got up on the right side of the bed and enjoyed breakfast with his family. His children had all been happy and were genuinely so. There'd been no bickering at the table, and the family chef had even produced homemade bagels, which he'd always been quite partial to. He had back-to-back meetings lined up when he got to the office, including one with a difficult client. However, at the conclusion of the meeting both parties had come out pleased with the outcome, and in the most amicable terms.

It was precisely because everything was running smoothly that Ned found himself feeling inexplicably anxious. The unsettled feeling continued to build with every email and phone call that came in, and with every knock on his office door.
"Anything wrong, boss?" Jory Cassel felt compelled to ask him when he found Ned frowning, his lunch still untouched on the table before him.

Jory had entered the room carrying a small parcel in his arms, along with a slim white envelope.

"No," Ned replied, "there's nothing wrong, which makes me believe that something definitely is."

"It's because you're a natural pessimist, and it makes you uncomfortable when you have nothing to worry about," Jory gave voice to the very thought Ned had been mulling over.

"You know me far too well, Jory," Ned remarked darkly, then nodded towards the parcel. "What have you got there?"

Jory chuckled as he placed the parcel atop Ned's desk. "Your Tech guy asked me to bring this up to you. Apparently, the new production tracking app you wanted to trial has now been installed."

Ned swiftly opened the box to find a brand-new iPad and spent a few minutes navigating the said application. "Looks good so far. I'll speak to the tech guys about it later. Is the envelope also from IT?"

"Yep. It should be from the app developer."

"Must be the invoice," Ned muttered as he ripped the seal, tipping the contents out before him.

Except it was not the developer's invoice at all. There was a logo on the top-left corner of the covering letter bearing the name of an institute he'd never heard of. There were lots of words he did not grasp immediately in the paragraph before him, but when he did, he swore out loud.

"Sonofabitch…"

**Why the hell has this been delivered to me?**

The sheaf of papers in his hands turned out to be a report, and each word he read made it abundantly clear that things were going to get a lot worse for the Baratheons. The sense of foreboding he'd been feeling all morning settled in his stomach like concrete. The contents of the first two envelopes he'd received were scandalous enough, but this third envelope contained the most damaging information of them all. And, if he had received a copy, others were bound to have received one too.

"What's wrong?" Jory asked him, watching as Ned neatly stacked the papers back together.

Ned rubbed a spot between his eyes with the tips of his fingers. "The Baratheons and Lannisters have been dumped into a cauldron full of scandal which they've been stewing in for the past few months, but I fear the situation is now at a boiling point and I don't know what's going to happen when the pressure inside the cauldron inevitably causes it to explode."

The concrete in his stomach grew heavier, but Ned found himself strangely calm. The envelope was a heads-up, a warning to be on guard rather than a threat to himself, he knew that. Someone was telling him to keep his head screwed on firmly because if he did not remain vigilant, his head would roll too.

Jory took the report when Ned handed it to him, promptly read the contents, and when he was done his jaw had dropped to his chest in shock.

"Is this true? What does this mean?"
Ned shook his head. "I only know that it can't mean anything good."

"Has Robert contacted you?"

As if on cue Ned's cell phone buzzed on his desk, Robert's name flashing across the display. Ned picked it up and mentally braced himself.

"Robert," he said by way of greeting.

"You got one of those envelopes, didn't you?" Robert demanded, his voice tight with barely suppressed fury.

"I did," Ned confirmed. "Just now."

"This has gone far enough, Ned," Robert grunted. "When I find out who is behind this, I'm going to destroy them!"

"How did they do this, Robert?" Ned ignored his friend's angry threat. "How did they get a hold of...of something they could use against you like this?"

"It has to be someone who knows us, of course. Someone close to our inner circle."

"Has Mace received an envelope too?"

"Of course, he has." Robert laughed humorlessly. "You can bet all the fucking Tyrells will know the contents of that report word for word by now. And, you can be sure they know that my marriage to Cersei has been a fucking joke from the start."

"What are you going to do?"

"What can I do? No one knows who sent the envelopes, and the damned institute where the test was done won't say who ordered it done."

"Is it even legal? Can they do this test without your consent?"

"Apparently it was all done legally."

"How?"

"With money, of course." Robert laughed again. "Money can buy just about anything if you have enough of it."

"Have you called the police? Your lawyers?"

"Police won't do shit because there've been no laws broken, and my lawyers at Pycelle's are already in damage control. Other than that, there's not much more I can do."

"So, you're just going to wait and see what happens?"

"There's not a fucking thing I can do but wait, is there? And, the bastards behind this know it, too. They've set me up. I'm a sitting duck, and I'm exactly where they want me to be."

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**Sandor**

Everyone in his class was talking about Senior Prom. Everyone was discussing nothing but who was
going with who, what ride they were taking, what they were wearing and what hotel they'd be partying at afterward. He had no interest or the slightest inclination in going to prom, and needless to say, the chatter around him only served to irritate him. And then the Masquerade Ball theme had been announced and all the chatter had merely intensified.

In between chatter about prom, people also spoke about the Easter Banquet, which only irritated him further.

"You're going to the Easter Banquet, right? Which table are you sitting at? I hope we get a table close to the Tyrells and Starks."

Sandor overheard similar versions of this sentiment in a number of his classes, which made him think about why his girlfriend's family and their acquaintances were revered as celestial beings. The banquet was open for all who could afford the ticket price, but as most attendees purchased tickets by the table – which equated to tens of thousands of dollars – the guest list excluded the majority of people. The Tyrells and Starks were not in the majority, and Sandor knew that it was the exclusivity, or the perception of it, that people were really buying into – a taste of what it was to be among the richest of the rich.

As the week had transpired, he had found himself dreading the banquet more and more with each passing day and he knew that his lack of enthusiasm was becoming evident in his behavior. He knew that Sansa was sensitive to his moods, but he was having a hard time hiding his thoughts. All of it made his already short fuse become nothing more than a hair-trigger. At lunch that Friday he arrived at the usual table that he and Sansa shared with her friends to find that they were in the middle of prom talk.

"I found the most gorgeous dress at this antique gown place in Braavos," Mya was saying to the group.

"Go on," Sansa prompted her, "tell us about it."

"Well, it's made of black silk with real antique French lace…"

There was no escaping the talk, Sandor noted, not when the majority of the group were all seniors. Randa and Jeyne joined in the conversation while Sandor met Lothor's gaze from across the table, resigned to their shared fate even as they commiserated.

"What about you, Randa?" Sansa turned to the older girl. "Have you found a dress?"

"I have two on reserve," Randa replied. "One is this red ombre from Oscar de la Renta, and the other is a sequined Prabal Gurung strapless gown."

Randa then took out her phone to show them photos of herself modeling the dresses, which was followed by enthusiastic ooh'ing and ahh'ing from the girls.

"I can't wait to see what dress you'll be wearing, Sansa." Randa grinned at her. "You always look hot."

"You mean, to the banquet?" Sansa smiled.

"No, silly." Randa laughed. "To prom, of course."

Sansa's expression showed her confusion for a brief second before her features turned neutral a moment later.
"Oh, ah…Sandor hasn't…I mean, we haven't talked about prom, yet," Sansa quickly told her.

Sandor then found himself under Randa's curious gaze.

"What?" he asked her.

"You are going to prom, aren't you?"

"I haven't thought about it," he replied dismissively.

"Then think about it soon, because Sansa needs time to find a dress," Randa warned him.

Sandor grunted in response before he glanced towards Sansa. He didn't expect to see the disappointed look in her eyes. He frowned. Was she expecting to go to prom with him? Wait…was she really expecting that I would want to go to prom? Evidently, she had been, but he had no desire to entertain the idea at that moment so he ignored the question in Sansa's eyes. However, after school that day he found Sansa waiting for him at his locker with an unmistakable aura about her that warned of impending confrontation.

"Ready to go?" he asked her abruptly, gearing himself up for the fight.

"Let's go." Sansa nodded, then watched as he grabbed books from his locker.

The walk to his car was tense, with Sansa continuously shooting glances at him as though she was trying to gauge his mood. When they were both seated and strapped inside his car, Sansa could no longer keep her mouth shut.

"So, have you thought about going to prom?" she asked in that sing-song voice that meant trouble for him.

"No," he told her straight up, seeing no point in playing games. "I'm not interested."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't really care for dressing up and partying with classmates I don't care for, especially when there's no alcohol involved."

"But, that's not what prom is about," Sansa argued.

"Face it, most people only go because it gives them a reason to dress up and ride in a limo, and frankly, you get enough chances to do both as it is."

"You think I want to go just so I can dress up?" Sansa's tone was indignant.

"You're not a senior," Sandor pointed out. "When it's your prom, you can go nuts."

Sandor revved the Mustang's engine louder than he had to, cutting off whatever Sansa was going to say in response. But Sansa was far from through and he felt the heat of her stare along the side of his face.

"What's gotten into you lately?" she demanded. "You've been acting weird and I can't figure out why."

"I'm always like this," he snapped, "don't make me out to be any different."

"You're being an ass," Sansa muttered waspishly. "Is this because you don't want to go to the
banquet tomorrow night?"

"That's one reason," he replied, deciding to come clean about it.

"You could have just said so from the start,"

"You made sure that I couldn't refuse."

"If that's how you really feel about it, you don't need to come tomorrow."

And let Willas Tyrell swoop in on you while I'm not there? Sandor thought darkly. No fucking way!

"I'm going with you," he bit out. "Your parents expect me to be with you."

Sansa huffed and sighed, frustrated. "Why don't you want to go?"

Sandor grit his teeth. "People are going to be watching. I don't want that."

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye and saw the confusion on her features.

"I don't understand," Sansa began, "everyone already knows who you are. You're Sandor Clegane, the fiercest linebacker KL Prep has ever produced. You're a football hero around here, and I thought you'd be used to the attention."

"Not off the field I'm not."

"But you used to go to events with Joffrey all the time, so why –?"

"Nobody was watching me," he grunted, "it was different."

"You came to Spring Fling with me."

"Once again, it was different. School dances are different."

"Prom is a school dance too…"

"Different."

Sansa huffed and sighed again, in exasperation this time. "If the banquet is just one reason, what other reasons do you have?"

"Drop it, Sansa. I'm done talking about this," Sandor's voice had dropped to a low growl. "Let's just get through the banquet and move on."

Sansa knew to back off when he got like this, but it was clear that she was displeased and far from satisfied with his responses. She remained silent for the rest of the ride and did not seem surprised when he drove straight to Chateau Maegor instead of continuing to their usual Friday after-school ritual. Sandor was not in the mood to wander around the mall or sit in a café that afternoon, and he did not need to glance at Sansa's expression to know that she was far from being in the mood to follow him to his house to fool around in his bedroom.

Instead, Sansa got out of his car in silence, turning to stare at him through the passenger side window.

"You'll be at city hall at six tomorrow, right?" she questioned him, her tone uncertain.
"I'll be there," he confirmed.

Sansa scrutinized him for an uncomfortable moment, while he saw a dozen different expressions flit over her face. She was wondering whether to believe him, he suspected, but in the end, her expression became determined.

"Then, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah."

"Call me if you need anything."

"I will."

"Are you going straight home?"

"That's the plan." He needed to cool off and calm his head.


He drove away from Chateau Maegor swearing and cursing. Despite the stillness of Sansa's outward appearance, he knew for a fact that she was mad. Livid, to be exact. Undoubtedly, he had completely and royally pissed off his girlfriend, and he had no idea how he was going to fix the mess he'd made. Why the hell couldn't I have just lied to her? He could have made up an excuse for his behavior, anything at all to throw her off, but he had not been thinking and now Sansa believed he was just being a jerk for not wanting to go to the banquet…or to prom.

As always, he wanted to tell her the truth, or half-truth in this case, but the real cause of his problem wasn't hers to fix. He had issues, lots of them, and he always knew they were going to catch up to him eventually. What he had with Sansa was fragile, he'd always known that. But, in the brief months they'd been together he had somehow pushed that truth to the very furthest corner of his mind while he'd revel in being in her presence and being called her boyfriend. However, reality was never going to be ignored indefinitely, and he had a very strong premonition that the Easter Banquet was going to be the backdrop against which the final moments of his relationship with Sansa as he knew it would unfold.

I've never been good with fragile, breakable things. The thought filled him with a helplessness and sense of fear that began as an insidious shadow in the left cavity of his chest, that would slowly come to consume his thoughts throughout the night.

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**Gendry**

"Goo-goo eyes?" Arya looked at her phone in disgust. "The fuck? We were not making goo-goo eyes at each other!"

Gendry snorted. "Really? Out of that entire paragraph *that* is what you take offense to?"

Arya tossed her phone onto the carpeted floor next to her backpack. "Ugh! I don't care anymore. Gossip Spyder can go shove a baseball bat up his ass and fuck himself."

"You didn't read the post this morning?"

"I woke up late this morning and didn't check the notification."
"That's probably a good thing, otherwise you'd have been a cranky bitch all day," Gendry mused.

"I should just stop reading Gossip Spyder's posts. It's all total bullshit anyway."

Gendry had to agree. While he acknowledged that Gossip Spyder's posts had some basis on real facts and events, the commentary was almost always skewed to garner the most reaction, and never really presented one hundred percent of the facts. Not that he would be happier should Gossip Spyder ever obtain that kind of knowledge, but he knew first-hand how devastating an effect Gossip Spyder's posts could have on the people involved.

"Let's talk about something else," he suggested, "it's not every day that I get the house to myself, so come over here and sit next to me while we talk."

Arya's grumpy expression cleared and a knowing smirk took over her features when she saw him patting the bed where he sat.

"Talking isn't really what you want to do, is it?"

"No, it's not." Gendry's smile became a smirk too.

It was a Friday afternoon and he and Arya had arrived at his house to find no one at home. A rarity. Ellen had sent him a message saying she and the kids had accepted a last-minute invitation to have dinner at her mother's house, while Tobbo had plans to go for after work drinks with some of his staff that night. He hadn't expected to spend the evening alone with Arya, but he would be stupid not to take advantage of this golden opportunity.

Gendry watched as Arya walked across his bedroom from where she'd been sitting at his desk to join him on his bed. It was the first time he'd ever had a girl in his room and he was both nervous and excited, tense with anticipation. Without a word or further prompting, Arya climbed atop his mattress, placing a knee on one side of his hips before hooking her leg over onto his other side, straddling him while pushing his back against the headboard.

"Is this what you were hoping for?" she asked him playfully.

He nodded. "And, more."

Arya raised her face to his while he dropped his head to meet her kiss, finding her lips soft and warm beneath his. They had not been together all that long, but in the past few days, he had memorized the texture of her lips, the way she preferred to tilt her head, and differentiate between her sighs of pleasure, and sighs of frustration. Right at that moment, Arya sighed against his mouth while she tugged at the hem of his hooded sweatshirt, letting him know that she was frustrated that he was still wearing it. He removed his shirt a second later, which immediately saw her place kisses on the newly exposed skin along his neck and collarbone. Her hands were exploring him, tracing lines up and down his back and flattening against the wall of his chest. Arya was bold with her caresses, to the point where he often found himself gasping in surprise.

There was no hesitation in the ways she touched his body. Right from the beginning, Arya was confident in his arms, knowing where to stroke, kiss and lick him, seeming to know where it would make him feel the most pleasure. He didn't want to think about how she had learned to do these things, but when he felt her palm seeking the length of him through his jeans, Gendry couldn't help but think how he was not the first guy she'd done this with – in the brief second before she found and began to rub his cock.

Oh, holy fuck...Gendry shivered and began his own exploration of her body, clumsily unbuttoning
the front of the chambray shirt she wore and impatiently pushing the fabric aside so that he could see
the small swell of her breasts encased in a satiny blue bra. He still hadn't seen the color of her
nipples, which he was now determined to remedy, and in a few swift moves he'd slipped her shirt
from her shoulders and unclasped her bra so that she was as topless and he was. Pink-beige. Arya's
breasts were bared for him to see in the afternoon light filtering into his bedroom window, and he felt
his half-mast turning into a full erection as he began to thumb his girlfriend's pink-beige nipples,
mirveling as they hardened under his hands. Arya let out a soft moan as her eyes fluttered shut,
encouraging him to continue. He palmed the slight weight of her breasts in both hands, just as he had
that night on the cliffs, but this time he took in the sight of her cheeks coloring as he clenched his
fingers against her flesh.

"Do you want to keep going?" he asked her softly.

Arya nodded. "Yeah."

With hands trembling, Gendry skimmed his palms against her ribs, behind her back and down to the
clasp on the skirt that hugged her hips. He drew the zip down, and with a bit of maneuvering, Arya
soon knelt on his bed in nothing but her panties. He didn't know where to look. He didn't want to
miss out on seeing every part of her and he was unaware of his pupils dilating as his eyes wandered
over her body. She sat back down, her near-naked bottom settling against the top of his thighs,
wasting no time in drawing his head down for another kiss. Gendry wrapped one arm behind her
back and drew her against his chest so that he could deepen their kiss, while his other hand slipped
under the elastic waistband of her panty daringly, cupping a butt cheek in his palm before giving her
a squeeze. Arya let out another moan, and emboldened, he dipped his middle and ring fingers into
the valley between her legs, finding her flesh softer there, and warmer than he had ever imagined.

"Oh…"

Arya's moan became more audible, and Gendry repeated the stroking motion with his fingers,
trembling against her when he thought about parting her flesh so that he could explore deeper. His
knowledge regarding the female body and all its erogenous zones was, for the most part, theoretical
only. Doing his best not to appear nervous, he began to experiment by rubbing his fingers in small
circles, slowly and gently against her outer labia. Arya stopped kissing him in favor of letting out
another soft moan, encouraging his fingers to explore further, finding her inner labia softer and
warmer still. Arya's breath hitched when he found a small nub at the apex of her labia, and repeated
teasing of this little bud of flesh soon found her damp, his fingers slick with her moisture as reward
for his effort. Did he dare to go further?

However, before he got the chance, Arya was moving, pushing him back against the bed so that his
hand was dislodged from between her legs.

"Arya?" he asked, looking at her questioningly.

"You first. There's something I want to do something for you," she replied.

Her hands were moving over his waist then, swiftly unbuckling his belt and unbuttoning the top of
his jeans. His fly was undone and she was tugging at his pants with a surety that left him in no doubt
about the something she wanted to do for him. He should have been excited, and when he sat there
in nothing but his boxer-briefs with his hand-on straining against the fabric he did feel his heart
thumping hard inside his chest, which only worsened when Arya leaned over him, her small hand
slowly sliding into the front of his underwear. When her slim fingers first brushed his flesh he almost
jumped out of his skin, and when she grasped him and began to stroke him up and down it was all he
could do not to hiss at the unfamiliar, yet unbelievable sensation. The sight of her fist wrapped firmly
around his erection was almost more than he could handle. Arya was overwhelmingly confident
when it came to physical intimacy, he thought once again. She's done this before. And, unexpectedly this thought brought a swift stab of fury to his gut.

"Arya, wait." Gendry grabbed her wrist as she was preparing to completely remove his underwear. "Maybe we should slow down."

Arya gazed up at him, her breathing uneven, looking puzzled. He was just as surprised by his action as she was. Every cell below his waist was screaming for her to keep going, but the feeling of fury that had swirled in his gut now turned to uncertainty…as though he was sinking into a pool of insecurity and he'd forgotten how to swim.

"You don't want to?"

"I want to…believe me, I do. But…it doesn't have to be today."

He was more nervous than he wanted to admit to her. He was feeling overwhelmed by how fast their physical relationship was progressing and he hated feeling so…unprepared. Arya was far more experienced than he was, which he did not hold against her, despite the jealousy he felt at the mere thought of her with a certain red and platinum streaked individual who shall not be named. He wasn't wrong to feel the way he did, he thought. It was normal for everyone to feel some insecurity when they were literally baring their body and in his case a part of his soul, to another person.

"You want us to wait?" Arya clarified, still clearly puzzled by his request, especially when he was still rock-hard.

"I think we should."

Arya finally saw that he was completely serious about it, and she gave him a smile. In fact, she looked relieved. "Sure…we can do that."

Arya sat up and settled herself on the bed, leaning into his shoulder as he arranged the pillow behind them so that they both lay comfortably. He also pulled his blanket around them so that she could cover up, while he waited for his erection to subside.

"I kind of wanted our first time together to be someplace more amazing than my bedroom. I'm not saying doing it in my bedroom won't be nice, but I just don't want to have to think about the possibility of my family coming home at any moment, you know?"

"Well, when you put it that way, you make a very good point." Arya's smile widened, and she relaxed against him. "Actually, I'm kind of glad you want to wait. I want our first time to be special too…and not just because it's going to be my first time and all that. Despite what you might think, I'm actually really nervous."

Gendry wondered if he'd heard her correctly. He pulled back so he could better see her face, looking to see if he'd made a mistake.

"First time?" Gendry frowned at her.

Arya's already flushed cheeks went bright red and she looked away so she wouldn't have to endure his piercing stare.

"Well, yeah." Arya's shoulders rose and fell in a shrug. "I never had sex with…I mean, I'm still a virgin."

Gendry froze in shock, and with his jaw slack, he was sure he must have looked comical. But his
disbelief must have been so great because Arya went on trying to convince him of her chastity.

"I know it's hard to believe, but I just never felt ready before, so it never happened, okay? Fuck…I thought you'd be happy about this."

"I am!" Gendry let out a laugh. "Believe me, the thought of him anywhere near you makes my blood boil. I was just worried that I wouldn't be able to live up to the…um, standards he set, because I've never…done it, either…But, now we'll get to learn together…"

Gendry allowed his voice to trail off because he now felt distinctly vulnerable under Arya's gaze. She had never slept with Jaqen. She was still a virgin. Gendry knew that he could be possessive towards Arya, but he didn't understand how strongly until that moment.

"Hold up, hold up." It was now Arya's turn to make a comical expression as she looked up at him with wide incredulous eyes. "Are you saying that you're…?"

"That's what I'm saying."

"And, you were worrying about…standards?"

"I have an ego, okay?"

"I don't believe it." Arya shook her head. "What about that night at the cliffs, Gendry? You had me naked to my waist out in the open air! You knew what you were doing!"

"That was all instinct!" Gendry grinned wickedly. "And, maybe I learned some of it from the porn Lommy forced me to watch."

"Ahuh…Lommy forced you to watch porn, did he?" Arya shook her head, not believing him for a second. "That shit is supposed to be all fake, so where the hell did you learn to do all those things, huh?"

Arya's question was accompanied with a well-aimed pinch to his pectoral muscle, which he narrowly blocked, laughing as he deflected her sharp pincers.

"Hey, maybe I just have natural talent?"

Arya laughed. "How the fuck has a guy as hot as you stayed a virgin?"

"You think I'm hot?"

"Answer my question, Gendry!"

Arya's fingers managed to find his ribcage and she yelped with laughter as she tickled him. He wrestled with her for some moments, seeking retribution as he held her arms away from him while he tickled her in turn. She shrieked in response, laughing and cursing him at the same time, and when they were both out of breath from laughing, they called a truce and lay back down on his pillow. Gendry had an answer for her, and the smile on his face gradually turned serious. He felt vulnerable again, having exposed so much of his inner thoughts to Arya in the past few days, yet he was aware that he was choosing to lower his guard because he trusted her, and it felt wonderful to finally have someone that he could be completely himself with.

"It just never happened. Mainly because I never had the confidence to put myself out there," he heard himself say. "I never really believed any girl would seriously like me."
"I don't believe that there wasn't at least one girl at your old high school that wasn't into you. You have dated before, right?"

"I went on dates, sure," Gendry admitted. "But they went nowhere and nothing became of them. They said I never really talked about myself and that I was hard to get to know. I guess it's hard to open up to people when even I didn't know myself all that well. Girls eventually lost interest. Everything changed when we moved here and I transferred to KL Prep. A lot of things have happened, and I guess I was forced to find out who I really am, in more ways than one."

"That's an understatement if ever there was one." Arya chuckled darkly.

"Oh, yeah," Gendry agreed with a humorless chuckle of his own. "But, because these things happened, I met you and you helped me become Gendry Waters 2.0, which is much like the original version only better."

"Two point O…haha! What is that?"

"This new version comes with boosted confidence, a better wardrobe, a sleek haircut, newly discovered blue-blood pedigree and serious cred courtesy of being a guitarist in a band. Version 2.0 also happens to be the perfect boyfriend for none other than you, Arya Stark. Being with you just makes me better, and…I'm really glad that you're my first girlfriend."

Arya stared at him with her mouth agape for some moments following his confession, evidently astounded by what she'd just learned about him. He was close to making a joke to break the silence when a smile began to take over her features. Her smile was gentle, her eyes twinkled and a soft flush again colored her cheeks.

"I'm really your first girlfriend?" she asked quietly, and he could tell she was asking not because she didn't believe him, but because she just wanted him to say it again.

Gendry reached up and carefully smoothed out a tangled lock of emerald hair about her face, then he placed his hand on her bare shoulder, caressing her skin beneath his thumb.

"You are, Arya."

She hugged him, pulling him to her still naked chest while she pressed kisses along the side of his face.

"Gendry Waters, you are just one surprise after another, aren't you?" Arya murmured into his ear. "And, I think I fell in love with you all over again just now."

For the second time, Gendry pulled back so that he could look at her face, again wondering if he'd heard her correctly. He saw a reflection of his own shock in her eyes when she realized what she'd just said.

"Say that again, Arya." Gendry heard the plea in his voice. "Do you really mean what you just said?"

Arya nodded frantically, kissing his lips three times in rapid succession, her grey eyes wide and clear as she stared into his own.

"I really do mean it." Arya tightened her hold around his neck. "I love you."

Something came undone inside him as Arya spoke, like the unraveling of a knot that held together the emotions he never knew he'd been reigning in until that moment.
"I love you, too." He meant every syllable he uttered. "I really do."

He felt free all of a sudden, and he realized that it was because he now knew that her feelings mirrored his own in every way possible. He had no idea that hearing the words *I love you* could leave him with such a feeling of joy that made his chest feel so full yet so light at the same time. At that moment he felt completely free to be himself. And, while his heart had always been free to feel whatever emotion he wanted, it was the first time he welcomed emotions like love, contentment, vulnerability, and even a healthy dose of jealousy without second-guessing his right to feel that way. Unreserved, and unrestrained.

He tilted Arya's head back so he could kiss her again, and soon their kisses deepened while their hands began their explorations anew. As excited and turned on as they both were, he knew that they were not prepared to go all the way right then. He really did want their first time to be somewhere more conducive to romance than his bedroom, and where they would be free to completely focus solely on each other.

"We were going to wait, weren't we?" Arya asked when Gendry's hands palmed her butt once again.

"We are," Gendry agreed, "but, there are other things we can do…"

Arya laughed, and then she was gently pushing him onto his back and straddling his knees. Her fingers teased the waistband of his boxer-briefs.

"Then, should I continue where I left off?"

Gendry swallowed nervously and gave her a smile in anticipation.

"Please do."

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**Sansa**

Sandor had not attempted to call her or message her at all that Friday night, which left her unable to settle down for most of the night. Consequently, she was tired and short-tempered when she woke up on Saturday morning. She was usually excited on the day of big social events like the Easter Banquet, but her excitement had been dulled by her current predicament with Sandor. Ordinarily, she might have distracted herself by doing her nails or washing her hair in preparation for the party, but because it was an open-to-the-public event being covered by the press, her mother had hired a team of stylists to come and do hair and makeup for all three Stark women that afternoon. Sansa had nothing else to do other than stew in her own thoughts.

If she had known that Sandor would be so against coming to the banquet, she wouldn't have forced him to agree to go with her. Perhaps she had gotten too used to having him by her side, and expecting that he would unquestioningly go wherever she went. She really should have asked him seriously and not assumed he'd have no issues with her going ahead and ordering a tuxedo for him. Sansa sighed. She would apologize to him first thing, she decided, then they'd get the banquet over and done with and move on, just as Sandor had said. And yet, somewhere deep down she knew that Sandor's moodiness had nothing to do with attending the banquet at all.

He had basically told her that he had something on his mind, and it worried her – frightened her even, that Sandor was so unwilling to discuss it with her.

"What isn't he telling me?" she muttered to herself while she rolled over on top of her bed to stare at her ceiling. "I don't think it's about prom either."
She'd be lying if she said she wasn't interested in going to senior prom with Sandor. In her mind, she'd been thinking it would be a nice opportunity for them to create more memories together, especially as it was his final year of high school. Whatever was troubling Sandor was manifesting itself in his foul mood, and there was every chance it would get worse.

The stylists arrived at Chateau Maegor after lunch. The team included a makeup artist, a hair stylist, a nail technician and an assistant to help facilitate the entire beautification process. An upstairs drawing room was temporarily converted into a salon, and after a detailed consult to confirm styles, colors and designs, Catelyn, Sansa, and a nonplussed Arya were seated at individual 'glamor stations' – as the makeup artist had referred to the specific seating arrangements complete with portable mirrors and tables – with Sansa beginning with a manicure.

"Who gave you this idea, mother?" Arya had asked in between having sections of her hair teased. "I wasn't expecting you to actually hire a posse of professionals."

"They came highly recommended by Margaery," their mother had replied in between bursts of the makeup artist's air-brush gun. "She and her cousins have used their services in the past for family weddings and special events."

Later, when the gel on her nails had cured, the hairspray in her hair had set and the final coat of lipstick had been applied, Sansa was glad her mother had taken Margaery's recommendation because the results were nothing short of astounding. However, it wasn't until she had stepped into the Dior dress (once again chosen by her mother) that she fully appreciated their talents. She stood there in a lavender-hued gown with a skirt made up of layers of hand-embroidered silk organza which fell in soft curtains from her waist. The bodice was sheer like gossamer, with fine straps upon her shoulders and a scooped neckline that left her arms and décolletage bare. The stylist had formed soft curls into her hair, while the makeup artist had echoed the hue of her dress into her eye makeup. Her auburn hair contrasted with the cool lavender gown, ensuring that she was going to turn heads.

Her mother was wearing a matte satin shift gown in a dove grey shade, with a square neckline which she accentuated with a slim diamond choker. Catelyn's darker auburn hair had been twisted into an elegant up-do to show off her still slim and toned upper back and neckline. Arya meanwhile, had been dressed in a pale-yellow tea dress with a full skirt made of layers of sparkly tulle and fitted bodice with spaghetti straps. Her hair had been slicked into a bun high on her head, with her only accessory being diamond studs at her ears which had been borrowed from their mother. Arya's entire ballerina-esque look would have been far too sweet on her, had it not been for the bold red lipstick on her lips and the black lacquer on her square-tipped nails.

Including breaks, their entire glamor makeover had taken three hours. By the time the stylists departed, it was almost time for them to make their way to the banquet. Sansa waited with Arya in the foyer as their parents spoke to the sitter who would be in charge of Bran and Rickon for the evening and as the family's driver brought the limo around. Arya kept staring at her reflection in the mirror by the door, flipping the tendrils of hair about her face that the stylist said was intended to soften her look.

"You look great, Arya," Sansa assured her. "Stop fussing with your hair."

"Are you sure this isn't too much? I mean, red lipstick doesn't look weird on me, right?"

"Trust me, you look hot and Gendry will think so too."

"Thanks." Arya smiled at her. "You look very pretty, as always."

"Thank you." Sansa did a half-twirl, swirling her skirt about her feet "Mom's fondness for Dior is not
Arya gazed at her quizzically. "Is everything okay, Sansa?"

Sansa stilled. "Why do you ask?"

"You were unusually quiet today, especially considering we were getting glammed up and that's like, one of your favorite things ever, but you barely spoke at all throughout the entire three hours."

Sansa sighed. "It's nothing, really."

"Did you have a fight with Sandor?"

"I don't know that it can be called a fight. We just had a…difference of opinion."

"Also known as a fight." Arya made a face of sympathy. "Tonight's not gonna be fun for either of you, will it?"

Sansa shrugged. "We'll get through it somehow."

With a wave at Bran and Rickon as they exited the house, Sansa and Arya were ushered into the limo by their parents and shortly they were making their way towards city hall where arrangements had been made for Sandor and Gendry to meet them in the lobby, away from the paparazzi that would undoubtedly be waiting. Sansa's tummy was in knots, anticipating what kind of mood Sandor would be in that evening, and how he might react when they saw each other. Sighing, she steeled herself for the night ahead and whatever it might bring.

Thirty minutes later they approached their destination. The road leading to the steps of King's Landing City Hall had been cordoned off by security and all vehicles were being directed into a queue. As passengers of other vehicles alighted before them, Sansa recognized the faces of people she'd only seen on television and movies. She'd been told that the Easter Banquet drew celebrities, and it now made sense why tickets to the event were so coveted. The banquet was the event of the season, and people wanted to be seen mingling with the rich and the famous. She'd underestimated the attention the event would draw, and she now understood some of Sandor's apprehension about attending.

Their arrival was met with a volley of camera flashes when it was their family's turn to alight from the limo, and Sansa found herself momentarily blinded from the sudden brightness of so many cameras flashing at once. She saw Arya ducking her head, physically trying to avoid the light, as did their father who was never a fan of having his picture taken. Meanwhile, Catelyn Stark greeted the attention like a pro, seasoned by years as a socialite hailing from the illustrious Tully family long before she was the wife of Eddard Stark, smiling graciously and unfazed by her surroundings. The banquet was the first open event that Sansa and Arya had been allowed to attend with their parents, and Sansa acknowledged that she had plenty of things she could learn from her mother.

An usher approached them and directed them towards the red-carpet covered staircase. "Mr. and Mrs. Stark, could you and your daughters please come this way."

The sounds of a string quartet greeted guests immediately upon their entrance, and Sansa noted that opulence seemed to be the theme of the night. There were masses upon masses of white roses, lilies, and astroemeria clustered together in enormous arrangements throughout the hall, accented by splashes of peach and pink variants of the same species. The ceiling had been adorned by garlands of faux pearls and yet more flowers, which softened the light from the glittering chandeliers above. Waiters in tailcoats floated discreetly around the guests with ready glasses of alcoholic and non-
alcoholic refreshments while they waited to be led into the main dining hall. The tuxedo-clad men cut
dashing figures, while the elegantly dressed women dripped with diamonds. The folks in King's
Landing certainly did not know the meaning of the word moderation.

"Holy fuckballs…" Arya muttered under her breath.

"You got that right," Sansa agreed, immediately looking around the room for signs of her elusive
boyfriend.

"Do you see them?" Arya asked, also glancing around them even as she began to pull her phone out
of her clutch.

Sansa spotted Gendry first, looking supremely polished with just the right amount of debonair about
him that made women, both young and mature, turn to look at him twice. She heard Arya's sharp
inhale when she caught her first glimpse of Gendry in his tuxedo.

"Your man looks good, Arya," Sansa commented, acknowledging Gendry's undeniable looks.

"He certainly does." Arya raised her arm to draw his attention, clicking her tongue in appreciation
before gasping, appearing to do a double take. "Is that…?"

"What's wrong?" Sansa asked, turning to see what had made Arya gasp.

A large figure had appeared behind Gendry, and Sansa momentarily stopped breathing when she
realized who it was.

"I can't believe I'm saying this," Arya began with a shake of her head, "but, your man looks good,
too."

The surprise in Arya's voice was completely warranted, in Sansa's opinion, watching as Sandor
approached them following several steps behind Gendry. She was aware that she had been looking
at Sandor through rose-tinted glasses and she found him physically attractive in his own way, but at
that moment she felt as though she was seeing him with completely new eyes, and the only word that
came to mind was handsome. Sandor looked handsome, that's all there was to it, Sansa thought.
Certainly, it was not in the most classical definition of the word, but Sandor was exuding his own
brand of masculine appeal. The custom-made tuxedo fit him better than she could have imagined,
stretching across his broad shoulders and tapering at the waist to accentuate his muscular physique
and his impressive height. What really took her by surprise was the fact he had tied his hair back into
a neat column at the base of his head. This, of course, meant that the scars on his face were
completely exposed, but she couldn't help thinking that Sandor had worn his hair that way on
purpose.

Sandor met her eyes when he was some feet away from her, before approaching and greeting her
parents first, just as Gendry was doing.

"Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Stark," Gendry and Sandor said, almost in unison.

"Good evening, gentlemen." Ned shook their hands in turn. "I hope neither of you has been waiting
long."

"No sir," Sandor replied, "we've only just arrived."

"It's so nice to see you both again," Catelyn said as she appraised them. "I must say that you're both
looking very sharp tonight."
"That's very kind of you, ma'am. You look very elegant, as always." Gendry gave Sandor a subtle nudge.

"Thank you, ma'am," Sandor echoed automatically, "very elegant."

"Why, thank you." Catelyn's lips bore a bemused smile as she observed her daughters' suitors. "Do enjoy yourselves tonight. Now, don't keep your dates waiting any longer."

Arya brushed past her in her haste to claim her boyfriend, while Sansa remained where she stood as Sandor came to her side.

"Hi," she said to him, "thanks for coming."

"I promised I'd be here," Sandor returned quietly.

She took a breath and prepared herself to recite the apology she'd been practicing in her head. "Listen, I'm really sorry if I made you feel like I forced you to come tonight. I didn't think things through and I really should have been more considerate about your feelings. I hope you'll forgive me."

"There's nothing to apologize for."

She blinked up at him, not believing he could let it go so easily. "Really?"

"Let's not make it a bigger deal than it has to be, okay?" Sandor glanced down at her. "You're forgiven if that makes you feel better."

Sansa tensed at the tone behind his words, but she chose to let it slide for the moment. "You really do look great, you know."

"You do, too. You always do."

Sandor's back was rigidly straight, and his mouth was set in a firm line. His eyes too were guarded, far more than she had seen them in some time. Sansa sighed.

"I've never been to an event like this," she told him quietly, "but, father said it should be okay for us to leave after the speeches if things get too dull."

"Yeah, let's wait and see what happens."

The arrival of the Tyrells was heralded by a commotion at the entryway, followed by murmurs among the crowd. Margaery was dressed in a sleek Azzedine Alaia gown while her three brothers were, expectantly, dazzling and handsome. Of the three, Willas alone looked effortlessly cool and this fact did not go unnoticed by the many appreciative eyes that glanced their way. Olenna Tyrell exuded a regal aura in a sequined skirt-suit combo, drawing attention away from her son and daughter-in-law who entered the room after her.

Shortly after, the Baratheon entourage arrived led by Stannis and Selyse who both appeared as somber as always, despite the festive mood. Several feet behind them were Robert, Cersei, and Joffrey, making their first public appearance since the Valentine's Day Bachelor Auction. Renly Baratheon brought up the rear in his usual affable manner, looking far too amused for the occasion. The Baratheons were then followed by a procession of Lannisters, led by patriarch Tywin, then his sons Jaime and Tyrion, as well as a host of blonde-haired relations.

Sansa couldn't help thinking that Robert appeared agitated and uncharacteristically jumpy, glaring at
a waiter who appeared to step too close to him. Cersei appeared typically cold and beautiful, while Joffrey preened and postured as though he was God's gift to women. Sansa wondered how she could ever have found him attractive because all she saw now was a self-centered, arrogant, petulant psychopath.

The Tyrells and Baratheons congregated around Eddard and Catelyn Stark, exchanging greetings and pleasantries amiably as though no one in the room was watching them, when in fact all of them were acutely aware that the opposite was true; they drew far more attention than the A-list celebrities in attendance.

"So much for a classy party," Joffrey muttered in a low but audible drawl, glaring first at Gendry and Arya, before glancing at Margaery, then finally in Sansa and Sandor's direction. "They forgot to take out the trash."

Despite the glare and accompanying insult, Joffrey's lips bore a smile, put on specifically for anyone who might be watching. Sansa felt Sandor step closer to her side, sensing his hackles rising. Margaery's eyes turned glacial in response, while Gendry straightened to his full height. The adults among them were standing a few feet away, and Joffrey's comment had gone unnoticed by his parents. Sansa bristled and prepared herself to defuse the tension nevertheless. However, it was Willas who stepped in.

"Now, now, Joffrey," Willas soothed in a calming tone, "the night's too short to worry about housekeeping matters. How about you focus on something far more entertaining…like that pretty starlet over there. Isn't she the lead in that new spy-thriller movie that just came out, Red Parakeet, I think it was called? She's been eyeing you ever since you stepped onto the red carpet earlier."

Joffrey smirked when he caught sight of the young actress Willas referred to. "Hmm…maybe I will later if nothing else amuses me."

The distraction worked because Joffrey promptly ignored them and focused on pretending he wasn't at all interested in the pretty actress. Sansa saw Arya averting her face as she made a gagging expression, and Gendry attempted to shield her even as he tried to maintain a straight face.

"Nice save there, Willas." Renly came to join their group, having paid his respects to the adults. "My brother was all for leaving Joffrey behind, but his mother insisted on bringing him."

"It was nothing," Willas said with a shrug. "Sansa looked as though she was about to say something to him, but I thought it better that she avoid any confrontation with him."

"That's sweet of you, coming to Sansa's rescue like a knight in shining armor like that," Margaery added with a smile for her oldest brother, before turning to Sandor. "I'm sure Sandor appreciates it, don't you, Sandor? I imagine anything you say to Joffrey would just come off awkward given you were once his best friend."

"We were never friends," Sandor rasped, leaving Willas' good deed unacknowledged.

All the guests were ushered into the dining hall not long after. Robert Baratheon and his family shared a table with his Lannister in-laws. Arya and Gendry were seated at the table behind them together with Renly, Stannis, Selyse and a handful of her relations on the Florent side. The Starks and Tyrells were seated together, as Sansa had been pre-warned, but much to her dismay she had been seated with Sandor on her right side, and Willas on her left. Is this what it means to be stuck between a rock and a hard place? Sansa thought, trying not to grind her teeth in frustration. She could sense Sandor's displeasure radiating from him, though outwardly his facial expression was impassive. On the other hand, Willas was the epitome of charm and sophistication, exchanging witty
banter with those who spoke to him, and attentive to those around him.

"Can I get you something to drink, Sansa? What about you, Sandor? I'm ordering drinks for Gran and Margaery."

"I'll have a lemonade please," Sansa replied, "and a Pepsi Max for Sandor. Thank you, Willas."

Willas smiled at her. "You're most welcome."

The formal banquet began with an opening speech by the head organizer of the event, which was shortly followed by the *amuse bouche* and the appetizer. Sansa was seated opposite Loras, with his grandmother Olenna beside him. On Loras' other side was Garlan, who sat across from Sandor. Sansa was soon engaged in conversation with Loras and Olenna, and with Margaery who sat on Willas' other side. Of course, Willas was not going to be left out, and it was he who claimed a lot of her attention. Sandor barely spoke a word, despite Loras and Garlan's best attempts to draw him into football talk. Sansa tried to converse with him, even just to ask what he thought of the food, but when Sandor rebuffed her for the third time with his stilted grunts of *it's fine* and *great*, Sansa stiffened her jaw and chose to endure it...all throughout the seven-course degustation that followed.

Light entertainment, live music, and dancing came soon after the food had been served. Sandor obliged her with a dance when her parents gave them expectant glances, following Gendry and Arya onto the dance floor. Sandor remained tight-lipped during the three-and-a-half-minute song, awkwardly shuffling from one foot to another. By this time Sansa's patience had worn thin, so thin she felt she was going to snap at any moment. She very nearly did when Sandor let her go as soon as the music had ended, except Willas appeared at her elbow before she had a chance to say a word.

"May I have this dance?" Willas asked with his ever-present smile on his face.

She began to shake her head. "Not now, Willas I'm--"

"Go right ahead," Sandor growled, "she'd love to."

Sansa gaped at his words, staring at Sandor wide-eyed and dumbfounded. *What the hell is he thinking?*

"Thank you kindly." Willas inclined his head as Sandor began to stalk away from the dance floor.

"Hey, wait a minute…"

Sansa began to go after him, but Willas was sweeping her into his arms and into the heart of the crowded dance floor. Sansa moved automatically and because Willas knew how to lead a dance partner she didn't have to think about anything other than Sandor's bizarre behavior. Over Willas' shoulder, she followed Sandor's form as he headed back toward their table. She lost sight of him for a moment when other couples blocked her view, but when her view was cleared she found that Sandor was nowhere to be seen.

"Let him be, Sansa." Willas turned her so that she faced the opposite direction, away from the tables. "I'm certain he much prefers to be off the dance floor, am I right?"

Willas had observed correctly. Sandor had never made a secret of how much he disliked dancing, and yet she continued to force him to dance with her.

"I should go after him." Sansa attempted to crane her neck around trying to spot Sandor once again.

"At least wait until this song is over." Willas gave her a pleading look. "One dance, please?"
Sansa capitulated, and as soon as Willas sensed some of the tension leave her body he wasted no time in twirling and gliding her across the floor. Sansa had been given ballroom dance lessons as a child, excelling at them even, yet she found herself breathless by the time Willas lowered her into an elegant dip at the conclusion of the song. She stared up at the glittering chandelier overhead for a few seconds as she caught her breath, realizing that their performance had attracted an audience when she was standing upright once more.

"That was wonderful, you both dance so beautifully!" exclaimed the people around them.

"You're too kind," Willas responded to them.

The dance over, she attempted to extricate herself from the crowd. "Willas, I'll be going –"

"You are Sansa Stark, are you not?" asked a sophisticated looking woman who'd stepped up to them.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm Sansa Stark." Sansa pasted a practiced smile to her face.

"You are as lovely as the rumors say you are," the woman continued, "you're stunning to look upon, and a stunning dancer too. You're a very fortunate young man, Willas."

"Thank you, Mrs. Tarley." Willas smiled politely, identifying the woman for Sansa's benefit. "I do consider myself lucky that Sansa has allowed me to be by her side tonight."

"You make for a very handsome couple," Mrs. Tarley added, "I would love to see you both dance again."

Catching onto what the older woman was saying, Sansa rushed to correct her. "Oh, no we're not–"

"We're not ready to dance again just yet," Willas spoke over her, cutting off her protest. "Perhaps we may dance again later, but for now we'd better get back to our table. Do excuse us, Mrs. Tarley."

Willas expertly extricated them from the floor and politely declined the invitations of other people wishing to speak with them as he escorted her back towards their table, all while Sansa fumed. She was angry, and she had no patience to bother hiding it from him.

"We are not a couple, and I do not appreciate you misleading people into thinking that we are!" Sansa snapped bitingly. "Don't bother asking me to dance again because it's not going to happen. I haven't said anything before because I didn't want to believe you had it in you to be so devious or underhanded, but lately I think I'm starting to see who you really are. Now, I don't know what game you're trying to play tonight, but I want you to stop. Stop, before you do something you can never undo, before I really do start thinking the worst of you."

Willas regarded her with an expression on his face she'd never seen before, as though he was truly seeing her. The smile slipped from his lips, and for a moment the charming façade fell away. Willas Tyrell without his debonair persona really was just a serious, sober young man. He paused mid-step while they were still some feet away from the table that their two families shared, out of earshot from everyone.

"You really do like him, don't you?" Willas asked though it was said as a statement.

Sansa had never heard him speak in this tone before, without the false gaiety she was used to, and for the first time, she felt she was really speaking to the real Willas Tyrell. She wanted to believe that his persistence and prejudices were, as with Margaery, a regurgitation of Grandma Olenna's influences. But despite hoping that there was a truly good person under his false charm, Sansa had learned not to
give away her trust so freely, and she now regarded Willas with a new level wariness.

"I really do," she confirmed, speaking truthfully, knowing that at least, Willas was finally listening to her.

Willas sighed deeply and shook his head in a defeated sort of manner before he met her gaze. Sansa was momentarily taken aback by the sincerity she saw in his eyes. She had never believed that Willas could have had genuine feelings for her, but now she wasn't so sure.

"One day I hope I'll get the chance to know how it feels to have the heart of a girl like you, Sansa. Your loyalty to Sandor is truly admirable, and I do envy him."

"I hope you do, too, Willas," she said, glad that he finally understood. "Again, I'm sorry, but I don't see you that way."

"I'm sorry, too." Willas smiled at her in a sad kind of way, yet it was an honest smile, the most honest he'd ever been with her. "I wish I'd met you earlier."

Sansa shook her head, softening her stance a fraction. "Don't say that. You shouldn't wish for things you can't change, you'll just drive yourself crazy."

"Yes, you're right." Willas regarded her with his deep, sincere gaze a moment longer. And, then the veil came down and his façade returned. "If you're going to search for him, start at the courtyard. I saw him heading in that direction."

"Thanks, Willas."

Sansa smiled at him gratefully, glad that they were finally able to reach an understanding and that he now acknowledged that her relationship with Sandor was serious. Whatever Willas' intentions toward her may have been his attraction to her had been genuine, but he was far from being in love with her. She sincerely hoped that he would soon get over her and move on, and that their acquaintanceship could continue on a strictly platonic level, albeit with a healthy dose of circumspection. Willas was still a Tyrell after all.

The courtyard, situated at the heart of the grounds, was a green haven of manicured lawns, curated flower gardens and discreetly placed seating. Sansa found people there were in much more relaxed moods and easy conversations, taking cigarette breaks in the designated smoking areas and sipping brightly colored cocktails. She also found a lot of familiar faces of students she recognized from KL Prep, many of whom waved and attempted to invite her to join them. Having successfully avoided them, she eventually found Sandor in the most secluded corner of the courtyard, peering at the screen of his phone, disassociated with the happenings around him. He looked up as the sound of her footsteps alerted him to her presence.

"Had enough dancing?" he asked gruffly, glancing at her from over the screen of his phone.

"For now." Sansa nodded.

"I'm not gonna be dancing again later if that's what you're thinking."

"I wasn't going to ask you to dance again," Sansa said through tight lips, annoyed by how petulant he was being.

Sandor caught the bite in her tone and he placed his phone back into his pocket. "You didn't have to come out here to look for me."
"I didn't know where you'd gone," Sansa said softly, giving him a careful look. "I wasn't sure you'd be coming back."

"So, you came to make sure that I did?"

Sansa glanced away tellingly. "You were going to come back, right?"

Sandor made a grunting noise in response, which made Sansa curl her fingers into a fist at her sides. Sandor's expression, dark and foreboding, told her more than she wanted to know.

"I'm not welcome there." Sandor gestured towards the hall with his elbow. "I hate to state the obvious, but I don't belong here, not with all these people eating thousand-dollar lobsters and ballroom dancing. I'm not rich or come from the right family. I have nothing in common with people like--"

"People like me," Sansa cut in, bitterly. "That's what you're saying, isn't it? You have nothing in common with people like me."

Sandor's lips curled in a way she had not seen in a long time. It was a mocking sneer he'd always worn in the past when he used to call her out for being exactly what she was; a privileged, entitled brat.

"You see that now, don't you?" Sandor chuckled humorlessly. "You heard them all talking about the rough-looking thug who dared to dance with Eddard Stark's daughter, didn't you?"

"Heard who?"

"Oh, come on. Don't pretend you didn't hear all those people in the lobby wondering if I was some charity case that your mother had picked up."

Appalled, Sansa stared at him in horror. She had been right there with him and she'd heard none of what he'd just recounted.

"That's awful!" she cried, "I'm sorry you had to hear that."

"What's worse," he continued, "what's worse is the fact not one of them even considered I was here because of you."

"What do you mean? There are so many people here from KL Prep that know about you and me."

"You don't get it," Sandor declared flatly. "I'm standing right next to you, but they all still assume that you're with Willas Tyrell."

"Sandor, that's...that's..."

Bewildered by the bitterness in his voice she could only watch him, painfully aware that what he'd observed was not incorrect. She'd seen the speculation in peoples' eyes moments earlier when she'd danced with Willas. Mrs. Tarley had even referred to herself and Willas as a 'handsome couple'.

"What's the matter? You can't even tell me I'm wrong, huh?" Sandor's voice was rougher than usual, raw with pent-up emotions. "Maybe you and Willas should just get together and prove all those people right."

"Have you lost your mind?"

"I'm not blind, Sansa. I've seen the guy watching you for so many months." Sandor pierced her with
"What?" Sansa frowned.

"That night I came to your house for dinner," Sandor reminded her, "I heard him telling you that he'd wait for you to grow out of this phase... that he'd wait for you to get tired of dating bad boys like me so that you could be with a real man like him."

Sansa's jaw dropped in shock, vaguely recalling hearing footfalls in the hallway that night when she returned to the sitting room.

"You were eavesdropping." Sansa couldn't believe the sense of déjà vu she was suddenly experiencing. "Again."

"It didn't seem like either of you was trying to keep your voices down," Sandor pointed out, "maybe he meant for me to hear everything."

"This isn't the first time you've listened in on a conversation I've had with Willas, and just like the last time, you're jumping to conclusions." Sansa recalled that Sandor had eavesdropped on her and Willas that day at the Blue Rose Song Festival, and how angry he'd been afterward.

"No." Sandor shook his head. "This is not like the last time."

"You obviously must have heard me telling him over and over again that I am with you and that I wasn't interested in him." Sansa huffed. "I don't even know why we're having this conversation!"

Sandor grunted. "Yeah, I heard."

"But?"

"I don't know why, but his argument seems more convincing to me." Sandor folded his arms across his chest as he regarded her with his ever-darkening stare. "He has a point, you know."

"Willas is wrong," Sansa argued, "everything he said that night is based solely on what he's observed about other people. It has nothing to do with you and me."

"I don't know about that," Sandor said with a shake of his head. "Seems like he knew what he was talking about. He knew better than I ever did."

"Sandor, what's going through your head?"

"I thought that being with you was enough. That all I had to do was be beside you. I thought that if I was always at your side then people would realize that you were mine. These past few months I've been stressing out about leaving for college because I don't know anything about doing things long-distance because all I know is how to do things when I'm next to you. But, now I see that being next to you isn't enough." Sandor gave her another of his mocking sneers. "I've been alone most of my life, Sansa. But, I understood loneliness on a whole new level tonight, standing right by your side."

Sansa felt her heart constrict within her chest, feeling his words like a physical blow. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying that you and I were never going to work, and I've been fooling myself this whole time. I thought I could fight for you, but I never stood a chance."

"Who are you fighting, Sandor?" Sansa took a step closer to him. "I'm already yours."
"You could never truly be mine," Sandor rasped, "because there are always going to be things about you and the world you belong in that I will never understand, or ever be a part of. I'm always going to be a fucking square peg trying to force myself to fit somewhere I won't!"

"I'm not asking you to change for me," she emphasized, "and, I'm sorry if it seems like that's what I'm trying to do. I won't make you come to parties you don't want to be at anymore."

"It's not about attending parties, Sansa. It's about whether I'm the right guy for you, and I really don't think I am. We can pretend, just as we have been doing, but once I leave for Valyria U and Willas Tyrell shows you how much I've been holding you back, you'll see what everyone else has always understood. We've always been the odd couple, Sansa, and Gossip Spyder didn't have to point it out in that fucking blog for everyone to see it."

"If you're talking about that photo of us on the blog the other day, that was because you never smiled in any of our photos together while I, apparently, always had a smile plastered on my face. That was the only reason we were in 'the odd couple' gallery."

"You really do like to see the lighter side of everything, don't you?"

"And, you're always so negative,"

"And that's our problem, that right there."

"Are you trying to break up with me?" Sansa heard a high-pitched ringing in her ears, and for a brief moment, she had an out-of-body experience, seeing herself as though she were an on-looker, her face frozen in shock.

"It's better to end it now before we get in too deep," Sandor replied tonelessly.

"Before we get in too deep?" she echoed in disbelief, "it's way too late for that. I'm in this with everything I have, Sandor. I gave you everything I have. I could never have done it if I wasn't serious about you."

"You think losing your virginity to me means I owe you something?" Sandor's eyes narrowed. "Sex doesn't change anything. It won't magically fix all the ways in which I'm wrong for you."

"Did it really mean so little to you?" Sansa demanded, feeling the tightness in her chest constricting further. "Is sex really that meaningless to you?"

"Have you forgotten?" he raised his good eyebrow. "One-night stands were what I did best before I met you."

His words stung, painfully so, but Sansa knew that he was trying to hurt her on purpose.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Haven't you been listening?" Sandor growled at her. "I'm not fucking good enough for you, and everyone in there knows it! Sansa Stark deserves someone who can be there for you in all ways, not just meet you half-way. You aren't seeing things clearly, Sansa. You've been cocooned in this safe, rosy little world your entire life that you don't realize not everything can be as perfect as you want it to be. The real world is not as forgiving as you think."
"So, you're doing this for my sake?"

"Everything I've done has always been for you," Sandor replied, "and, none of it has ever been good enough."

Sansa's shoulders began to tremble from the sudden rush of anger, fear and frustration rushing through her. Of all the things she envisioned happening between her and Sandor that night, this had not been one of them. The possibility of losing Sandor, a possibility she had greatly feared, suddenly became all too real.

"You don't get to decide," she heard herself say.

"What?"

"You don't get to decide what is good enough for me," she repeated, "no one but me gets to decide if something or someone is good enough for me. Not even you."

"That's exactly what a spoilt, rich princess would say," Sandor sneered.

"Is this really how you feel?"

"What if it is?"

"How long have you been thinking like this?" she demanded.

"A while," he replied with a shrug.

"And, you never intended to say anything to me?"

"What good would that do?"

"We could have done what all couples do and worked it out together." Sansa spat out in frustration. "I knew you'd been acting strangely these past few weeks, but you refused to speak to me every time I asked you about it. After everything we've been through I still can't believe that you would choose to keep your thoughts and feelings to yourself like this, and that you'd let it get to you so badly to the point you're about to make the biggest mistake of your life – because breaking up with me would be the biggest mistake you could ever make. I don't know what the future will bring, but what I know for certain is that I want you in my future…I'm saying that it has to be you. I don't want anyone else. I love you."

Sansa was finding it difficult to breathe after her impassioned speech, realizing that it was the first time she had ever told him that she loved him, wondering why she'd waited so long to tell him. Sandor looked stunned, his eyes wide with the impact of her words. For a moment Sansa thought she'd gotten through to him, hoping she'd derailed the destructive path of his thoughts. But, instead, her words seemed to have the opposite effect. In the space of a heartbeat, Sandor's expression closed over completely and his eyes became like those of a stranger. He stood up abruptly, looming over her in a way that made her want to take a step back, but she stood her ground.

"You only think you do," he growled, "you don't know what you're talking about."

"I do know," Sansa insisted. "I love you, Sandor. I mean it."

"What do you even know about being in love?" Sandor scoffed. "You're just playing at being a grown up and thinking you're in love with me because I treated you better than your last boyfriend."
"I know enough to realize that you're just trying to hurt me," she countered, "but, I'm not going to let you."

"Still talking like a spoilt princess, huh?" Sandor bared his teeth like a feral beast. "Well, guess what? I'm done. I've had enough."

He began to walk away from her, sidestepping her as he headed down the dimly lit path toward the exit. Sansa watched him in disbelief, her heart suddenly beating painfully in panic.

"Sandor!" she called out to him, finding her voice when he was half-way down the path.

He slowed his steps, but did not stop walking. Sansa chased after him, cursing when the lavender ruffles of her skirt tangled about her ankles. She caught the sleeve of his tuxedo between her fingers just as he reached the main hall. Sandor turned at her touch, but the look he gave her sent her heart sinking to the pit of her stomach. Standing by the doorway in full view of anyone who cared to look, Sansa pleaded with him.

"Don't do this," she implored, "don't do this to us."

"Let me go, Sansa," he rasped quietly.

"We can fix this," she said quickly, "I know we can. Let's work this out together, please."

"I don't know how," he confessed to her, "I don't know if I can."

"We have to try. We won't know until we do."

Sandor was refusing to meet her eyes, and the line of his jaw remained hard while his stance stayed rigid. For a few aching heartbeats they stood in front of each other in silence, until he shook his head once more, and Sansa's heart froze in her chest.

"It's no good."

Sandor's uttered rejection was almost inaudible but she heard him nevertheless, and when he began to walk away, this time she did not go after him. Instead, she turned her eyes to the ceiling high above her, unable to watch him leave. What just happened? Is it really over for us? She did not want to believe that Sandor had just broken up with her. Moreover, she was unable to do anything to stop him. She finally lowered her gaze to look in the direction of the exit, but of course Sandor was no longer there. Sansa didn't know how long she stood in the doorway staring in the distance, hoping that a familiar tall figure would reappear, but she was in the process of reliving their final conversation when she was broken out of her trance by a murmur in the dining hall.

Sansa became aware of a buzz amidst the group of tables nearest to the doorway, but soon the buzz grew into a veritable roar as people began to talk to each other in shocked and excited voices. Reminding herself of her present environment, Sansa gave herself a mental shake. Keep it together, she told herself. Just a little longer…don't fall apart.

"I see that the news has broken," drawled a feminine voice beside her.

Sansa turned to find Margaery standing on the other side of the doorway, and for a second Sansa thought she was referring to her situation with Sandor, before she saw that Margaery was watching the growing furor in the hall.

"What's happening, Margaery?" Sansa wondered, allowing herself to be distracted from her dark thoughts.
"Just watch and listen," Margaery replied as she hooked her elbow with Sansa's. "You'll find out soon enough."

"This sounds serious." Sansa observed the barely concealed looks of scandal among the people they passed on their way back to their table.

"It could be," Margaery supposed quietly, "but, I guess that all depends on where you stand."

As they neared their table Sansa could see that the adults all wore grim expressions. Her father was always quietly stoic, but her mother beside him was uncharacteristically stiff. Mace Tyrell was wearing a frown, and his wife wrung her hands beside him. Only Margaery's grandmother wore a bemused expression on her wrinkled features. At the table behind them Sansa saw Arya practically spinning in her chair while Gendry gripped her hand, presumably to prevent her from actually spinning in her chair. Stannis Baratheon, usually somber at best, had turned ashen-faced and was seated beside his equally immobile wife. At their table, Renly alone sat there sipping wine and smirking in the direction of his oldest brother's family.

Beyond Stannis Baratheon's table, Sansa saw that chaos had broken out at the table Robert shared with his family and extended Lannister relatives. Robert was red-faced and obviously agitated, Cersei's usually icy demeanor had cracked and she was presently hissing at her twin brother Jaime, while Tyrion attempted to play referee. Tywin Lannister was up on his feet with his hand on Joffrey's shoulder, who himself was standing in front of his father and speaking to him with a particularly harsh expression that distorted his features. What the hell is going on? Sansa thought.

Upon seeing her, Arya gave her a conspiratorial look that read; have you heard? Sansa shook her head. Arya then gave a pointed look towards Sandor's vacant seat, and again Sansa shook her head at the obvious question regarding her now-absent date. Margaery released her arm upon reaching their table, as Willas gallantly stood up to pull his sister's chair out for her.

"Where have you been, Margaery?" he asked of her.

"Greeting some friends," she replied, "what did I miss?"

Sansa knew that despite Margaery's innocent tone, she knew exactly what was happening. Willas turned to help Sansa into her seat, pausing for only the slightest moment to acknowledge the empty seat on her other side. Sansa sat down and thanked him, but did not offer an explanation.

"The evening edition of the King's Landing Herald has just been posted online and the Baratheons are front page news," Willas replied to his sister.

"Are they?" Margaery continued in her innocent voice. "Whatever for?"

"Something that does not bear repeating." Willas answered dismissively, "nevertheless, the repercussions of this latest scandal will be monumental."

Sansa caught Arya's eyes once more, this time her sister was brandishing her phone and mouthing for her to check hers. Taking her phone from her slimline clutch, Sansa opened the link that Arya sent to her in a text, which directed her to the front page of the King's Landing Herald. The headline read; Whose son is he? Which made her think the article would be about Gendry for a moment, until she read the first few lines.

In a shocking development for the Baratheon family, already beleaguered from the revelation of Robert Baratheon's infidelity resulting in the birth of an illegitimate child eighteen years ago, it is alleged that the son he had been raising as his own, and heir to the Baratheon fortunes, may not be
his. A DNA paternity report submitted to us from an anonymous source close to the family has revealed that with the probability of paternity at 0%, Robert Baratheon is excluded as the father of Joffrey Baratheon.

Sansa gasped and she looked up from her phone, catching the eye of her father who had been watching her. Ned gave her a stern look, and Sansa quickly set her expression back to neutral as best as she could. The banquet was over for all of them, without a doubt. She knew that her parents would be extricating them from the venue as soon as possible before all the reporters in the vicinity honed in on the Baratheons and anyone close to them. Sansa heaved a ragged sigh, looking around her and at the barely restrained chaos that was taking over the Easter Banquet, having had just about all the shocks she could take. As she waited for instructions from her parents, she realized that there would be questions about Sandor's abrupt departure, and she didn't know if she could respond without breaking into tears.

*Just a moment longer...keep it together.*

Chapter End Notes

Just because we're close to the end does not mean there won't be more drama...
Holy shit, you guys!

The Easter Banquet has just been disrupted by the most shocking news ever! The evening edition of the Herald has just alleged that Joffrey Baratheon is not the son of Robert Baratheon! The news outlet somehow got their hands on a DNA test report that excludes Robert as being Joffrey's father. How crazy is that? If Robert isn't his father, then who is? As an eyewitness to all that went down, I can tell you that both the Baratheon and Lannister families appear to have been blindsided by this news, resulting in heated discussions between Joffrey and Robert, though it is a pity that I was too far away to hear anything. Every member of the Baratheon and Lannister families were whisked out of city hall just moments ago, along with others close to them like the Tyrell and Stark families, presumably to be away from premises before media began to converge en masse. OMG! It always struck me how closely Gendry Waters resembled Robert and Renly Baratheon, while Joffrey looks nothing like them. The Baratheon genes are hella dominant I'd say, so the DNA test may just be true! Stay tuned!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

Gendry

He first became aware that something had happened when one of Stannis' in-laws had gasped while staring at something on his phone, loud enough so that people around him stopped what they were doing to look at him. The man had cleared his through, excused himself and then proceeded to whisper into Stannis' ear. Stannis had looked at the screen his brother-in-law had shoved under his nose, and for a micro-second Gendry would swear he'd seen a smirk flash across his uncle's face, before his expression became like stone once more.

"What is it, Stannis?" Selyse had asked her husband, herself beginning to notice that something had happened.

"The evening edition of the Herald has just been published online," Stannis had replied, "and, my brother is once again front-page news."

Shortly afterwards it became obvious that many people were subscribers of the King's Landing Herald when there were repeated gasps echoing around the hall. Arya had given him a nudge, prompting him to take out his phone, and soon he too had gasped.

"Is this for real?" Arya had asked, peering over his elbow at his screen. "This isn't some kind of joke, is it?"

Gendry had spared a glance towards the table where Robert sat and saw that his expression was hard and that his fist was balled up on the table beside his wine glass. Gendry had glanced again towards Stannis and saw that his uncle was staring intently at his older brother. Across the table from Gendry his other uncle, Renly, had began to chuckle as he placed his phone onto the table before him, the Herald site still on the screen.
"I don't know," Gendry had eventually replied, though he'd had an unsettling feeling that there was no joke and that everything reported in the Herald was entirely true.

"This is crazy," Arya had said with increasing excitement, "if this is true, then it means Joffrey isn't your brother."

"Crazy, yeah," he'd agreed, "totally insane."

As the news had continued to break around them Arya's excitement around the potential scandal was making her jumpy, so he'd reached for her hand to try and distract her, aware that their table was getting almost as much attention as that of his father's.

"This is starting to get out of hand, Stannis," Selyse had said to her husband in hushed tones. "The banquet is far from over…what should we do?"

"What are you going to do, Stannis?" a Florent in-law had repeated. "Your brother's family will be the center of attention for all the wrong reasons."

Renly had chuckled louder. "There's nothing to do but watch as Robert's kingdom comes crashing down around him."

"Of course, you have not considered how this affects us all," Stannis had drawled, directing an irritated glance at his younger brother. "We must leave before all the reporters and paparazzi converge outside city hall demanding a response."

Stannis had not been alone in this thinking as Arya's father soon came to collect her from Gendry's side.

"It is unfortunate that the night must end like this, but you had better head home too, Gendry." Arya's father had patted him on the shoulder. "Have your foster-parents contact Donald Luwin as soon as possible, just in case this brings you unwanted attention."

"Yes, Mr. Stark." Gendry had nodded obediently.

"I'll call you later, okay?" Arya had whispered to him as she collected her belongings.

"I'll see to it that the boy gets home safely, Ned," Stannis had told him.

"That's kind of you, Stannis."

"The safety of my nephew is of great importance to me, I assure you," Stannis had added.

Eddard Stark had given the man a look, perhaps noticing as Gendry had that there was something about his uncle's demeanor that did not fit with the expression he wore.

"Good to hear it," Eddard had eventually said before he'd taken Arya's elbow to leave. "Goodnight to you all."

Gendry had barely said farewell to Arya when he, Renly, Stannis and Selyse were being ushered out of the dining hall by security, taking an alternate route down to their waiting vehicles, avoiding the press gathered by the main entrance. Journalists who had initially been there to cover the charity function were now after more tantalizing news.

"Follow our car, then as soon as we're away from the city hall precinct you're free to make your way home," Stannis had instructed him. "And, expect a call from me tomorrow."
Now that he was in the confines of his car speeding along the Kingsroad Expressway towards home, all he could do was wonder at the timing of it all. After everything he'd experienced he knew better than to think it was all coincidental. The Herald publishing the news when the Baratheon and Lannister families were in the presence of their peers in a public setting had to be a deliberate act. *Who the hell sent the DNA report, and what are they hoping to get out of it?* Gendry wondered.

He arrived home shortly before ten and as he entered the kitchen via the garage, he geared himself up to tell Tobho and Ellen about the latest scandal, along with Eddard Stark's advice to call Donald Luwin. However, they were both sitting at the kitchen counter waiting for him.

"You're back, Gendry," Tobho said in greeting.

"Are you all right?" Ellen asked, her face lined with worry.

Gendry blinked, noting the concern on their faces. "I guess this means you've heard the news?"

"We have." Tobho cleared his throat and got off the stool to stand before him. "Luwin called to tell us. I've just finished speaking with him, in fact."

"What did he have to say?" Gendry asked, shrugging out of his tuxedo jack and loosening the bow-tie at his neck.

Tobho told him that Luwin had already devised a defensive strategy in case the press sought to come after him for whatever reason.

"Luwin expects renewed interest in you because, if the allegations prove true and Joffrey isn't Robert's son, then there is reason to assume that Robert may have a renewed interest in you, too," Tobho told him, further explaining that Luwin had advised for him to avoid his usual hangouts for a while, until they were certain that he wasn't going to become a target.

"Fine, I'll do what he says," Gendry agreed with a frown. "But, why would Robert suddenly become more interested in me now?"

Tobho mirrored his frown, looking conflicted but determined to tell him the truth. "Luwin was reluctant to tell me the reason given that his theory is based on hearsay, but there is rumor regarding the Baratheon inheritance."

"Which is?"

"There is supposedly a clause excluding anyone that is not *of the blood* from inheriting Baratheon property or wealth."

"Call me slow, but what does it have to do with me? Robert has two other kids."

"There will soon be questions regarding their paternity, too."

"So what?" Gendry's frown deepened. "What makes anyone think he'll leave anything to me? He has two living brothers and a niece...not to mention another bastard son in France. I know that I may be legally entitled to something, but I doubt I'd get anything worth mentioning."

"I wouldn't be so sure. Apparently, handing his entire fortune over to his brothers is something Robert is unlikely to do, and you are his eldest biological son -"

"I'm almost a stranger to him,"
"Perhaps, but according to Luwin he's more likely to bequeath his fortune to a stranger than to his brothers." Tobho rubbed a spot between his eyes, perhaps in disbelief at the conversation he was having with him. "Gendry, you may consider yourself a stranger to him, but -"

"I just happen to be of the blood," Gendry completed the sentence, unable to grasp that such a thing could even be possible.

He was a nobody just a year ago, and now he was in a position to inherit a fortune worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Not just any fortune either, he thought, the Baratheon fortunes.

"We realize this must be a lot to take in, but Luwin thought it best to give you a heads up, so that you can prepare yourself for anything that may happen."

"Yeah." Gendry sighed. "I'm sorry you've all been dragged into my family's issues again, I know these past few months haven't been easy for you."

"Hey, now." Tobho came and placed a father arm about his shoulder. "We're your family, too. Don't be sorry, okay? We're here for you."

Touched by their continued support, Gendry drew both his foster-parents together for a rare hug, which caused Ellen to tear up, before she urged him towards the stairs.

"Go on up to your room, Gendry. Get some rest, okay?"

Gendry showered and changed in record time so that he could message Arya before she went to bed. Arya responded with a video call.

"Hey," she greeted him with a gentle smile when their images appeared on the screen. "How you doin'? Anything happen on your way home?"

Gendry saw that she too had changed out of the pretty yellow gown she'd been wearing earlier, and all trace of makeup had been wiped from her face. She was sitting up, leaning against a pile of pillows on her bed.

"Nothing happened. Stannis' security people got us out of there without being noticed," he assured her. "What about you?"

Arya shook her head. "No problems on our side. Father doesn't really expect the press to bother us, but he wanted to leave just in case. I heard that the banquet is still in full-swing, even now."

"Yeah, Beric and Edric are still at city hall. They texted to give me an update. I guess that there are people out there who don't give a shit about the Baratheons or Lannisters," Gendry quipped. "The whole world doesn't revolve around them, contrary to what they believe."

Arya laughed, clearly glad to see that he was fine. "What do you think will happen now?"

Gendry shrugged. "I'm done guessing what these people will do, and to be honest, I want nothing to do with it."

"You do realize that may not be possible, given who you are?"

"So I've heard," Gendry said as he pinched the bridge of his nose, as though to ward off an oncoming headache. "We don't even know if it's true, so until someone tells me that it is, I don't even want to think about it."
"Do you really think the Baratheons and Lannisters would have reacted like that if there wasn't any truth to it?"

"I don't think anyone could have reacted with anything but outrage in this situation, don't you?"

"You're right," Arya agreed, "I'd just never seen Joffrey's mother lose her shit like that before. There's just something so odd about the whole situation, and it's been bugging me. I can't figure out why anyone would want to set out to destroy the Baratheons and Lannisters like this."

"Destroy?" Gendry picked up on the verb she'd chosen to use.

"Well, yeah." Arya raised her shoulder in a shrug, as though it was obvious. "Father's been locked in his office on the phone ever since we got home talking to business acquaintances and bank managers."

"Why?"

"Don't quote me on this because it's just something I overheard my parents discussing earlier and I might have understood it all wrong, but it seems that Robert has been taking loans from Tywin Lannister for years before he even formed a partnership with my father and Mace Tyrell, and somehow that debt is now larger than what father had originally heard. Robert and Cersei have a volatile relationship, but even with all of Robert's infidelities she has never sought to divorce him. Mother thinks that someone is trying to force him to divorce Cersei."

"And, divorcing Joffrey's mother will somehow lead to their destruction?"

"Because Robert would then have to pay all his debts to Joffrey's grandfather, or something like that."

"Someone wants to ruin them financially?"

"Maybe," Arya said with a shrug. "Like I said, I haven't figured out what's going on."

Gendry sighed tiredly. "I'm sick of talking about those people."

He was about to suggest meeting up and going for a drive the next day, but before he could get a word out Arya abruptly looked up from her phone, distracted by someone opening her bedroom door.

"What's up, Sansa?" Arya asked, simultaneously identifying her visitor.

"Sandor broke up with me," Sansa replied off-screen, her voice unmistakably nasal from crying.

Gendry's brow rose and his jaw dropped a little, but he remained silent.

"Huh?" Arya gaped in shock. "Sandor did, what?"

"We had a fight and he just -"

"Wait, wait!" Arya halted her sister and the screen shook as she held the phone up to her face, giving Gendry an apologetic glance. "Sorry, I'm gonna have to go now. You heard that, right?"

Gendry nodded. "Take care of your sister. I'll talk to you tomorrow."
"Goodnight."

Gendry ended the video call before muting all notifications on his phone. He hadn't been quite ready to say goodnight, but if the situation between Sansa and Sandor was as bad as it sounded then Sansa needed Arya more than he did at that moment. He distracted himself from his thoughts by watching a series on Netflix, and he must have fallen asleep because when he next opened his eyes there was daylight streaming through his bedroom window and his tablet had slipped out of his hands onto the pillow next to his head. He had fuzzy images of a dream where he'd been referring to Robert as Dad, which he dispelled by vigorously shaking his head, before reaching for his phone.

Throughout the night and into the early hours of the morning he had received dozens of missed calls and messages from friends and acquaintances, and a voicemail from Stannis summoning his presence, which prompted him to get out of bed and return the man's call to find out where and when. He then sent a text to Arya to let her know where he'd be, got showered and dressed, before heading downstairs to tell Tobho and Ellen of his plans.

"Whatever happens, just remember not to let your emotions get the better of you," Ellen reminded him.

"I'll do my best," Gendry promised her.

Davos Seaworth arrived after breakfast and spoke to his foster-parents briefly, assuring them that the Baratheon family was handling the situation as best as they could and that Gendry's continued well-being was foremost in Stannis' concerns.

"Stannis arranged for Gendry to be chauffeured in a vehicle that the local press will not be familiar with, given that we've spotted journalists close to Stannis' apartment," Davos told them. "I will personally ensure that he is returned home safely."

In the car, Davos kept up a stream of idle chatter. Gendry knew it was for his benefit given he was not as talkative as he normally would be in the older man's presence.

"Davos," he eventually said, "just tell me how it really is. What's going on?"

Davos gave him a glance, gauging his mood. "The entire household is in an uproar, as you would expect. Stannis has not had a moment's peace since he arrived home last night, and I suspect he has not slept. Renly stayed the night, but his presence was more antagonistic than helpful. Stannis did not elaborate what this meeting is about, but I gather it concerns your future as a result of this recent turn of events."

Stannis was alone in the luxurious apartment having sent Selyse and Shireen back to the relative privacy of Storm's End. Gendry saw him standing by the large window in the living room looking out over the traffic below and the green expanse of King's Square beyond, his back straight and wearing his usual grim expression.

"You're here," Stannis addressed him, never one for pleasantries. "Take a seat, we have a lot to discuss."

"That's what I'm here for," Gendry acknowledged, sitting himself down in an armchair and watched as Stannis took the chair opposite him.

"I'm sure you want to know the truth, like everyone else," Stannis said without preamble, "and, as it turns out I am in possession of the truth."

Stannis then slid a stack of papers across the coffee table in front of him, which Gendry caught
between his fingers before the stack fell to the floor.

"What's this?" he asked warily.

"The truth."

Gendry unfolded the stack of papers, noting first the logo of some scientific clinic, and then he read the same words he'd first seen reported in the Herald, almost word for word. The probability of paternity is 0%, this result excludes Robert Baratheon as the biological father of Joffrey Baratheon. He flipped through the remaining pages in his hands, and understood that he was looking at the DNA test that the Herald had been referring to.

"What are you thinking, boy?" Stannis asked him when he'd sat there for some time without making a sound.

Gendry let out a low laugh. "I am so fucking relieved I'm not related to Joffrey!"

Stannis' mouth thinned, but Gendry saw amusement in the man's eyes. "I see that this reaction of yours in entirely genuine. It's a great reassurance of your character."

"Who in their right mind would want to be related to that prick?"

"Indeed."

"So, why do you have a copy of this DNA report?" Gendry wondered. "How did you get this?"

"It was delivered to me anonymously a few days ago and its authenticity has been confirmed by Robert himself."

"Wait." Gendry held up his hand. "Robert knew about this?"

"It would appear he knew the truth about Joffrey even before the DNA test was carried out," Stannis revealed, his expression breaking into a smirk reminiscent of the one Gendry had witnessed at the banquet. "In fact, it might be fair to say he's known for years."

"He what?" Gendry balked. "He knew the entire time and did nothing? I don't understand. Why would he keep quiet about this?"

Stannis shrugged. "My brother's reasons will perhaps remain his own, but now that the truth is out in the open, he has no choice but to act accordingly."

"What will he do?"

"He's become society's laughingstock overnight with everyone recognizing him to be a veritable cuckold. He'll react aggressively, you can bet on that. And, you had better prepare yourself, too."

"So people keep telling me," Gendry quipped, "do I take it as advice or a warning?"

"Both," Stannis returned, fixing him with a hard stare. "Do you recall our conversation after the bachelor auction?"

"Parts of it, yes." Gendry nodded. "You said something about having done your duty by me, and wanting to do right by Shireen, and how I was a means to an end."

"I'm glad you remember. You also rightly suspected that I had a greater goal in mind." Stannis stared at him harder. "I can now tell you that my ultimate goal right from the start has been to secure for my
daughter everything that should rightfully be hers. My goal is to ensure that Shireen is named as the rightful, legitimate Baratheon heir."

"I see," Gendry said as cogs and wheels began to turn in his head. "I'm still trying to work out how I fit into your plans."

"Your existence is what started the ball rolling," Stannis began, "without you, none of this would have been possible."

"How?"

"When I first laid eyes on you I was astounded by how much you resembled Robert and Renly."

Stannis leaned forward in his armchair. "I will also say I was not the only one who thought so. Jon Arryn, when he saw your photo he said a peculiar thing that set off alarm bells in my head. Jon said, 'the seed is strong', which I at first thought to be a comment he was making regarding your uncanny resemblance to my brothers. However, he said it again when we were at Storm's End one afternoon and I happened to find him in the hall of portraits. It soon dawned on me that there were no portraits of blond-haired Baratheons up on those walls. Not one. And, that was when my first suspicions regarding Cersei's children were roused."

"You're saying you know for sure that Myrcella and Tommen aren't Robert's children either?"

Gendry asked incredulously.

"I am absolutely certain of it, especially now that it's been confirmed that Joffrey is not Robert's son."

"Did you have anything to do with this DNA report?" Gendry demanded, tapping the papers with his finger.

Stannis gave him an indulgent smile. "It was not me who ordered the test, no. However, I am not the only one who suspected the truth about Cersei's children, and there are many others who would profit from the chaos this revelation would bring."

"It may not have been you who ordered the test, but you're not entirely innocent, are you?"

"I know what you are trying to accuse me of, Gendry, and I'll tell you now that my only involvement in this entire saga was not ensuring that your original birth certificate was properly secured when I handed it over to my brother." Stannis stared him down, his blue eyes speaking volumes, letting Gendry know that Stannis had made no mistakes and leaving his birth certificate where it could be seen had been a deliberate act.

"But, you do know who did?"

Stannis did not even blink. "It will give you no benefit to know who did, so I must decline answering this question."

"Why are you even bothering telling me anything at all?"

"Because, I wish to make a deal with you, Gendry."

"Then you should talk to my lawyer,"

"No, no. That won't do." Stannis shook his head. "I wish to make a deal not for my sake, but for Shireen's. Will you hear me out?"

Gendry stayed. He listened. Shortly after, he was preparing to make a deal. A handshake between
men, as it were, in the event Robert were to re-write his will and name Gendry his heir.

"Storm's End and properties related to Storm's End must go to Shireen," Stannis stipulated. "Everything else is yours."

Everything else, as Stannis soon explained to him, involved assets that Robert had acquired on his own, including real estate all around the world, stocks, and cash.

"Why do you want Storm's End so badly?" Gendry wondered.

"It is Shireen's birthright," Stannis simply said, "and, it is the only true home she has ever known."

Gendry cared little about the old, grey castle with the imposing tower, and he cared just as little about inheriting any more of Robert's wealth. Granted, he suspected that Storm's End was worth a great fortune and if he'd had a proclivity for greed then he might not have been so generous. But he was not greedy, and his conscience would not allow him to deny Shireen the right to her ancestral home. The deal had not been hard to make. Of course, nothing had been set in stone because Robert had yet to make his move, but something told him that Stannis had already predicted what his brother would do, and that he would not be wrong.

"Your grand scheme is all going according plan, isn't it, uncle Stannis?"

Stannis' usually grim expression became less grim at Gendry's observation, indicating that he was not wrong.

"Perhaps so," was all Stannis said.

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**Sandor**

Every fiber of his being was crying out in protest against what he had done. Walking away from Sansa was not what he wanted at all. But after seeing, like he never had previously, exactly how wide the gap was between their social standing and the worlds they inhabited, he lost whatever hope he had in their relationship surviving a long-distance separation. He had done his best, given his many handicaps, to try and look the part of Sansa's boyfriend. He'd put on the tuxedo Sansa had ordered for him, slicked his hair back into a ponytail and even worn cologne. There'd been nothing he could do about his scars, the least he could do was ensure that he was clean-shaven, and that he stood with his back straight. Not that any of it had made a difference. Next to Sansa Stark and the company she kept among the Tyrells and Baratheons, Sandor's presence had not been acknowledged, not in the way he would have liked.

Eventually, the little ways in which he was reminded of how unsuited he was to Sansa had accumulated, ultimately getting the better of him. He'd taken it out on Sansa, said all the wrong things, and before he knew it, he'd been walking away from the best thing that had ever happened in his unfortunate life. He'd gone home, stripped off the fancy tuxedo and retrieved the six-pack of beer waiting for him. Sandor had downed them one after another, somehow falling asleep and slipping to the oblivion he'd been seeking, giving him a reprieve from the image of Sansa's trembling lips as she'd pleaded with him.

"Don't do this to us," she'd begged him, her blue eyes watery.

He had still waked away, and in the wee hours of the morning he'd woken up in a cold sweat, his t-shirt drenched so badly he'd ripped it from his body in disgust. Then he'd curled up on his side shivering beneath his blanket, convinced that it was proof of his body rejecting his actions. He was
not new to pain, he'd suffered through unimaginable horrors, but he was unprepared for the pain caused by his soul ripping to pieces. He'd given part of his soul to Sansa knowing there was no taking it back, and the pain caused by breaking up with her went beyond anything he'd ever known.

Later in the morning when the sun had come up, he woke to the news of Joffrey and the DNA test, which provided him with about five minutes distraction, but the news of the blonde prick's social downfall could not rouse him from his stupor. It was strange, he thought, for years he'd been waiting for the day the psycho bastard would finally get what was coming to him, and now that it had happened he didn't have it in him to even laugh. He closed the web browser and noticed that he had unread text messages, three to be exact, all from Arya.

"What the fuck did you do?" the little bitch had written in the first message, her words jumping out at him like a verbal scream.

Sandor did not attempt to reply, in case Arya should feel obliged to give him updates about Sansa, not wanting to hear of how much she was hurting because of him.

"You're a fucking fool!" her second message read, and he agreed. "After everything you've been through to get together, you go and do this? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Perhaps it was the fact someone else had pointed it out to him, but the gravity of what he'd done finally hit him so hard that his legs lost the ability to hold him up and he'd crumpled to the floor at the foot of his bed. The tears came unexpectedly, stinging his eyes, blurring his vision and running down his cheeks. He didn't know how long he stayed huddled on the floor, but by the time he got to reading Arya's last text the sun had moved to the other side of the horizon.

"Sorry for being a bitch, just shocked. If you want to talk, you know where to find me."

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Arya

Arya woke up late on Sunday morning, realizing that for the first time she had lost sleep for the sake of someone else. Sansa had told her everything that had happened between her and Sandor, and then her sister had curled up at the foot of Arya's bed and wept intermittently for hours. Arya had kept her company, understanding that Sansa had not wanted to be alone. Sansa had continued to lie on the bed after she'd stopped crying. Arya let her be, keeping herself occupied by watching YouTube videos. The next time she'd glanced at her sister, Sansa was asleep.

She simply could not believe that Sandor could have broken up with Sansa. It was unthinkable, given what she knew about him and his feelings for her sister. She hadn't been able to keep quiet about it so she'd sent him a bunch of texts expressing her shock. After she'd had some time to think about the situation some more, she realized that Sandor didn't do things halfheartedly and his reasons for breaking up with Sansa were borne from the many insecurities he had. Feeling genuinely sorry for the guy, she'd impulsively sent him a text letting him know that she was there to listen if he wanted to talk, but at the same time hoping he wouldn't because she had no idea what advice she could give him. They were barely friends, yet they had a history and an understanding of sorts between them that made her reach out to him nonetheless.

Gendry was busy meeting his uncle that day. She really hoped that his situation was not going to be made more difficult because of the latest scandal. Gendry had been through enough. The last thing he needed was more media attention just when things were settling down about his real identity being revealed.

Arya found Sansa sitting at the kitchen island, nursing a cup of coffee between her hands while she
"Morning," Arya greeted her as she poured herself coffee, finding the plate of croissants that Chef Martin had prepared for them.

"Hey," Sansa responded quietly, rousing from her thoughts. "I told mother and father not to wake you."

"Thanks. Where is everyone, by the way?"

"Father is in his office and mother took Rickon with her on her errands. Bran's upstairs playing Bloodraven."

Arya sat quietly eating her breakfast, observing her sister and trying to think of something comforting to say. She knew how painful a breakup could be, but she wasn't convinced that things were really over between Sansa and Sandor. After everything she had been through for Sansa's sake, and for Sandor's sake, she really did not want to see them break up.

"Do you think that the DNA test is real?" Arya heard herself asking instead.

"I am no longer surprised by anything," Sansa said with a shrug. "Joffrey's mom and Robert have never struck me as the lovingly married type, and it's not that hard to imagine her finding affection from someone else, especially when her husband is notorious for having a wandering eye."

"After what's happened over the last few months, the Baratheon family will never be the same again, huh?"

"No, they won't be," Sansa agreed, though her tone indicated that she was no longer interested in the topic. "I...I told mother and father that we had a disagreement, and that's why Sandor left early."

"Oh?"

"They asked where he'd gone, and I had to say something."

"What else did they say?"

"Just that they hoped we'll work it out. I didn't want to make a big deal out of it."

Arya gave her a careful look. "Sansa, have you heard from Sandor at all since last night?"

Sansa shook her head. "I haven't, and I don't expect to."

"Will you try talking to him?"

"I want to...but, I don't know what good it would do."

"Look, I know it really is none of my business, but I think you'll regret it if you don't try talking to him. I ship SanSan, okay? I've never met two people so different, yet so perfect for each other. I would really hate for you guys to end things like this, without even trying to work it out."

Sansa smiled wistfully at the amalgamation of her and Sandor's names, but she shook her head again. "I can't. Not yet. I think I'll burst into tears if I even hear his voice right now."

"Then, wait until you're ready," Arya encouraged her, "but, please don't just accept that it's over. Not until you've both had a good, long talk about everything."
"Yeah, you're right." Sansa nodded tiredly, before she gave Arya a small smile. "Thanks for being here, Arya."

Arya smiled back at her. "Anytime."

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**Gendry**

At school on Monday the first thing everyone noticed was that Joffrey was nowhere to be seen. After a few days, rumor began to spread that Joffrey had been withdrawn from KL Prep and that Tommen had been taken out of his elementary school. Gendry was used to attention so he'd been expecting plenty of gossip and intrusive questions his way, but what he had not expected was Arya turning into a little she-cat if anyone got too pushy or asked questions she deemed inappropriate. People also began to treat him differently, much to his amusement and bewilderment. People cleared pathways before him, vacated prime tables in the quad for him and his friends, and queues in the cafeteria miraculously disappeared.

"What the fuck is happening?" he asked Hot Pie at the end of the week when he noticed people literally jumping to get out of his way in a crowded hallway.

"Haven't you heard?" Hot Pie chuckled and gave him a teasing look. "You've officially been crowned the King of King's Landing Prep, didn't you know?"

"You're fucking with me, aren't you? That whole King thing is getting old." Gendry recalled hearing the bogus title for the first time after the Tourney.

"I would never dare to fuck with you, your highness!" Hot Pie replied in all seriousness, breaking into a laugh when Gendry aimed to cuff the back of his head.

"It's true," Arya smiled at him, "with Joffrey gone, the people have chosen you as their new sovereign. I am at your service, your excellency!"

"Oh, god. Not you, too." Gendry stared at his girlfriend in horror. "Why?"

"Who knows?" Arya shrugged.

"Then, that makes you Queen by default," he observed.

Arya had returned his look of horror. "Aw, hell no!"

Neither Hot Pie or Arya were able to give him a satisfactory response, and he hadn't really expected one, but the answer came unexpectedly, like everything that had ever happened to him in recent months. Classes had finished for the day and he was looking forward to the weekend when he could finally let his guard down. The Brotherhood were not having rehearsals because Beric was busy preparing for final exams, which meant he would have more time to spend with Arya. He was on his way to his locker when a manicured hand was suddenly on his arm, stopping him in mid-step.

"Going home so soon?"

The hand belonged to Margaery Tyrell, who was giving him one of her radiant smiles that charmed so many around her. Gendry automatically smiled back, curious what reason she might have for stopping him.

"It is Friday afternoon, so yeah I'm dying to get out of here," he replied, "and, Arya's waiting for me."
Margaery's smile never faltered, but the hand on his arm did tighten a fraction. "I'm sure our new Queen of the Quad can spare you for a few minutes, I'm sure. It's the least Arya can do after taking my title so easily."

"Queen of the what?" Gendry frowned, even as he allowed Margaery to lead him out of a side door into the courtyard behind the science building.

"Haven't you heard?" Margaery leaned her shoulder against a decorative column in the courtyard, gazing up at him with a mocking expression on her features. "The people have crowned you and Arya as the new King and Queen of King's Landing Prep."

Gendry laughed loudly. "Does anyone really take that kind of thing seriously? I've never been to any school that makes such a big deal over titles like the people at this school."

"The titles may be lame, but what those titles imply are no joke," Margaery said with a shrug.

"Is that right?" Gendry raised his brow. "Enlighten me, if you please."

Margaery appeared thoughtful as she searched for the words to answer him. "As much as we hate to acknowledge it in today's society, hierarchies still exist in almost every facet of life, and in KL Prep this hierarchy is more pronounced because the environment here reflects an extremely select strata of King's Landing society. And, by that I mean the very rich. Even among the rich kids here, your parents either own a company, or your parents work for their parents. Everyone at this school recognizes this distinction, verbally or otherwise. Then, there are kids whose families wield influence over economic, political and social factors. By that, I mean these families could make or break the fortunes and social standing of many of the families that exist in the lower rungs of the hierarchy with just a decision, or a word."

"These families you're talking about," Gendry began, beginning to understand, "the Baratheons are one of them, huh?"

"Correct." Margaery nodded with a smile. "As are the Starks, Lannisters and even my own family. It is a verifiable fact that our families have virtually dictated the economic, political and social climes of society for generations, not only in King's Landing but the entire country. Some people would call that power. Anyone can make money, but not everyone can have power."

"And, my being Robert Baratheon's son make me somehow powerful?" Gendry scoffed. "You do hear the words coming out of your mouth, don't you? What a fucking load of bullshit."

"Want to know why Joffrey never got called a king?" Margaery asked, ignoring his expletives. "I knew why the moment I met him."

"Let me guess, because he's a douchebag?" Gendry offered.

"Among other things," Margaery agreed, "but, it was because people had no respect for him as a person. They were happy to kiss his ass and act like they were best buds in front of his face, but they were even happier talking shit behind his back. The only reason he was at the top of the food-chain was because his surname happened to be Baratheon. Then you come along and turn out to be a genuinely nice guy with a talent that people could respect and even envy. People idolize you, Gendry. People want to be you."

"Stop it, would you. You're creeping me out." Gendry frowned at Margaery's explanation.

"I'm serious,"

"That's why it's creepy,"

Margaery gave him an exasperated look. "Everyone was all too ready to call you *King of KL Prep* when news of the DNA test and the truth about Joffrey came out. At last, here was a Baratheon worthy of the title. Congratulations, Gendry."

"Just stop, please."

Margaery laughed. "Wield your power at your discretion, and wield it wisely."

"Is this all you wanted to say to me?" Gendry gave her a look that demanded the truth. "Come on, Margaery. What's really on your mind?"

"I was merely concerned about you," Margaery offered, "as your friend, I was very worried about you after the news about Joffrey came out."

"You don't have to worry about me or my family. We're fine, thanks for your concern. Sure, we're back in the spotlight, but it's nothing like what Joffrey and his Lannister family are going through."

"Do you care what happens to them?"

"Not Joffrey, no. That fucker can be the son of a pig for all I care, but that would be an insult to pigs. But, I do feel for Myrcella and her kid brother. Myrcella was kind enough to reach out to me and she didn't seem half bad. It's crazy, but just as I was getting used to the idea of having a younger sister and kid brother, turns out they probably aren't."

Margaery gave him a measuring stare. "You know the truth."

"About?" Gendry's eyes narrowed.

"You know for a fact that Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen are not Robert's kids."

Gendry stared at her, seeing that ruthlessness in her eyes that he'd occasionally glimpsed in the past. Margaery always knew everything. He still didn't quite know what her deal was, but she was a girl he never wanted to cross - second to Arya, of course.

"As do you," he stated.

She gave him a benign smile. "My father is very close to Robert, and of course he was one of the first to hear the truth."

"I'm not surprised." Gendry shook his head. "Do you have any idea how it was even done? How was it possible for a sample of Joffrey's DNA to be taken without him knowing about it?"

"The technology these days is pretty amazing," Margaery surmised, "I've heard that it's possible to lift DNA from a used utensil, like a spoon perhaps, or a coffee cup. Of course, a blood sample is the easiest way, like if he'd had a nosebleed and bled on his shirt for example. But getting hold of an item of clothing with Joffrey's blood on it would be too convenient and far too coincidental, don't you think?"

Gendry had the skin-crawling sensation that Margaery was telling him something very important. Her eyes were locked onto his and he had the strangest feeling that she was willing him to remember something. When it hit him, he felt his stomach drop to his toes.

"Joffrey's blood was all over my hoodie," he said.
"Hmm?" Margaery looked subtly triumphant.

"That time I fought him, I busted his lip. My sleeve was covered in his blood." Gendry recalled it all in minute detail now, including what he did with the hoodie afterward. "Margaery, what did you do with my hoodie?"

"Oh, that filthy thing?" Margaery shrugged. "I threw that away, just as you asked me to."

Not for one second did he believe her, and it was evident that Margaery did not expect him to. Unwittingly, he'd played a role in the whole sordid saga.

"For what reason could your fam…I mean, why would anyone want to expose them like that?" he made himself ask. If he had been used, he may as well know why.

"For power," Margaery replied, "what else would it be?"

"Surely there's enough to go around," he muttered.

Margaery laughed at his apparent naivety. "You'd think so, right? Unfortunately, that's not the case. Some people, like the Lannisters for example, use that power simply to further their own gains without regard to anyone they may inconvenience."

"Now we start to get to the bottom of it," Gendry murmured.

"Don't get me wrong, the Lannisters have always been an influential family, but it wasn't until Cersei married Robert that they finally had the clout to make a real impact in society. With the Baratheon family name at their side, they were suddenly venturing into industries previously unexplored, and being invited to make deals they otherwise would not."

"I'm still not following," Gendry frowned. "What have they done that is so bad they need to be publicly taken down?"

"Long story short, Robert Baratheon has not been careful with his company finances and as a result Tywin Lannister has had to bail him out time and time again. Tywin's assistance is being granted only because Robert is married to Cersei and that Joffrey stood to inherit everything Robert Baratheon has, including the economic and political clout attached to the Baratheon name. To put it bluntly, it was in Tywin's best interest to secure Joffrey's future this way. However, it's now at the point where Tywin stands to gain a controlling power in Baratheon Inc, potentially destabilizing everything that my father and Eddard Stark have worked for in the past few months to help Robert keep his company. My understanding is that Robert created this joint-venture between my father and Eddard in order to thwart Tywin's movements, however my Gran…I mean, some people think this might not be enough and that the only way to stop Tywin is for Robert to sever ties with the Lannisters for good."

Gendry stared at her for a few moments as he processed all the information she'd just told him, not missing her little slip about her Gran - Olenna Tyrell was a mafia boss for sure, Gendry was convinced of it! There was also no doubt in his mind that Olenna Tyrell was the mastermind behind the DNA paternity plot.

"I get it," he said with a nod. "By publicly revealing the truth about Cersei and her children, Robert will have no choice but to divorce her." *Arya was partly right.*

"That's right,"

"So, what will that mean for the Baratheon-Stark-Tyrell joint venture?" Gendry wondered, shrewdly
asking what was really in it for Margaery's family.

"Hmm, I believe a deal may have been struck to buy Robert's debt from Tywin, in exchange my father gets a number of shares, exclusive contracts, rights and such. The joint-venture continues as before, with prospects now predicted to be even better for the next financial year."

"And, the balance of power is...?" Gendry prompted.

"Restored," Margaery replied without missing a beat, but the look in her eyes acknowledged that power had definitely been skewed in her family's favor. "Things are as they should be."

"Why the hell are you so invested in what the grownups are doing, Margaery?" Gendry demanded, unnerved by how the girl seemed to have an answer for everything. "Are you like, a thirty-year-old trapped in a teenage girl's body?"

"Haven't I already told you?" Margaery gazed at him quizzically. "One day I'm going to inherit my father's companies, and I'm not letting anything get in my way. I'm only ensuring that what I stand to inherit in the future will be much more prosperous than it is now."

"I don't envy the fools that try to stand in your way," Margaery laughed gleefully. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"Sure, whatever." Gendry shrugged. "Thanks for the enlightening chat, but I really have to go now. Arya's waiting."

"All right, better not keep her waiting any longer," Margaery said, stepping out of his path. "Oh, and if word gets out about what we just talked about that somehow implicates me, I will strongly deny everything, got it?"

"Wow. I think I detect a threat," Gendry said in mock affront.

"Say hi to Queen Arya for me." Margaery grinned after him. "Don't forget, if things don't work out with her, I'll be waiting with open arms."

"Then you'll be waiting forever, Margaery."

Gendry walked away shaking his head. After everything he'd just heard, it was the only thing he could do.

Shenanigans! Absolute, fucking shenanigans!

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Arya

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us?" Arya asked her sister for the final time that morning. Sansa shook her head. "Thanks, but I think I'll just stay home and catch up on some reading."

Arya could see that there was some redness around Sansa's eyes and nose, all tell-tale signs that she'd been crying. She was worried about her sister, but one week was too short a time to force Sansa to come out when her broken heart was still raw with grief. Sandor's absence from Sansa's side could be excused by the upcoming senior finals, but as he and Sansa had been joined at the hip in recent months, his continued absence would soon be deemed conspicuous. People at school had been too caught up in the Baratheon paternity test scandal to notice that Sansa and Sandor had not been seen together all week, but it was only a matter of time before someone noticed. Arya feared that Sansa would not be ready to withstand the attention if the news were to break too soon. This was not the
same as her break-up with Joffrey, as this time Sansa's heart was truly on the line.

"Okay, but give me a call if you want me to bring you back something."

"Sure." Sansa offered her a small smile. "Say hi to Gendry for me."

Arya left Sansa's bedroom and made her way downstairs to tell her mother that she was heading out. Her father had already left the house, headed to another business meeting with associates in regards to the ongoing concern of the Baratheon-Stark-Tyrell joint venture in relation to the Lannister-Baratheon side loans. Gendry had filled her in on everything he had learned from Margaery, including his hunch about who had orchestrated the DNA test.

"You mean to tell me that Margaery outright admitted that her grandmother was responsible?" Arya had gawked at him.

"She didn't admit it, per se." Gendry had frowned. "But, Margaery did have my hoodie with Joffrey's blood on it, and after the way she insinuated things…I put two and two together, you know?"

"Holy shit," Arya had let out a low whistle. "That old lady Tyrell is a badass, motherfuckin' boss!"

"Of course, you can't say any of this to anyone," Gendry had warned her. "I mean, it's all circumstantial and we can't prove anything. Don't say anything to your dad, okay?"

"Oh, I won't. Believe me." Arya had shaken her head. "Besides, I think Jory's done enough digging on his behalf to work out the truth."

"Jory?"

"Jory Cassel, my father's right-hand man, slash super-sleuth. I think father knows more than he lets on."

"You may be right," Gendry had agreed.

"Something's still bothering me though." Arya had frowned.

"What's that?"

"Margaery,"

"What about her?"

"The girl has a thing for you, and that bothers me."

Gendry had guffawed at that. "You're kidding, right? Margaery's a huge tease and she knows it."

"Actually, lots of girls like you, but they don't bother me like Margaery does."

"You're jealous!" Gendry had stared at her wide-eyed, even gleefully. "You so are."

Arya had responded by making a noise like a hissing cat, which had set Gendry laughing hysterically.

"I'm glad you're finding this funny," she'd said dryly.

"I do!" Gendry had agreed, even as he tried to stifle his laugh. "I mean, I can't really explain it but it's
nice to see you being possessive over me."

"Just, don't let her get too close to you, okay?"

Her boyfriend had draped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her tightly to his side before dropping a bunch of kisses on the top of her head.

"I'm all yours, got that?" Gendry assured her softly. "You have nothing to worry about, babe."

Arya had blushed, much to her chagrin, unwilling to admit how much his words affected her. So, she elbowed him in the ribs.

"Don't call me babe,"

"You got it, my Queen."

She'd elbowed him in the ribs again, which started a play-fight between them that ended only when she allowed Gendry to overpower her in an embrace that escalated into some heavy petting. The memory of which now sent her blushing for an entirely different reason. She was still blushing when Gendry pulled into the driveway of Chateau Maegor shortly after.

"Hey," Gendry greeted her as she let herself into the front seat of his car. "You all right? You're looking kind of red in the cheeks."

"I'm fine, just hot."

"Yes." Gendry winked at her like some sleezy drunk at a bar. "Yes, you are."

"Fucking hell…" Arya groaned at his dorkiness, cussing because she was still blushing.

"I had no idea it was this easy to make you blush!" Gendry exclaimed as he began the drive into the city.

They were heading towards a different part of town in an effort to avoid Gendry's usual hangouts, given that he was still being careful about tabloid journalists tailing him. Over the past week they had spotted at least three suspicious looking vehicles near their school and trawling the streets around Gendry's home, so it was understandable that he was being careful.

"Where are we going for lunch today?" she asked him.

"Hot Pie recommended this Vietnamese place just outside of Chinatown that serve giant bowls of phở, and I'm salivating just thinking about it."

"You like Vietnamese food that much?"

"I like food in general, but I have a separate stomach just for noodles."

The family run restaurant that Gendry took her to was the real deal according to Hot Pie, tucked in between an Asian grocery store and a boba tea shop, decked out with simple wooden tables and chairs and a large neon sign of a bowl of noodles on the window. Arya had only eaten phở at newer and shinier up-market Vietnamese restaurants that catered to a younger and shinier crowd in the past, the counterparts of the mom-and-pop places like they were now entering. They were greeted by an older gentleman who wore an apron around his slim waist, who indicated that they take a seat at a table by the window.

"If Hot Pie is to be believed, and I don't see why not, this place serves authentic, Saigon style phở. I
can't wait!" Gendry grinned as he perused the laminated menu in front of him.

Once their table was laden with large bowls of aromatic beef rice noodle soup with assorted condiments and piles of fresh herbs, along sides of fresh rice paper rolls stuffed with seasoned slices of pork and herbs, they ate their meal punctuated with plenty of laughs and semi-serious conversation. Gendry updated her on what the other members of the Brotherhood were getting up to while Beric was on hiatus, enthused over Hot Pie's successful new business venture with Pi, and bemoaned Gendry's limited movements once again because of the paternity scandal.

"It sucks that I can't even go to Harrenhal Mall," Gendry sighed, "but hey, at least I have this delicious bowl of noodles to console me."

"Harrenhal's not the only mall in this city," Arya pointed out.

"No, but it is the only place that has a Dragon Pit Steak House, and I was really craving that Firebreather burger yesterday."

"There, there." Arya patted his hand in a consoling manner. "It will all blow over soon."

"Yeah," Gendry agreed weakly, before fishing out another chunk of noodles from his bowl. "Anyway, what's the go with Sansa and Sandor? How's your sister doing?"

"Sansa's still holing herself up in her room after dinner every night, you know how it is." Arya shrugged. "I asked her to come for lunch with us today, just for a change of pace, but I don't think she wants people to see that she's been crying."

"She's a damned good actress though," Gendry observed. "I saw her when she was heading to choir practice the other day and she looked totally normal."

"It's something she learned to do while she was with Joffrey," Arya said with scorn in her voice, "that prick has so much to answer for."

"Sandor's been like a phantom this week,"

"You actually saw him?"

"Just briefly." Gendry nodded. "For such a huge dude he can move fast. He was scowling, but that's not unusual for him. He did have massive shadows under his eyes, though."

Arya clucked her tongue. "I still don't get what he's thinking."

"Hey, we know the guy had issues even before he got with your sister," Gendry reminded her, "maybe being with her just antagonized whatever deep-seated fears he's been harboring."

"I can understand that," Arya agreed, though still frustrated. "I just hope they give each other the chance to say what they're really thinking before it's too late."

Gendry shrugged. "It's not something we can control."

After lunch they took the time to explore the boutiques around Chinatown and drank boba tea from large cups and giant straws as they walked around the neighborhood. Gendry told her that in the past he'd rarely ventured to this side of town because of the distance from Flea Bottom.

"And, I had no money," he said with a self-deprecating laugh. "How times have changed, huh?"

In the end they stopped by the Asian grocery store where Gendry stocked up on Pocky biscuit sticks
to give as presents to his foster-siblings, picking up extra boxes for Arya to share with her own siblings before they headed back to his car.

"Did you have fun today?" he asked her as they drove along the narrow, one-way streets.

"Sure did," she assured him, "I don't really care what we do, to be honest. I just like being with you."

Gendry smiled at her straightforward response, and Arya liked to think that the pink flush gracing the top of his cheeks was because she'd made him blush, and not because he was suffering the effects of the chili he'd had with his noodles.

"You can be so sweet when you want to be," he said, glancing at her from the side of his eye. "I always knew that you were capable of being – whoa, whoa."

Arya swiveled her head around to see what had caught Gendry's attention. Outside her window she witnessed a tall, hulking figure with a familiar loping gait, along with an unmistakable side profile.

"Is that who I think it is?" Gendry asked.

"I think so," Arya said, craning her head again. "Turn the car around."

Gendry performed a U-turn at the next traffic light, slowing the car down as he sought a place to pull over near their target.

"What's he doing all the way out here?" he wondered, slipping his car momentarily into a loading zone. "And, looking like that?"

"I guess we'll find out," Arya said, winding down her window and sticking her head out. "Hey!"

Sandor Clegane shuffled to a stop at the sound of her voice, turning to peer at her curiously. He looked like utter shit, and she'd seen him looking like total shit before. In fact, Sandor looked like he'd been dragged through actual shit and back again. His hair was matted, his shirt and jeans were smudged with dirt in places and darkened with sweat stains.

"Hey," he acknowledged her, and that was all.

Arya frowned. "What are you doing here?"

Sandor shrugged. "Just, walking."

"You look awful," Arya told him. "Where's your car?"

"At home,"

"Huh?" Gendry balked. "How did you get here?"

"I walked."

"Your house is, like…twenty miles away from here," Gendry continued.

Sandor shrugged. "I felt like going for a walk this morning."

"It's past two in the afternoon, Sandor." Arya gave him a worried glance. "Are you drunk?"

"Maybe I was when I left the house."
"And, what time was that?"

"Six, maybe seven." Sandor frowned at her. "Why'd you wanna know for anyway?"

Sandor did not look drunk now, but it was evident that he was not his usual self, and if what he'd just told them was accurate, then he'd been walking for at least eight hours.

Arya turned to Gendry. "Is it even possible to walk from his place to here?"

Gendry nodded. "Avoiding the expressway, it's possible if he took all the side roads."

They both turned to study Sandor once again, noting the vacant expression in the big guy's grey eyes and the sunburn he was developing across his cheeks. Arya shared a look with Gendry, both wordlessly agreeing that they couldn't leave the guy to fend for himself. A second later Gendry was securing the handbrake and getting out of the car, while Arya climbed into the backseat. Gendry was opening the passenger door another moment later and urging Sandor into the seat Arya had just vacated.

"Get inside the car, Sandor," Gendry ordered him.

"What for?"

"You're going home."

"Good idea," Sandor agreed, "my feet are fucking killing me."

He then put his seatbelt on without fuss and sat back while Gendry returned to the driver's seat and re-entered traffic. Gendry shared one more look with Arya through the rearview mirror, each conveying their disbelief through raised eyebrows and pointed glances at their new passenger.

"So, what made you want to go for a walk this morning?" Arya hazarded to ask.

Sandor made a grunting noise. "Had some stuff to think about."

"You do realize you've been walking for hours, right?"

"I had a lot of stuff to think about," Sandor replied, grunting once more.

"Okay, so you went for a very long walk…but, how did you get so dirty?"

"I took a path at the park near my house, parts of it had construction tape blocking it off…turns out there really was a good fucking reason for it because there was water everywhere and I slipped."

"Did you fall into a pile of shit?"

"It's just mud," he said matter-of-factly, ignoring her snarkiness.

"When was the last time you ate?" Gendry interrupted.

"I don't know." Sandor shrugged carelessly. "Yesterday morning, maybe."

They stopped at a burger place near Sandor's house where they watched the big guy wolf down two wagyu beef burgers and a large soda, before they delivered him back to his imposing grey house. Unspoken, both Arya and Gendry felt responsible for seeing that Sandor was indeed sober and sane before they left him alone. Gendry then pushed the guy upstairs, urging him to take a shower, even standing outside the bathroom just in case the guy fell over from exhaustion. Arya waited in the
living room downstairs, recalling the one and only time she'd ever been to Sandor's house.

She'd seen for herself just how much Sandor and Sansa cared for each other that day. In that very same living room Arya had watched the two of them share a kiss so achingly sweet and full of genuine affection that she'd found herself envious – now that she had Gendry, she understood that she'd been envious of their intimacy, their intensity…their love. Sansa and Sandor belonged together. *Why can't he see that?* Arya looked up in the direction of Sandor's bedroom, mulling over the guy's strange behavior. It was no secret what Sandor had been referring to by *a lot of stuff to think about*. Clearly, thoughts of Sansa consumed him to the point of distraction, so much that he forgot about hunger and physical pain.

Gendry entered the room then and came to join her on the couch.

"He looks almost like himself again," he told her, "he'll be down in a minute."

"That's good. Thanks for taking care of him."

"Why are you thanking me?"

Arya shrugged. "On my sister's behalf, I guess. Sansa would hate it if something happened to Sandor while he was like…that."

"I gotta admit, I was worried too," Gendry confessed, "I mean, I knew heartbreak made people do strange things, but his reaction is something else."

"Sandor is something else though, isn't he?" Arya added.

"I heard that, little bitch," came a tired sounding rasp from the doorway. "Brave of you to insult a person in their own home."

"Oh, you're back." Arya smiled at Sandor, entirely unapologetic. "How are you feeling?"

Sandor glowered at her as he came to sit on the armchair adjacent to where they sat on the couch. "Better."

"Are you gonna be okay if we leave now?"

"I s'pose," Sandor replied with a shrug. "But, you guys can stick around if you've got nothing better to do."

Arya caught Gendry's sidewise glance at her. He hadn't missed the plea in Sandor's words either.

"Yeah," Gendry said with a nod. "Yeah, okay."

"We've got nothing else planned today," Arya assured him, "we can hang out, sure."

"All right." Sandor got up from the armchair. "Let me get you guys a drink."

"I'll help," Arya offered, nimbly jumping to her feet.

Sandor's housekeeper kept the fridge stocked with different soft drinks and juice, along with various snacks in the cupboard. Arya filled glasses with ice while Sandor found a tray, and shortly they returned to the living room where Gendry had switched on the television, which had been wired to Sandor's laptop. Sandor gave him his Netflix password, and Gendry picked a random action movie to watch. They were quiet for a few minutes at the beginning of the movie, but it was clear that Sandor was restless, shifting every few seconds in his seat. Arya and Gendry said nothing, and
eventually Sandor broke the silence first.

"Where is she today?" Sandor asked, correctly assuming they would know whom he was referring to.

Arya also knew to tread carefully. "She's at home."

"How's she doing?"

"You mean, after you broke her heart and tore her soul to shreds?" Arya returned, internally acknowledging that treading carefully was not one of her strongest suits.

"Arya..." Gendry cautioned her.

"What?" Arya refused to back down. "It's true. Sansa is seriously hurting because of him."

"You have absolutely no sense of delicacy," Gendry said with a sigh.

Sandor appeared to slump in his seat at Arya's words. "Fuck... fucking, fuck!"

"What are you swearing for?" Arya demanded. "You might as well tell us what's going through your head, because a sane person doesn't just go out for eight-hour walks."

Sandor grimaced, making the lines on the damaged side of his face harsher. The guy rubbed his knuckles to his eyes then, drawing attention to the deepening shadows under them. Arya could see that he was in dire need of sleep, and she hoped that getting his feelings off his chest would soon allow him to get some.

"Come on, speak up," she urged him.

Sandor grunted at her tone. "I fucked up."

"How so?"

"I thought ending it was the best thing for both of us," Sandor rasped, "but, I wasn't prepared for... for this."

"What's that, exactly?" Gendry prompted, betraying his own curiosity.

"Like I've thrown myself into the fire and there's no getting back out."

It was a testament to how well Arya and Gendry had gotten to know Sandor, and understood him, to realize that the big brute was in no way making an exaggeration. He was suffering, and immensely so.

"Then, why did you break up with Sansa?" Arya asked, this time in a gentler tone.

"Because, I fucking hate that I'm not good enough to be with someone like her," Sandor replied, "I hate that I can't ballroom dance, but it's not like I want to go out and learn it either. I don't know how have fucking boring adult conversations with people. I fucking hate talking to people if I don't have to. I don't have the right fucking pedigree, the right connections, or a bank balance large enough to keep up with how you rich people burn through money. Even if I work as hard as I can, there's no guarantee that I will be successful or rich in the future. I can't guarantee a fucking thing, so how can I guarantee that I can make Sansa happy?"

Arya listened to all that he had to say, but all that she really heard Sandor saying was 'I'm scared'.
She knew him well enough by now to understand that giving his heart and opening up to someone was a huge deal for him. From what she'd learned about him first-hand and from the snippets Sansa shared with her, Sandor had known little love and affection growing up, if at all. In the world he'd grown up in, acts of seeming kindness or generosity always came with a price.

Sandor did not know the meaning of unconditional love.

"I kind of understand what you mean," Gendry said, unexpectedly. "But, I think you're missing the big picture."

"What would a rich, blue-blooded, pretty boy like you know about what I'm talking about?" Sandor asked rudely.

Gendry rolled his eyes, not even a bit insulted. "You're forgetting that I'm a rich, blue-blooded, pretty boy bastard and former orphan. Sure, I may have money now and have Baratheon blood, but where I one-up you, if you could even call it that, is the fact I grew up dirt-poor in fucking Flea Bottom. You grew up in this middle-class neighborhood in a large, though imposing house, with a father who provided for you the best way he knew how. I lost my mother too, just like you did, but after that I went to an orphanage before I spent the next six years being shifted from one foster family to another. When I first transferred to KL Prep and met Arya, I developed a severe inferiority complex which made me question the same things you did. I, too, wondered if I had the right to be with a girl like Arya, and whether she would even look my way. When that red and platinum streaked wunderkind showed up my complex only got worse and I very nearly ruined any chance I had with Arya because of my inability to see beyond my inferiority complex. So, I think I have a fairly good chance of understanding what you're going through."

"You're saying I have an inferiority complex?" Sandor frowned.

"To put it simply, yeah." Gendry nodded. "What do you think, Arya?"

Arya nodded, amazed at how accurately Gendry had him pegged. "Did Sansa ever say that she wanted you to be all those things that you described?"

"No, but I've seen her with Willas Tyrell and--"

"Last I heard, Sansa was in love with you, not Willas Tyrell." Arya gave him a sharp look. "I think you already know this, but my sister could have practically any guy she wanted, but the hard fact is that she wants you. Sansa doesn't want you to be anyone but you. Get that into your head, okay? She sees something in you, and you need to put your faith in her. Whatever's happened to cause all of these misunderstandings between the two of you...forget all of it. Sansa does not care if you can ballroom dance or have witty conversations, and I know for a goddamn fact she doesn't care about your face or even your last name. All that matters to her is that you love her. Trust her."

Sandor's expression began to change then, looking a little less sullen, but caution was still in his eyes. "Even if we stay together, I'm going to be leaving for college in the summer. I don't know how we're going to handle a long-distance relationship."

"I don't think anyone really does," Arya told him, "but you can't give up without even giving it a chance. I know you two really love each other, so you both owe it to yourselves to try as hard as you can. Besides, it's not like you'll never see each other. Sansa can come and see you on weekends, or you can come back to King's Landing when you have time. I mean, even if you went to college here in King's Landing your schedules may not always match up and there's no guarantee you'd see each other as often as you do now. Who knows, maybe the distance won't even be a real issue at all. Valyria U is only an hour away by plane, don't forget."
"That sounds too simple," Sandor observed.

"Maybe you were overthinking it," Arya returned. "My point is, the two of you will work it out. I'm sure of it."

Sandor sighed once more, and again he rubbed his knuckles to his eyes. However, he appeared to be sitting taller in his seat again. "What the fuck do I do now?"

"I don't know." Arya gave him a measuring look. "What do you want to do?"

"I need to fucking apologize, don't I?" Sandor's grey eyes finally lost their caution, instead a new determination gradually began to take over.

Arya and Gendry smiled at him.

"That's a good place to start," Arya told him.
Episode 46 "The Altar of Dignity"

Chapter Notes

Welcome to the final chapter, and I thank you all for lasting the distance with me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gossip Spyder

Good morning King's Landing Prep!

It's another fine Monday morning here in King's Landing, and while I can think of many other places I'd rather be today, unfortunately I'll be at school with the rest of you. Fortunately, the school halls and grounds have never failed to provide me with juicy gossip and rumor – the latest of which is the hushed whispers regarding Sansa Stark and Sandor Clegane. With all the uproar surrounding the Baratheon DNA paternity scandal last week, I have overlooked a rumor that Sansa and Sandor have not been seen together since the night of the Easter Banquet. A little bit of digging also uncovered the fact that Sandor and Sansa were witnessed having a heated discussion within the city hall courtyard. I checked out some photos that people posted on Instagram on the night, and in one of those pictures you can clearly see Sansa and Sandor in the corner looking none too happy with each other.

Sansa and Sandor had been inseparable since their shock hook-up late last year, so this rumor of trouble between our favorite odd-couple has had many people speculating. Critics of the couple – and I admit to often falling into this category – are hedging bets on whether the duo are on the verge of a breakup. There were many witnesses at the banquet who saw Sansa being swept into the arms of debonair bon-bon Willas Tyrell as they dazzled onlookers on the dancefloor. This was only moments before the aforementioned heated exchange between Sansa and Sandor, shortly after which Sandor was seen exiting the venue. Sansa and Willas have been the subject of speculative talk before and the question must be asked, was Margaery's eldest brother the catalyst for Sandor's moodswing? Many have previously commented that Sansa and Sandor are two very different people from two alien worlds – perhaps the distance between them proved too great, hmm?

Going back to last week's shocking expose in the King's Landing Herald about Joffrey Baratheon - or whoever he may be! I am still trying to recover from this bombshell and I believe many of you feel the same. Still, no one could be more shocked about this than Joffrey himself - imagine finding out that for the past eighteen years you've been lied to by your very own mother! Of course, there's been no official word from the Baratheon or Lannister representatives, but I've heard whispers coming from King's Landing's shallow pool of pampered housewives that Cersei Lannister has moved out of the Red Keep and has taken her two sons with her. Joffrey's sister, Myrcella, is currently still abroad studying at the Dorne Academy, but I hear plans have been made to bring her back amid the intense scrutiny that their family is now facing. Imagine passing off the son of another man as your husband's child and lying to the whole world all this time! Joffrey's mother is undeniably brazen, if not a little insane!

No one appears to have seen or heard from Joffrey at all since the Easter Banquet and word is that his enrolment at KL Prep has been withdrawn. I'd want to disappear too if I were in his shoes. Imagine having to deal with identity issues while you're in hiding because the media is still hounding...
you? In any case, no man has yet come forward claiming to be Joffrey's real father. As for Robert Baratheon, I received a tip-off from someone whose brother's girlfriend is a legal-secretary at Pycelle & Associates, the law firm that represents Robert Baratheon, saying that Robert has been meeting with his lawyer to begin divorce proceedings from Cersei Lannister. I think divorce may be the most logical conclusion for Robert and Cersei whose marriage was already on shaky ground after it came to light last year that Robert had fathered another illegitimate son. The question everyone seems to be asking is why Joffrey's mother lied about his paternity this whole time? We can only speculate, but perhaps the reason she seemed to accept Robert's transgressions was because she herself was far from innocent! If Joffrey really isn't Robert's son, then it is fair to assume he should no longer be heir to the Baratheon fortunes. With questions now being asked about the paternity of Cersei's two youngest children, we can expect that Robert will be re-writing his will, if he hasn't done so already.

In other news, most of our seniors are poised to take their final ever high-school exams in just a few weeks and the tension surrounding finals is adding to the mounting excitement around Senior Prom. The atmosphere within the halls of KL Prep of late has been nothing short of electric! For all those who still haven't purchased tickets to prom the committee would like to remind you all that they will be at their pop-up booth near cafeteria every day until prom week, and lastly, good luck to all our seniors!

Tata for now!

Gossip Spyder

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**Sandor**

Sandor closed the browser and threw his phone onto his bed, swearing in disgust.

"Motherfucking Spyder! Goddamn piece of shit!"

At last, Gossip Spyder had gotten wind of what had been going on between him and Sansa and brought it to everyone's attention. Neither he nor Sansa had been discreet that night at the banquet, and neither were they thinking about who might be watching them. He'd hoped that they would go unnoticed altogether. Breakups were hard enough without public scrutiny, and he hated to think how Sansa was being affected by Gossip Spyder's latest post, but now that the news was public he was even more determined to set right the wrong he'd created.

After a week of being in utter hell he'd discovered and come to accept one earth-shattering realization – being without Sansa was the most excruciatingly painful torture he'd ever known. He'd thought himself afraid of not being able to be the kind of man she deserved, of not being worthy to stand by her side. But when it came down to it, what he'd really been most afraid of was being without her. He'd been so scared that his shortcomings and failings would eventually drive her away from him that in his fear, all he'd done was actualize that fear into reality.

He thought he'd been doing what was best for both of them, just as he'd told Arya and Gendry, he really had. He'd told Sansa that he hated how people at the banquet were looking down on him and thinking that he was one of Mrs. Stark's charity cases. However, what he'd really hated...what he'd been afraid of, was how people would perceive Sansa when it became apparent that he was her boyfriend. He hadn't wanted people to look down on Sansa the way that they had looked down on him. That's what he had believed. That's why he'd readily agreed to let Willas dance with her when the pretty boy had asked to cut in.

Recalling the day that he and Sansa had first got together, Sandor remembered her thoughts about how they would become the talk of the school.
"Everyone at school will talk about us, when they find out," Sansa had said at the time.

"Do you care?" had been his response. "We'll ignore them, or tell them to fuck off."

"I don't care what people will say," Sansa had stated, vehemently. "I'm done caring about what strangers think about me or what I do."

Sandor had shared her bravado and resolve at the time, but it was one thing to ignore playground gossip and rumor, and quite another thing entirely when it was the broader society in question. The more exposure they received as a couple, the more his resolve had crumbled. His relationship with Sansa was not a game, and there were very real consequences to be had by their actions.

During his nine-hour walk he'd done a lot of thinking, as he'd told a skeptical Arya, and just as he used to dissect football plays in the past, he'd dissected each and every single one of his actions that night. He had eventually come to understand that his behavior was not brought on by having to wear a tuxedo, or having to attend a boring banquet. It wasn't because of having to share a table with the Tyrells (though Willas had rubbed his feathers the wrong way, as expected), and not even because he had to learn which cutlery to use to eat the ridiculously expensive dishes they were served.

That night, he'd been hyper-aware of the scrutiny Sansa and her family would be under, which caused him to be hyper-sensitive about everything, bringing out the worst of his fears…and himself. Suddenly he could not ignore the whispers about his physical appearance as he normally would. He could not ignore the appreciative glances Sansa was receiving from other men, and he could not ignore how his presence next to Sansa was being ignored in favor of Willas Tyrell. Ordinarily he would have asserted his position somehow, so that there would be no mistaking that he was Sansa's boyfriend. However, that night he'd been his own worst enemy and he'd done nothing instead. He'd done nothing to ingratiate himself to Sansa's family. He'd done nothing to include himself in the conversation that the other Tyrell brothers were attempting to start with him, and he'd done nothing whatsoever to alleviate the tension building between himself and Sansa all evening. When they did finally speak, he took it all out on her, blaming her and refusing to acknowledge just how much of a coward he was feeling.

I ran away from the ball like some scared fucking little princess, he thought, disappointed in himself. I was too fucking scared to do anything, so I ran away and fucked it all up anyway. But Sansa deserves better than that. She deserves far more than that out of me. She's done everything she can to be good to me ever since we got together, and I know I don't fucking deserve any of it, but she's stuck by me. She sees something in me that other people don't, and I owe it to her to be so much better than this.

Sansa was so much stronger and braver than most people gave her credit for. To many she was just a pretty, chirping, entitled little bird who loved nothing more than to preen in her exclusive, gilded cage. Many people expected her to break after the ordeal she went through with Joffrey, especially with the plethora of rumors that continued to follow in her wake. Yet, she'd come out of the shitstorm all the tougher, smarter, and far more confident than when he'd first met her. So confident in fact, that she'd had the guts to go after what she wanted – him. Sandor had to acknowledge that it would have taken a lot of balls to approach a guy like him under normal circumstances, but Sansa had talked his housekeeper into letting her into his house amidst all the drama he was going through after the championship game. He respected the hell out of this girl for doing what she did, and now he had to respect Sansa's decision, in choosing him.

"You don't get to decide what is good enough for me," she had told him, "no one but me gets to decide if something or someone is good enough for me. Not even you."

Sandor knew that she was right. Now, after all the things he'd said to her, after he'd hurt her, all he
Sansa

"What's Gossip Spyder talking about, Sansa?" Randa demanded.

Sansa sat at the table she regularly shared with her friends at lunch that day. It had been the first day since the banquet that all four girls had managed to eat together due to their schedules. Randa and Jeyne were among the first to contact her about Gossip Spyder's post when it came out that morning, but she had not provided them with a satisfactory answer, hence the reason they were now gathered around her wearing identical expressions of concern.

"Yeah, what's going on?" Mya asked, frowning. "You can tell us, whatever it is."

"I thought he was just busy preparing for finals and all that," Jeyne added, "I didn't even think his absence was because of something else."

"We assumed the same thing," said Randa, "we've been caught up with finals prep, too, and we haven't been able to come and join you guys for lunch either so we didn't think it strange when we didn't see Sandor around."

"Lothor has homeroom with him and math, he said that Sandor's just been disappearing right after class," Mya informed them.

Sansa shifted in her seat uncomfortably. It was understandable that her friends were curious about what sparked the rumors, but she was not ready to reveal exactly what had happened between her and Sandor. Vocalizing it seemed to make it all the more real, and she wasn't ready to accept that things were truly over between them.

"It's partly true," she conceded, "we did have a fight that night."

"Oh no." Randa clicked her tongue. "That's no good."

"And, you guys haven't made up yet?" Mya wondered.

Sansa shook her head, sadly. "We haven't spoken since that night."

"At all?" Randa balked.

"At all," Sansa confirmed.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Jeyne asked softly. "But you don't have to if you don't want to."

Sansa sighed. "I think I might have pushed him too far. Sandor's never made it a secret that he's not a fan of getting dressed up and going to fancy parties…at least not when he's going to be scrutinized and expected to be on his best behavior. It was one thing for him to come to Spring Fling, but I practically dragged him to the Easter Banquet."

"Surely he wouldn't get mad just because of that?" Randa pressed.

Sansa made a face. "It's a combination of things, but making him go to the banquet was the last straw, I think."

Sansa's tone made it apparent that she wasn't willing to spill all the details, and her friends did not push her.
"What will you do now?" Mya asked. "Speaking from experience, it's better not to let things like this drag out for too long."

"You're right," Sansa agreed, "I know you're right. Thanks for worrying about us, you guys."

"You're our friend, of course we care about you." Jeyne reached over and gave her a light squeeze about her shoulders. "We're always here if you need to talk, okay? That goes for Sandor, too."

"Has anyone actually seen Sandor today?" Randa wondered, casually looking about the quad as though expecting to see him.

"Lothor mentioned that Sandor didn't show up to homeroom today," Mya replied, "maybe he didn't come to school."

"I would personally strangle Gossip Spyder's scrawny neck if I knew who it was," Sansa commented hotly, "maybe Sandor decided to skip after seeing that post this morning."

"Or, maybe he had an entirely different reason for skipping altogether," Randa suddenly said as she sat up straight in her seat, her gaze now locking onto something across the quad. "Turn around, Sansa!"

Doing as she was told Sansa turned around to see what had caught Randa's attention, and immediately she felt her stomach drop – for all the right reasons. Making his way through the center of the quad and attracting the attention of all present, was Sandor, clutching the strings to a bunch of large helium balloons in one fist while his other hand held a bouquet of the biggest and yellowest daffodils Sansa had ever seen. He was scowling as he continued to walk toward her table, but beneath the scowl Sansa also saw the determined set of his jaw. Sandor wore his usual dark jeans and a black pullover, the kind that pulled taught over his chest and accentuated the breadth of his shoulders, the very kind he knew she liked.

Sandor held five balloons in total, four giant letters each 2-feet tall and one in the shape of a question mark. Presently the wind was tangling up the strings and blowing the letters out of order. Yet, it was quite obvious to Sansa what his balloon message was meant to say, and before she knew it she was on her feet, ready with her answer.

"What do those balloons say…MORP?" Randa asked, perplexed. And then she gasped loudly. "PROM?"

"Oh, my god!" Mya cried, laughing loudly. "It's a promposal!"

Promposals had been happening all over the school in the lead up to senior prom, but none were attracting as much attention as Sandor's currently was. Sansa and Sandor were two of the biggest names in the school, but because of Gossip Spyder's post about them that morning there was far more interest in them than usual that day. Others in the quad had worked out the balloon message much faster than Randa had and an excited buzz began to build among the students nearby. Soon there were even people gawking out of the cafeteria windows, curious to see what all the fuss was about.

Sandor stopped about five feet away from her, awkwardly handling the balloons that continued to twist and tangle above his head. His eyes met hers, and Sansa saw the shadows that lingered above his curiously sunburned cheeks. Immediately she wanted to rush toward him so she could hug him and press kisses all over his face, but that would have to wait. Sandor was clearing his throat and shifting his stance.
"Sansa," he began, her name coming out as a rasp. "I'm sorry."

Sansa understood. She understood everything he meant to say in those two words, and her eyes began to water in response.

"I'm sorry, too," she told him, and she saw the tension visibly leave his shoulders.

Randa let out a giggle across the table from Sansa. "Is that it?"

Sandor glared at Randa. "Do I look like the type to go dancing along the school bleachers belting out some soppy love song over the announcement system? This is all I'm good for."

"It's perfect," Sansa mumbled through the lump in her throat. "This is perfect, Sandor."

"Then, what's your answer?" he grunted, tugging on the balloon strings and making the letters wiggle violently, reminding her that he'd asked a question.

"Of course, it's a yes!"

"Thank fucking god…oof!"

Sansa had launched herself into his chest, knocking the wind from his lungs. People around them cheered and wolf-whistled as Sandor roughly wrapped his arms about her as best as he could while still holding the daffodils and balloons.

"Can we go somewhere?" Sansa asked him quietly.

"You want to skip the rest of the day?" Sandor clarified, and Sansa felt his chest vibrate as he spoke.

"Yeah," she nodded, her cheek rubbing against the front of his shirt. "I missed you."

"Let's get out of here."

Briefly letting go of him, Sansa flashed her friends an apologetic yet beaming smile as she grabbed her belongings from the picnic table.

"I'll see you all tomorrow," she told them hastily.

"Seeya tomorrow, Sansa." Jeyne smiled back at her.

"Take care now, you hear?" Mya said with a wink.

"Have fun!" Randa waved at them merrily.

More whistles and cheering followed them as they hastily left the quad together, which prompted them to move all the faster to get away from their audience.

"I honestly was not expecting all this," Sandor told her when they reached his car.

"Honestly?" Sansa gazed up at him in shock. "You walked through the KL Prep quadrangle, which is arguably the busiest thoroughfare in the school at this time of the day, carrying giant helium balloons."

"I wasn't thinking about that," he admitted as he stuffed said balloons into the back of his car. "I was thinking only about you being at the quad, that's all."
Sansa took the daffodils from him and carefully stowed them carefully in the backseat where they wouldn't be crushed, before letting herself into the front passenger seat. She gave him another smile.

"Thank you for the flowers, too. They're beautiful."

"Glad you liked them." Sandor sat in the driver's seat and cleared his throat. "Jonquils…daffodils, they have meanings, right? I mean, most flowers in general have some sort of symbolism behind them, and daffodils, because they're the first to bloom early in the spring, they mean renewal…new beginnings."

Sandor was not looking at her, rather he was looking at a spot somewhere outside the windscreen, but she could see that he was finding it difficult to speak his thoughts.

"They can mean that, yes."

"Can we have that, Sansa?" Sandor now turned to look at her, his grey eyes wide and hopeful as they searched her face. "A fresh start, that is."

She wasn't entirely certain what he meant by that, but evidently it seemed incredibly important to him. She'd rarely seen his expression look so desperate.

"If that's what you want, Sandor."

"Thank you," he said quietly, and again she noticed another layer of tension leave his shoulders.

They drove out of the school grounds and headed toward the expressway, deciding between them that they'd check out a café at Trident's Bend that had recently gained popularity. Sandor had not had lunch, and they knew they both had a lot to talk about. The lunch-hour rush had subsided and by the time they reached the café it was reasonably quiet, and they were seated at a table overlooking the river and the esplanade. Sansa sipped on a fruity frappe while Sandor quietly ate a club sandwich and soda, not talking much but just savoring the company of the other. Sandor kept staring at her the entire time, as though making sure she wasn't going to disappear from under his nose, while beneath the table his long legs continually brushed against hers.

She still could not believe that he had actually carried out a promposal, and the memory of him walking through the quad brought a giggle to her lips.

"What's so funny?" Sandor wondered.

"You are,"

"What about me is?" he pressed, narrowing his eyes.

"I'm just surprised you even came up with the idea of a promposal,"

"I wanted you to see that I was serious about making up with you," he admitted.

"You wanted to make up with me by asking me to prom?"

"I wanted you to see that I was serious…by doing something I would never have done," he rasped.

Sansa understood the depth of the meaning behind his gesture. He had made a public apology, made a spectacle of himself in the process, completely stepping out of the narrow comfort zone he'd been confined in for who knew how long, and he'd willingly done so for her.
"I knew it," she assured him, "the moment I saw you, I knew what it had taken for you to do what you did. It means a lot to me, Sandor. Thank you."

His eyes met hers across the table, his expression turning thoughtful. "Can you forgive me?"

"I already have,"

Sandor was shaking his head. "I mean, really forgive me? I said some terrible things to you that night, and I don't want you to keep remembering those things, because I don't want you to think that I meant them."

"I really do forgive you, Sandor." Sansa reached for his hand, turning it so that she grasped his fingers between hers tightly, securely. "I was hurt at first…no one likes to hear those things."

"Sansa, I'm such an idi–"

"No, you're not," she interrupted him before he could put himself down. "I know that you don't mean those things that you said, but we can't ignore that you said them because you were feeling scared and insecure, and I'm just beginning to really understand that. I don't think any less of you for feeling the way you do, and I don't want you to think that it's wrong for you to feel those things."

Sandor's fingers tightened around her own. "Is it really okay?"

"Yes!" Sansa assured him. "I think it's fine for you to feel that way sometimes, but what's not okay is how you let it get to you so badly like that. I just wish you'd talked to me before you let those negative emotions trap you into a corner like that…I don't want you ever thinking that you have no other way out but to break up with me…ever again."

"I don't know…I don't know how." Sandor looked lost at that moment, as though the very thought of willingly talking about his feelings was beyond his physical capability.

"Then I'll help you," Sansa said softly, "I want to be able to help you however I can, because we're a couple and that's what couples do. I also want us to work things out together."

Sandor squeezed her hand. "Whatever you want, Sansa."

"You have to want it too, Sandor. It won't work otherwise."

"I want us to work things out together," he said immediately, fervently.

Sansa smiled at him. "Come on, let's go for a walk."

Hand in hand they walked by the riverside in silence for a while. Sansa could tell that Sandor still had things he wanted to say and she wanted to give him all the time he needed. It was a huge milestone for him to admit that he was unsure how to talk about his inner-most thoughts – without resorting to derogatory remarks and negative self-talk. Being perfectly frank she had gotten used to reading between the lines where Sandor was concerned, but it did not make it easier to understand him. Sometimes she read him wrong, and sometimes she missed cues entirely. If they could learn to communicate with each other openly and directly she knew that it would make a long-distance relationship between them just that much easier to bear.

She had not lied when she'd told Sandor how she'd been hurt by the things he'd said to her that night. She'd agonized about it for days. Yet deep in her heart she knew that he did not mean them. She wasn't making excuses for him, but she knew that he had lashed out because he was hurting. When she had first gotten together with him she'd subconsciously known that being with him would present
challenges, and now she understood that she needed to be emotionally strong enough for both of them. She wasn't certain she knew how to do this, or if she was capable of it, but she was determined to give it all she had.

"I need to apologize to your parents," Sandor suddenly said, "I mean, they invited me and I was rude and left without a word."

"You don't have to do that," Sansa told him, "I made an excuse for you."

"I'm still going to personally apologize," he insisted, "I meant it when I said I wanted a new beginning."

She glanced up at him as they navigated a wooden boardwalk. "Why exactly do you want a new beginning?"

"Because you deserve better from me," he said without hesitation. "I'm going to try and be the guy I should have been for you, right from the start."

"Thank you, but I don't want you to turn into someone else. I want you to be you."

"You're not hearing what I'm saying," he grunted, "maybe I'm not explaining myself properly – I want to be a better version of me, that's all. I'm not going to try being some prince charming because it isn't going to happen, but I can try being politer and shit like that."

"And, shit like that, huh?" she repeated, amused.

Sandor glanced down at her. "I'm trying to talk about my feelings and you're giggling."

"I'm listening!" Sansa assured him. "I'm taking this all very seriously. I'm just really happy that we're talking like this, I can't help but smile."

His expression cleared. "You're happy?"

"Well, yeah!"

"Good," he muttered, "that's really good."

"I'm also really happy that you want to try harder for me, but don't think you have to be the one making all the concessions," Sansa told him. "I know I've been selfishly making you accompany me to events that make you uncomfortable despite the fact I know you hate them, so I won't force you from now on. I'm going to try and be more sensitive to your feelings, too."

"It wasn't about the parties, Sansa."

"I know, and I'm not explaining myself all that well either, but what I'm trying to say is that I know you're conscious of how we're so different…our different backgrounds, and things like that…and, while I can't do anything to change that, I'm going to try to be more aware and not push you into situations you're not comfortable in."

"Our differences, huh?" Sandor pulled them to a stop at a quiet bench overlooking the rapids along the river "I've been thinking about that, too."

"How so?"

"I've got to thinking that even though we were born into families and social classes beyond our control, I've realized that our futures are entirely in our hands. Something you said to me that night,
how nobody but you got to decide if something or someone is good enough for you...well, it made me realize that I should start thinking that way, too. The only person whose opinion should matter to me, is you. Fuck everyone else, they don't get to live our lives for us, no one does but you and me. We decide the course of our own future.

"We are the masters of our own destiny, huh?" Sansa let go of his hand long enough so that she could grasp the length of his arm to her side, leaning her head against his bicep.

Sandor relaxed against her. "As much as we can control our fates, yeah."

"I'm glad you're beginning to think like that," Sansa said softly, "it means we have an honest chance at making it when you go away for college."

"It's not going to be easy," he murmured.

"No, it won't be," she agreed. "And, I know that we'll probably fight and there'll be times we'll miss each other and times when we'll get so busy doing our own thing, but I think that as long as we make a conscious effort to make time for each other, listen to each other and try to understand what each of us is going through, we can make it."

"I want us to work, Sansa."

"I do, too," she told him, "and as long as both of us want the same thing, we will make it work."

"I don't see me ever wanting you any less," Sandor confessed, "if I learned anything this past week, it's that I physically get sick being without you."

Something in his tone made her look up at him, growing alarmed when she could see no sign of his words being an exaggeration or a joke.

"What happened, Sandor?"

He shrugged and cleared his throat before answering her. "Nothing really...my subconscious just punished me for fucking up big time."

Sansa was not appeased by his answer but she knew that it was not the time to wheedle the full story out of him, it was concerning enough to see that he had suffered in the week they were apart. What she needed to do was reassure him of how she felt about him, verbally and physically so that she could help him strengthen and fortify his confidence in himself, and the security of their relationship.

"You're the only one I want," she told him, "I mean that with all my heart, and I hope that you'll come to believe it in your soul."

"I do believe you," Sandor said softly, his voice coming out as a low rumble. "I believe you."

"Even on the days we fight, you're still going to be the only one I want." Sansa emphasized this statement by holding his arm tighter. "Even on the days when you're being a stubborn jackass and a grumpy-guts, I'll still want only you."

"Okay, okay." Sandor chuckled. "I get it."

"And, do you know why that is?" Sansa tugged on his sleeve to make him look down at her, ensuring that his eyes locked with hers. "You already know the answer to this, because I told you that night."
A frown formed between Sandor's brows at her words, his grey eyes darting about her face as if searching for the answer in her expression. Sansa felt her heart thudding in her chest, sincerely hoping that he would find the answer on his own. She didn't want to think he'd dismissed her words so easily in the midst of their emotional exchange and the darkness of that night. Yet, the very moment his frown vanished Sansa realized she'd been worried over nothing.

"You love me," he rasped.

A smile split her face. "Correct answer."

Sandor slowly moved to position her in front of him, gently looping both his arms at her waist and behind her back. Sansa took this to mean that he finally understood just how much he meant to her. By pulling her into his arms, could she take it to mean that he was accepting the depth of her feelings for him? It was important that he believe her, because the way she saw it, her love was like the mortar holding together the emotional fortification she was trying to build for him.

"When you love someone, you just know, right?" Sandor asked quietly.

"That's how it was for me," Sansa replied, "I knew that's how I felt about you when emotions like joy and happiness just weren't enough to describe how I felt for you."

"Is that so, huh?" Sandor cleared his throat, and Sansa felt a considerable tightening of his arms about her.

"What is it?"

Sansa looked up at him, seeing a look on his features she didn't see often. He looked nervous, and she felt him shiver against her. He cleared his throat again and made a point of meeting her eyes.

"I love you, too," Sandor suddenly declared, cheeks flushing with a shade of red she had never seen on his features. "I love you, Sansa."

Inhaling sharply, she had to blink several times before her ability to respond caught up to the emotions suddenly swirling within her. She had never expected Sandor to say those words to her in return, yet as the sound of his gravelly voice echoed in her ears, she realized that deep down she had been desperately longing to hear him say them.

"Once more, please?" she pleaded, her voice coming out as a squeak.

"I love you." Sandor obliged her, the scarred corner of his lips twitching.

"You...oh, my gosh!" Sansa suddenly felt tears pricking her eyes, but she was laughing as she wiped them away with the back of hand. "I love you so much!"

Then she was throwing her arms around his neck, standing on tip-toes and pressing her mouth against his, deepening the kiss when she felt his lips yielding beneath hers. His tongue darted into her mouth, and as she eagerly responded she was astounded by how gentle he was being with her, even as his muscular arms pulled her tightly against him.

They had shared countless kisses in the time they had been together, but there was something profoundly changed this time, and she wasn't the only one to sense it. Sandor hummed against her lips, his breath deepening as he cradled the back of her head so that he could tilt her face at an angle to better suit him, exploring the limits of her mouth as though searching for the source of the unfamiliar sensation. Her skin tingled wherever he touched her, and from the slight tremors she could feel coming from his body, Sandor was feeling its effects, too.
"What are you doing?" Sandor rasped, pulling away far enough to stare down at her. "How are you doing that?"

Sansa shook her head. "I'm not doing anything."

Sandor dropped his head and resumed kissing her, and once more they were struck by that indefinable something that made their heartbeats race and their blood pulse in their veins. It was like kissing him for the first time all over again, as though he had never touched her body before – like it was all new for them both, only infinitely so much better. If this had anything at all to do with the new beginning that Sandor was hoping for, then she could happily get used to it. Sansa had an inkling that this sensation of floating through the air and running at full speed at the same time was all due to the fact they'd finally professed their love to each other. In fact, she was sure of it, but she was content to keep that to herself, happy to allow Sandor the chance to discover it for himself knowing that the realization would be more meaningful that way. Love, she thought, is a wondrous thing.

Sandor abruptly broke the kiss and put her back onto her feet with some haste.

"Let's go," he said, taking hold of her hand.

"Where are we going?" she asked as she followed him back the way they came, taking two steps to his every one.

"My house," he responded gruffly.

"Did you forget something?"

"You could say that," he replied, his tone getting even rougher.

"What is it?"

"I just remembered the best part about making up," Sandor rasped, excitement now taking over his features as he gave her a look loaded with expectation.

Sansa felt her throat go dry at the heat of his gaze. "I'm almost afraid to ask, but what's the best part?"

Sandor's answering grin was bordering on feral.

"Make up sex."

Sansa threw her head back and laughed.

"Why didn't you say so sooner?"

She bounded ahead of him, and suddenly he was the one trying to keep up with her!

---

**Gendry**

"So, everything is right with the world again?" Gendry asked from the driver's seat, glancing at Arya from the corner of his eye as he navigated the busy road before them.

"Everything is back to how they should be," Arya said with a grin. "Sansa and Sandor are back together."

"Of course, with the promposal he staged in the quad, was the outcome going to be any different?"
"Everyone is still talking about that!" Arya laughed. "It's been almost a week."

"It's because no one can believe that Sandor 'the Hound' Clegane was really capable of such a public display of affection."

"It was a prom-posa, not a pro-posa," Arya pointed out.

"It was an apology and a declaration of love," Gendry corrected her, hardly believing he was having to explain it to her. "Because of that rumor people were ready to believe that your sister and Sandor really had broken up, but all those rumors have been smashed to bits by Sandor's stunt. Sandor is far from the romantic type, but he may as well have been Romeo declaring his love to Juliet that day. Everyone now assumes they just had a regular old lover's spat. I don't think he was expecting that to happen, but it was a clever move."

"He is capable of using his brain occasionally," Arya agreed. "Would you believe he came to our house last night and apologized to our parents for leaving the banquet abruptly like he did?"

"Really?" Gendry raised his brow in surprise. "That would have taken guts."

"It took my parents by surprise for sure, but I think they were both impressed that he readily took responsibility for his behavior, mom especially because she had some pretty strong reservations about him to begin with."

"Does that mean he's going to be hanging around Chateau Maegor from now on?"

"It's definitely looking that way," Arya replied, before she gave him a pointed look.

Gendry felt the heat of her stare and he spared her another glance. "What?"

"It's time you ran the gauntlet, too," she stated without preamble.

"Gauntlet, what gauntlet?" he asked, slightly alarmed by the seriousness of her tone.

"Dinner with my family," Arya elaborated. "It's kind of the unspoken condition my parents have set if you want to be allowed to come over on a regular basis. Come summer I'd like to invite you, Toby and Tabitha over to swim in the pool."

"I've met your parents, Arya, numerous times at that. They know who I am, I even came to visit you at your house that one time."

"Yes, but you've never had a sit-down meal with them or been subjected to in-depth, soul-baring questioning."

"That seems…intense," he commented, now wondering what went down on the night Sandor came to dinner to make Arya speak of it in such a daunting manner.

"You'll come?" Arya demanded.

"Yes?" Gendry hazarded. "I mean, yes…yes, I'll come for dinner. Definitely."

"Great," she said happily, taking out her phone. "I'll tell mother now."

"You're telling her now?" Gendry refused to admit that he was slightly panicked.

"Why wait?" Arya returned, continuing to compose the text to her mother. "The sooner the better, in my opinion."
"Whatever you say," he said with a resigned sigh.

Arya had a point, he conceded. While he had met her parents on several occasions in the past, their meetings were brief and confined to polite conversation. The closest he'd had to a deep and meaningful with Eddard Stark was before he'd gone to Storm's End to meet Stannis and his family, and even that had been fairly one-sided, with Arya's father's greatest concern being to reassure Gendry that he would be there to offer his support if the situation with Robert ever became too overwhelming for him and his foster-family. Now that he had Arya were a couple, it was natural that Arya's parents would be wanting to get to know him on a much more personal level.

His feelings on the matter were slightly more complicated, he admitted to himself. While he did want to get to know Arya's parents for the sake of deepening his own relationship with Arya, he also suspected that getting to know her parents, in particular Eddard Stark, could possibly lead to him gaining an insight about his biological father. There had to be a reason Eddard was close friends with Robert Baratheon. There had to be a common denominator that somehow allowed a man as principled as Eddard Stark to maintain a lifelong friendship with a man that appeared to be his polar opposite. Gendry was ready to find out.

"So, where are we going?" Arya asked him, breaking into his thoughts.

They passed by a sign in the middle of the road that said 'welcome to River's Edge', which clearly stated their location but not their destination.

"Someplace you haven't been to before," he told her, crossing an intersection and oncoming traffic. "It's where Lommy, the guys and I usually went for food after school."

"I'm always down for good food," Arya commented. "Why haven't you brought me here before?"

Gendry shrugged. "I didn't think about it, and I always had band rehearsal most days so we never got the chance."

"Then, we'd better make the most of your free time before Beric cracks that whip again, huh?"

"I'll tell him you said that," Gendry threatened jokingly.

Gendry parked his car at an underground garage that Arya appeared to recognize, but she seemed hesitant to reply when he asked her about it.

"It's a long story," she said evasively.

"But, you have been here before," Gendry stated, raising one brow as her expression all but confirmed it, belated remembering that Lommy and Bruce had once mentioned something about Arya poking her nose inside the 'Lucky 8' some months before.

"Just the one time because Sandor parked his car here,"

"You were here with Sandor?" he gave her an incredulous look.

"Oh, fuck..." Arya swore when she realized her slip.

Gendry gave her an evil grin. "This is going to be one interesting story."

Arya tried to distract him as they started to walk along the street but he would not be put off from extracting the full story out of her. He took hold of Arya's hand as the path inclined, owing to the fact they were on the cliffs overlooking the river mouth below, and the ocean beyond. He led her to a
steep alleyway that had been carved into the face of the cliff, smiling when he saw the familiar winding steps before him.

"Where are we?" Arya now asked, her eyes widening when she began to take in the sight of the steps and the colorful doorways they spied from the bottom of the alley.

"Serpentine Alley," Gendry happily told her, "I think you'll like it here."

Pushing her in front of him, Gendry said and did nothing but watch as Arya's head swiveled left to right as she observed the many winding alleyways that appeared on either side of the stairs, each of them offering glimpses of glass-fronted windows, opened doorways that enticed with heavenly scents both sweet and savory wafting from within. There were signs attached to posts and lintels written in both English and foreign scripts, while the interiors of the doorways they passed showed décor that varied from shabby chic to vibrantly exotic.

"This is awesome!" Arya gushed enthusiastically. "What are we eating? I wanna try everything!"

Gendry chuckled. "What do you feel like? There's pretty much everything here, and then some."

"Where's your favorite place?" Arya tugged on his hand. "Let's go there."

"Okay, it's down this alley," he said, beginning to lead her towards a café that had been carved into the rockface. "But just so you know, you're not off the hook and I mean to hear all about your misadventure with Sandor."

"So, it's a given that it was a misadventure, huh?" Arya huffed.

"When it concerns you and Sandor together, what else could it be?"

Gendry took her to the hangout that he had frequently haunted with Lommy and the guys ever since middle-school. It was an inexpensive sandwich shop that was simply called O'Browns, which also offered a variety of cheese fries, poutine and bowls of warm soup or stew in the winter months. There were plenty of more adventurous places to eat along Serpentine Alley, but few that near-penniless students could afford to visit frequently, so Gendry and his friends almost always ended up at O'Browns.

He ordered a large plate of poutine for the two of them to share, and while he savored the squeaky cheese curd and brown gravy covered fries, he finally got Arya to tell him how she'd ended up in a Flea Bottom parking lot with Sandor.

"Don't be angry, okay?" Arya had begun, which guaranteed that he would be angered at some point, and she told him of that fateful visit to the 'Lucky 8' where she'd first met Bruce, Lommy and his friends, how she'd learned about his inheritance, and of how Sandor had helped her when a couple of drunks had sought to bother her afterward.

"You got assaulted?" Gendry demanded, keeping his voice calm.

"Almost," Arya pointed out, "nothing serious happened because Sandor came along and beat them up."

"Arya…"

"Okay, so I beat up one guy and Sandor took care of the other."

Gendry forced himself to keep calm, knowing it was futile to get mad about something he could not
change. He could picture what had happened in his mind’s eye, having seen one too many violent incidents happen in front of his eyes in the rough streets Flea Bottom.

"Lucky that Sandor came along," he chose to say. "Why was he there anyway?"

"He never said and I never asked," Arya admitted. "We kind of agreed never to talk about it, and we never have."

Gendry sighed. "Look, I know you can fight when you have to and you're perfectly capable of defending yourself, but you came to Flea Bottom on your own, willingly opening yourself to danger, all on my behalf. I don't want to think about what could have happened to you if Sandor hadn't come along, and I don't want to preach to you because it's not going to do any good, but I just want you to promise me that you'll never put yourself in danger again like that for any reason – and especially not for me."

Arya managed to look contrite. "You're right. What I did was stupid, and I promise I won't take unnecessary risks again."

"Good," Gendry was happy with her response, but he knew that Arya was perfectly capable of attracting trouble even without having to come to Flea Bottom, so he held little hope for long-lasting peace where his girlfriend was concerned.

*I wouldn't have it any other way.*

After they'd eaten, he urged Arya to follow him to the top of Serpentine Alley where he promised her a sunset worth making the steep climb for. At the top of the stairs they first came upon a stone wall, and were immediately buffeted by a cool breeze from a stone corridor to their left. Guiding her down the corridor he found himself smiling when Arya whooped with excitement at the view that greeted her.

"Incredible!" she exclaimed, spreading her arms out as though to encompass what her eyes could see. "This view was here this whole time?"

Arya dashed ahead and peered over the stone safety railing, gazing down at the winding streets of Flea Bottom and the motley collection of buildings below, the steady flow of the Blackwater Rush, and the expanse of Blackwater Bay beyond. Gendry joined her at the railing, taking a moment to survey the view he'd seen countless times before. Back then when he'd looked down at Flea Bottom all he could think about was how quickly he could get away from the place, never once imagining he could ever see the view with anything but contempt. Yet at that moment, as though seeing the view from Arya's eyes, he found himself thinking that there really was something incredible about the place.

"King’s Landing is an old city, isn't it?" Arya asked him. "I mean like, centuries old?"

Gendry nodded. "Three centuries old, according to my elementary school teacher."

"And, Flea Bottom has been here the whole time?"

"Every city has its slums, so it's fair to assume its been here just as long," he replied with a shrug.

"That's amazing," Arya murmured, gazing at him. "A tough place like this must produce tough people, don't you think?"

She was clearly talking about him, and he smiled softly. "I guess you could look at it like that."
"It's true," she insisted, "to think that the people here have continued to build their lives and make a living for themselves and their families throughout the centuries, despite all the hardships they must have faced, there's something really amazing about that. The people who call this place home are… they're…oh, what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Resilient," Gendry supplied for her.

"That's it, exactly!" Arya grinned at him. "You're no different, you know that? Like a cockroach."

Gendry burst out laughing. "A cockroach? Really, Arya?"

"I'm saying it because it's a good thing, okay?" Arya laughed with him. "Cockroaches can supposedly withstand a nuclear blast, and I'm saying you are kind of the same because you'll survive whatever bombs life throws at you. I mean, you've had some crazy things happen to you this year, and you're still smiling, and stronger than ever."

Gendry pulled her to him and dropped a kiss on her cheek. Arya wriggled in his arms until she'd found a comfortable spot against his chest and the two of them settled to wait for the sunset.

"Thanks," he said simply, appreciating her thoughts.

Some days, hearing Arya speak of him in such a manner still left him astonished, his head often struggling to reconcile that she was describing him. It would take time, he acknowledged, but he was getting accustomed to it, just as he was getting extremely accustomed to his role as her boyfriend.

"Hey, there's something hard poking me in the back," Arya complained loudly, wriggling against him again.

Gendry was super glad that there was no one else around them because her words were embarrassingly suggestive, and misleading. Chuckling, he momentarily let her go so that he could retrieve the offending item from his jacket pocket.

"Good thing you reminded me," he said, "this is for you."

He held aloft a little gift box, unmistakably the kind that came from a jewelry store. Arya eyed it curiously.

"What's this? It's not my birthday."

"This was actually meant to be your present last Christmas, but I never found the right timing to give it to you."

"Christmas?" she said with a frown. "I thought you didn't get me anything."

Gendry shrugged apologetically. "I lied."

Arya looked at him curiously but accepted the box nonetheless and lifted the lid. Slowly her expression morphed from curious to delighted when she worked out what she was looking at.

"It's a wolf earring," she observed, before letting out an amused laugh, just as he had planned all those months ago. "Oh, wow! The head part is separate, and the tail is the backing piece so when I wear it, it looks like I've got a tiny wolf dangling from my earlobe…that's crazy, I love it!"

Arya insisted on putting it on then and there, so Gendry helped her while she fiddled with the box and its contents, patiently waiting while she securely fastened the little wolf to her earlobe. Her task
completed, she pulled her hair back so that she could show him the end result.

"What do you think?"

"It looks great," he told her truthfully. "It really suits you."

Arya took out her phone and switched the camera to selfie mode so that she could check it out for herself, giggling when the little wolf's tail swayed with her movements.

"This is the cutest fucking thing I've ever seen!" Arya grinned at him. "Thanks, Gendry."

"I'm glad you like it," he said, continuing to observe her as she then took a number of selfies with her new earring. Suddenly, he was struck with an idea. "Arya, give me your phone for a sec."

Arya handed him her phone and gave him another curious look while he arranged himself behind her, wrapping his arms about her so that he held the phone in front of them, adjusting their positions until both of their faces were visible in the camera's screen.

"Are we taking couple-selfies now?" she wondered.

"Yep," he answered her, and began clicking away.

Arya played it up for some minutes while he continued to take their photo, laughing when she pulled faces, laughing even harder when she tried to mimic the *Blue Steel* pose.

"Why are you taking so many?" she asked when he repositioned them so that the view of the ocean and the pink-orange tinted, late afternoon sky was behind them.

"Because, we've never taken a couples-selfie before," he told her. "Not a real one, I mean."

While he didn't elaborate on why this was significant, Arya must have sensed that this was something meaningful to him, because she stopped pulling faces and instead gave him a beatific smile while pressing her cheek next to his. The result, he was quite pleased to say, was one awesome, screensaver worthy shot of the two of them together.

They resumed their wait as the sun continued to dip lower in the horizon, content to stand in silence hugging each other as the evening breeze grew colder. Arya's slight weight against him felt nice, warm, even comforting, he thought. She had called him resilient, and while he didn't deny that he was in possession of an inner-strength that had seen him through the toughest of times, he also couldn't deny that having someone by his side who believed in him and supported him was immeasurably just as special. He was, he realized, that much stronger with her by his side.

"Thanks again, Gendry," Arya said, leaning her head against his shoulder.

"For the earring?"

"Yes, for the earring and for bringing me here and sharing your poutine with me…and showing me this sunset."

"You're being really sweet right now, and it's freaking me out,"

"Hey!" Arya elbowed him in response. "Shut it and just accept my gratitude."

"You're such a pain…literally, you're always pinching and prodding and elbowing…"

"I do not!" Arya protested, simultaneously attempting to elbow him again.
Gendry laughed and wrapped his arms tighter about her, immobilizing her arms and her offending elbows in the process. *Yes,* he thought. *All is finally right within my world.*

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**Sandor**

"Let me get this straight," he said to Sansa as she led him up the steep stairway leading to the top of Serpentine Alley. "You're telling me that you were never afraid of heights?"

"That's right," Sansa replied, though she still held onto his hand with a vice-like grip.

They had just finished having a snack at the cozy little café that sold her favorite lemon cakes, and when they'd stepped out of the café they realized they had time to make it to the cliff-top to watch the sunset. Being a Friday night, her curfew wasn't until midnight and they were going to make the most of it.

"So, what about that time you got stuck up that tree in the quad and I had to save your ass from falling?" Sandor pressed. "Or, when I first brought you here and you were clinging to my arm the whole time we were on the stairs?"

"It's not the height I'm afraid of," Sansa corrected him, "it's the possibility of falling and breaking my neck that scares me."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"No, it's not, and there's a very clear distinction if you think about it."

"The only reason people have to be afraid of heights is because of the possibility of falling, so that makes it totally the same thing."

"It is not," Sansa insisted. "What about getting height induced nausea, or getting the call of the void?"

"Call of the what?"

"Call of the void," she repeated, "you know, that feeling you get when you stand in a high place and think about jumping, but you don't actually want to do it?"

"The fuck?" Sandor frowned. "I've never once looked over the edge of anything and thought about jumping off it. That's stupid, and what does it have to do with having a fear of heights?"

"Well, what if the call of the void gets too tempting?" Sansa suggested. "What if you suddenly snapped and jumped?"

"Where are you going with this?"

"I'm saying it's not the issue of height that's the problem, it's the possibility of something bad happening when you get up so high, that's the difference."

He saw it, if he squinted hard enough, the difference was there.

"All right, so you could have a point," he finally acquiesced, and he heard Sansa's little *hmph* in triumph.

By now they had reached the landing at the top of Serpentine Alley and Sandor continued to follow Sansa down the stone corridor leading to the lookout platform, bumping into her back when she
abruptly stopped in her tracks.

"There's another couple here," she whispered, "let's go to the other side."

Sandor caught a quick glimpse of the silhouette a guy's broad back before Sansa was tugging on his hand and pulling him towards the furthest end of the lookout, giving themselves and the other couple present as much privacy as possible. It was, Sandor noted, the same spot where he and Sansa had come to watch the sunset on her birthday all those months ago. Now, Sansa stood before him with her back turned towards him, holding her arms away from her torso clearly expecting for him to wrap his arms about her, which he did, cheekily giving in to the urge to feel her up as he did so because she had the audacity to assume that he would know what she was thinking.

"Sandor!" Sansa giggled when his large hands brushed – and lingered – against her breasts.

"They won't look if you don't make so much noise," he rasped into her ear.

"You could try being more discreet,"

"Screw that," he grunted, and continued boldly caressing her.

Sansa squirmed against him as she stifled her half-moan, half-laugh, unaware of how provocative her movements were. Predictably it did not take long before he began to want for more than merely feeling her up through her clothes, and he reluctantly ceased his exploration of her body in favor of burying his nose into her hair and holding her close.

"To be continued?" Sansa teased, reading his mind.

"Fuck, yes!" he all but hissed.

Sansa's giggles eventually quietened and they watched the last of the sunset in companionable silence. As they stood there, he was reminded of the very first time he had brought Sansa to Serpentine Alley. Back then, he could never have foreseen – never could have imagined that he would one day be standing in the same spot holding her tight against him. It had seemed an impossible dream, yet the workings of fate and the alignment of the stars had seen that dream become reality, despite all the odds against them. He'd come so close to losing everything he had with Sansa, and the very thought of how close he'd come to the abyss – the very void Sansa had spoken of earlier – filled him with such anxiety that his palms began to sweat. He remembered the darkness that had surrounded him in the week when he thought he'd lost her, and he vowed he never wanted that darkness to consume him ever again.

"Hey, Sansa," he began.

"Mmm?"

"I've been meaning to talk to you about something," he continued, "I've been thinking about what you said about communicating more, and trusting each other more."

"Yes, and...?" she prompted gently.

"Looking back, I realized that even though I thought was above the gossip and caring about what people said behind our backs, I was nothing but a hypocrite because I was being affected by those things more than I want to admit."

"You're not the only one." Sansa sighed. "I'm guilty of that too, and I've made some bad calls because I listened to gossip in the past."
"Well, I'm done with that shit," Sandor stated. "I don't want to be influenced by what other people say or do, no matter how inconsequential it may be."

"Me too," Sansa said, sighing again. "...Is what I'd like to say, but we both know that there's a big difference between saying and doing because I've made that resolution many times over the last few months and somehow, I still find myself falling into the gossip trap."

"At least you've made the effort," Sandor pointed out. "You've made that conscious decision, and you're doing what you can to stick to it...it's time I make the effort, too."

Releasing one arm from around her, Sandor dug around in his back pocket for his phone. Holding the screen up from where they could both view it, he opened his inbox to find the latest link to Gossip Spyder's blog.

"What are you doing?" Sansa wondered, watching him scroll to the bottom of the page.

"Something I should have done a long time ago," he rasped.

Determinedly, Sandor found the miniscule print that had purposely been made tedious to find, and with a grunt of satisfaction, he tapped on the button that read; unsubscribe.

"Why didn't I think of that before?" Sansa gasped, looking at him like he was a genius. "Where's my phone?"

It seemed like such an obvious thing to do, and as Sansa quickly followed suit the significance of their action, small as it may be to others, did not fail to impress him.

"I've said this before, but the only opinion that should matter to me, is yours," he told her, "the only words that should matter to me are the ones that come straight out of your mouth. From now on, that's how it's gonna be. When I leave for Valyria U, if the only way we're gonna be able to feel closer to each other is by communication, then it's damned fucking important that we get it right."

Sansa put her phone back into the crossbody bag at her side and pulled him to her by the lapels of his jacket, slipping her hands up along his chest and collar bone until she was able to link her fingers behind his neck. She offered him a smile.

"We will," she assured him, "I know we will."

"Where is all this confidence coming from?" he demanded.

"From the fact we're both on the same page," she answered with certainty. "Everything's all falling into place for me...for us. I don't know how to explain it, but it feels like something bigger and greater is about to come over the horizon, and I'm kind of excited about that. I just have a feeling that everything is going to be okay."

Despite the waning light Sandor saw a brightness shining from her face and wondered if somehow his eyes were playing tricks on him because Sansa looked like she was glowing. The smile that graced her lips was soft, conveying joy, and maybe even contentedness. Beautiful as always.

"You're happy," he stated.

"I am!" Sansa nodded enthusiastically. "I'm happy about lots of things. Like, just recently I've realized that for the first time since moving to King's Landing I am genuinely happy. I mean, what's not to be happy about? You and I have levelled up as a couple--"
"Is levelling up a couple thing to do?" he asked, snorting with laughter. "Like, a video game?"

"It is now!" Sansa laughed with him. "Yes, we've levelled up. We've grown as a couple."

"I see…go on, what else are you happy about?"

"What else…oh, my parents have said that you can come over to our house as often as you like, and I'm looking forward to going to prom with you, and let's see…I guess the other big thing I'm happy about is that Arya and I are getting along better than we ever have before. Never in a million years did I ever think I could open up to Arya as I do with my girlfriends, but now it feels like the most natural thing in the world. She's my only sister, and I'm glad we can be friends, too."

"That's great, Sansa," he rasped quietly, "that's a great list you've got there."

"I'm sure that you'd have a good list too, if you just look a little closer," she said encouragingly, "like, getting into Valyria U, for example."

"I'm sure you're right," he agreed, "but the one that tops my list at the moment is this red-headed little bird that won't stop chirping long enough for us to watch the last of this sunset."

"You're saying I talk too much?" Sansa laughed. "I hope you remember, but you're the one that started this deep and meaningful talk."

Sandor was about to make a comment but he was distracted by a movement out of the corner of his eye, seeing two silhouettes approaching them seconds before a familiar voice pierced the darkness.

"I knew it!"

The two silhouettes stepped even closer toward them, allowing him to confirm their identities.

"Oh, it's you two," Sandor acknowledged them.

"Arya?" Sansa looked surprised at the appearance of her sister. "And, Gendry…what are you two doing here?"

"We were checking out the view," Arya replied, "and then I thought I heard someone saying my name."

"Hey guys," Gendry greeted them. "I kind of worked out that it was you two by the size of Sandor's silhouette, but she insisted on coming over. Sorry for interrupting."

"It's fine, you guys are no bother." Sansa waived away his apology. "Have you been up here before, Arya?"

"This is my first time to Serpentine Alley," Arya replied, "this place is amazing, I could spend hours wandering around all these alleyways!"

"I know, right?" Sansa's eyes widened, her enthusiasm triggered. "We were at this café earlier that sells the most amazing cakes, and…"

As Sansa excitedly told her sister about the restaurants that she had visited within Serpentine Alley, Sandor got the distinct feeling that whatever plans he'd had regarding spending that evening alone with her would now have to wait. He caught Gendry's glance over the sisters' heads and saw the resigned expression that must have been mirrored on his own face. Gendry lifted a shoulder in a careless shrug.
"I'm just gonna go with the flow," the pretty boy said, just as carelessly. "I'm in a good mood."

"Is that right?"

Sandor knew that despite his first impressions, Gendry was far from being a pushover. Instead, Sandor suspected that Gendry was happy to cater to Arya's whims simply because he was madly head-over-heels in love with his girlfriend. Sandor glanced at Sansa's radiant face, feeling a warmth envelop his heart as he did so. I'm the same.

"You didn't have anything big planned tonight, right?" Gendry wondered.

"Nothing big," Sandor confirmed, "probably just getting food later."

"It looks like we'll be joining you," Gendry stated. "Hope you don't mind."

"It's fine."

"I think we're all going to be eating somewhere downstairs," Gendry commented, following the continued enthusiastic chatter between the sisters.

"Seems that way," Sandor agreed.

"You guys wanna kill time at the 'Lucky 8' until it's time to eat?"

"Lead the way."

Without a word, Sandor and Gendry each took the hand of their respective girlfriends and began to usher them towards the steps, guiding them down the stairwell with a steady grip as the girls kept talking.

"Where are you taking us?" Arya asked when they were midway down the steep flight.

"Somewhere fun, don't worry," Gendry told her.

"Are they coming with us?"

"Yep, it's a double date."

"Did you hear that, Sansa?" Arya whooped with laughter. "It's our first double date."

"Ahuh, I heard!" Sansa giggled happily as they continued to make their way down the stairs.

Sandor grunted under his breath at the notion, not understanding why it was necessary to attach such a cheesy label to a group of people comprised of two dating couples, who were merely hanging out together. Yet, upon reaching street level and falling into step with his companions as they headed towards the pool hall, Sandor decided he would reserve judgement for later. Screw it...whatever, he thought. This could be fun.

~ The End ~
Thank you all for reading Gossip Spyder! This fanfic was seven years in the making, and I really want to give a shout out to all the readers (make yourselves known if you haven't already) who've been with me since day one back in 2012 – you guys have the patience of saints, honestly! THANK YOU! To the new readers, and to the Russian readers (courtesy of our most excellent translator Cosa) thank you for taking a chance on my story!

Through your encouragement I drew strength to continue writing this story while life happened around me. I became a mother in 2014 while writing this, and when our daughter was almost 2 yrs old we found out that she had Cerebral Palsy (she is doing brilliantly and has all the support available to her!) so the years have not been without their real-life challenges for sure, which certainly pulled my attention away from writing…but I always came back because I wanted to finish this story for the fans as much as it was for me.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!