Watching You Watching Me

by crossingwinter

Summary

Prompt—Today, I peeked through my window and trained a pair of binoculars on my neighbour's house. Every night without fail, he ends up standing in front of his window topless to flex his muscles. This time, I was surprised to instead find a note taped to the window saying, "Sorry, I'm out tonight." FML.

A Story of Arya and Gendry.

Notes

There is nothing explicitly Non-Con in this fic, but there are implications about things in the past.
So I am providing a trigger warning.
Arya

August - Oldtown

Arya would never have imagined that she would enjoy living with her sister.

Sansa had come back from her first year at Oldtown’s University with stars in her eyes, a stupid obsession with ballroom dancing, and a set of friends with whom she giggled incessantly over the phone.

But that was before Joffrey. Joffrey had left Sansa quiet, withdrawn, and with a biting sense of humor.

Arya liked it.

“Do you two need any help?” Sansa asked quietly, poking her head through the door.

“I think we’re fine,” smiled Jon.

“Don’t break yourselves. I don’t know how I’ll explain that one to mum.” And she was gone.

The cheap Qohorric bed that Arya and Jon were putting together was proving more resistant to formation than they would have guessed when they had bought it that morning.

“I think that thing is supposed to go in here,” said Jon, pointing to the dowel that Arya was trying to fit into one of the sideboards.

“It’s too fat for over there,” snapped Arya. She was more frustrated than she would have believed possible. It seemed that struggling with unconnected, inanimate objects was far worse than struggling with stupid people.

“Yeah, but it’s clearly not fitting in there. We might as well try it.”

She handed to him after a moment. It didn’t fit.

“I give up. I’ll just sleep on a mattress on the floor.”

“No you won’t. Your mum won’t have it.”

“Then she can put the damned bed together.”

The idea of Catelyn Stark making a bed set Jon laughing. As ever, his laughter was infectious, and before Arya knew what was happening she was rolling on the ground, clutching her stomach, fighting for breath.

“Pass me that one? The short one. That might go here,” suggested Jon. She threw the appropriate dowel at him, and after a brief moment where he attempted to line up the two pieces of wood he was trying to connect, he let out a shout of triumph.

“What is it that father always says? One victory doesn’t win a war?” Sansa was back, a towel wrapped around herself, clearly on the way to the shower. She was leaning against the doorframe, her auburn hair falling to somewhere in the middle of her back. Arya was always astounded to see how long it actually was. Arya hacked off her own dark hair religiously the moment it passed her chin. It was rare to see her sister’s hair down. Sansa was the type of person who got her hair to do
what she wanted, and often wore it in elaborate updos that left Arya befuddled.

“Yeah, but it’s always a start,” grinned Jon.

“Let’s hope we didn’t put that dowel in the wrong place. Otherwise we’re fucked,” said Arya and she rooted around in the box.

“If anyone calls in the shower, let me know?” asked Sansa, turning. Arya saw the scar again. It slashed from Sansa’s left shoulder to midway down the right side of her back and made Arya’s stomach twist every time she caught sight of it.

“Of course.” She hoped that she sounded more normal than she felt.

When Sansa was gone again, Arya looked at Jon. He was watching her very carefully.

Then he grimaced.

“Can we hunt Joffrey down and poison him?” she asked.

“We’d probably be thrown in prison for that.”

“He’d deserve it,” she muttered.

“I’m not saying I don’t agree, I just think that we should be more subtle about it.”

“I think poison is plenty subtle. Better than hacking his head off with one of my sabres or something.”

“That would probably be fun, I don’t think we can strike it from the list of possibilities.”

“But you’re striking poison off?”

“Well yeah. I mean, we’d have to get a-hold of the poison, wouldn’t we? We already have one of your sabres. We could even probably get your coach to give us a really cool one and then cunningly frame him.”

“I’m not framing Syrio. Can we frame Thorne instead? He trains the foil users.”

“Done.”

“But poison would still probably be useful. Undetectable and all that shit.”

Jon paused for a moment, considering. “I suppose I could always talk to Daemon about it. He could probably get something from lab if we promise to cook for him or something…”

“Daemon doesn’t want my cooking. He also probably doesn’t want the cooking of people who have been dabbling in the recreational poisoning of the First Family.”

There were four of them living in what they affectionately referred to as the Bastard House—Jon Snow, Aurane Waters, Daemon Sand, and Gendry Waters. Aurane and Daemon had lived with Robb and Theon last year, before Robb went to study Law and History at King’s Landing and Theon went to study surgery at the Dreadfort.

“Just regular old chemistry, as far as I can tell. He’d probably go into greater detail about it, but the minute he gets too scieney…”
“I thought you were a sciency type,” accused Arya.

“The School of Forestry is not sciency. It deals with science, but it’s not sciency. I mean, come on, I spend my days studying reforestation. If there’s any science involved in that, it’s ecology. I never touch chemistry.”

“Still more science than there should be.”

Jon rolled his eyes.

“How come you don’t bug Sansa about it?”

“Political Science is not sciency, Jon.”

“It has science in the name.”

“That doesn’t make it actually sciency. It’s—” There was a knock on the front door. “Coming!” hollered Arya, extracting herself from the pieces of her bed.

She trotted down the stairs and opened the door. Her mother was standing there with a man that Arya did not recognize, carrying what looked like every possible grocery that Arya, Sansa, and their housemate might want.

“Times when I wish your father had come to help,” muttered Catelyn Stark. She dumped her parcels unceremoniously into Arya’s arms. “Here, take these. I feel like my arms are about to fall off. There’s more in the car that I should get.” And she was back down the stairs of their front porch heading to the rental car.

Arya grumbled as she adjusted the bags, hoping that she wouldn’t lose grip on them. Arya couldn’t help but wish her father had come instead of her mother—she got on better with her father. But Ned Stark had gone to move Robb in King’s Landing (in what Arya had assumed was a way to show his wife he cared more about his trueborn son than his bastard). It had not been worth the trouble of voicing this preference when her parents had been deciding which children they would help move in, especially since it concerned Sansa.

And so, it was Catelyn, and not Ned, who guided through Arya’s transition into Oldtown’s University—“the finest university in all of Westeros,” Catelyn had gloated over the phone to her sister (as if Lysa Arryn had not already known) when Robb had first been accepted. She hadn’t gloated quite as much when Sansa had gotten in, and barely gloated at all for Arya.

“I don’t know if all this will fit in our kitchen, mum. Our kitchen’s tiny.”

“Then put some of it in the cellar,” called Catelyn over her shoulder as she descended the front steps again.

Arya rolled her eyes.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m your uncle,” grinned the auburn haired man. His eyes were very blue, like mum’s and Robb’s and Sansa’s, so Arya couldn’t be surprised.

“Oh,” said Arya. She didn’t really know what else to say. The only thing she knew about Edmure Tully was that he was much younger than mum and that he had graduated the year that Robb had started school here. He had then gone on to do things with the city council, but none of them were
ever quite sure what.

She let Edmure into the kitchen, and began attempting to figure out where everything should go.

She’d never been good at small talk, much to her mother’s frustration, and so an awkward silence filled the room. All Arya really wanted to do was go back upstairs and plot Joffrey’s death with Jon.

It did not surprise her that Jon had not come downstairs. Mum had never liked Jon much, in what Arya considered to be a gross misplacement of anger. Mum had been, of course, angry with her father too, given that he had apparently had an affair within the first year of their marriage, but she had had to forgive him in the end. She had never forgiven Jon for existing.

“That’s everything for now,” said Catelyn, entering the kitchen with two more huge bags. She began putting things away. Arya did not ask her how she knew Roslin’s system without having been in the house before. She supposed that that was something that just came from keeping a kitchen. “Where’s your sister?”

“She’s in the shower. Maybe for ten minutes or so?”

Catelyn nodded. “I hope she doesn’t take too long. I’ll need to get to the airport pretty soon. I do not think I should wait around for a later flight. Rickon will go ballistic if he has to miss his football match to pick me up.”

“Rick goes ballistic over everything,” muttered Arya. Her youngest brother had an even quicker temper than she did, and that was saying something. Especially given that he spent all his time around Bran, who was possibly the calmest human being that Arya had ever met, most people were surprised by this. But Arya supposed that the youngest of six had to find some way to stick out.

“He might be better about it if you aren’t there needling him all the time.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Three things happened all at once. Sansa came down the stairs, dressed in a long-sleeved blue dress (she always wore long-sleeves these days, even if it was as hot as all of the seven hells in one outside); Roslin came in through the front door, carrying even more groceries; and Edmure’s face went purple.

Arya glanced between Edmure, whose eyes were trained on Roslin, and Sansa. Sansa rolled her eyes.

“Uncle Edmure, have you met our housemate, Roslin?”

“Edmure Tully,” said Edmure breathlessly, taking one of the bags from Roslin.

“Roslin Frey,” smiled Roslin.

“Frey? Are you related to Walder Frey?” Roslin nodded. “He’s on the city council with me. Keeps trying to make us raise taxes to fix the bridge into town.”

“He is rather adamant about it,” said Roslin, quietly.

“Now, you two,” said Catleyn, pulling Arya out of the kitchen so that she could speak to both of her daughters at once. “I want you to look out for each other, all right? I know you aren’t the best
At living together, and if it doesn’t work out, it doesn’t work out, and we’ll talk about a solution at the semester break. But I think you both can keep an eye on each other, all right?”

Arya and Sansa both nodded. They had heard this before, when Catelyn and Ned had decided it would be best for the Stark sisters to live together. Neither girl had protested when it had been decided. Arya didn’t want to upset Sansa, and Sansa was too polite let on if she was displeased.

“And call anytime you need anything,” Catelyn’s eyes were fixed on Sansa. Sansa nodded, with a smile so small it almost didn’t seem to exist playing at her lips. Her blue eyes, which had once been so bright looked dull and sad. Catelyn kissed the side of her forehead. “And you,” she turned to Arya. “Stay out of trouble.” Arya flinched, but smiled as she did so. It could have been a lot worse, after all. Her mother kissed her as well.

“Edmure!” she called him. Edmure was still prattling away at Roslin while she tried to find places for her groceries. Edmure nodded, said goodbye to his nieces (promising to look in on them soon) then followed Catelyn out the front door.

A moment later, their car had pulled away. Sansa went into the kitchen to help Roslin, and Arya went back upstairs.

The bed was done.

“Wow,” she said, genuinely surprised.

“I guess I didn’t need you in the end,” grinned Jon, sitting on top of her bare mattress.

“Shut up.”

“Your mum’s gone, then?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Good. I hate hiding from her.”

“You don’t have to hide from her, you know? She knows you exist. You lived with us all your life.”

Jon shrugged. “More trouble than it’s worth, I think.” Jon ran his hand through his hair. His hair (black, like hers) had always been unkempt, but he was growing it longer (probably because he was too lazy to cut it) and so it looked even more disheveled than she was used to. “I should probably get back. I promised I’d help do the dishes before heading to work. D’you and Sansa want to come around for dinner tomorrow night? I can make a lasagna or something.”

“Ask Sansa. I’ll be there,” grinned Arya.

“Excellent. Oh, before I forget, here.” He pulled a small box out of his pocket and handed it to her. She opened it.

“Binoculars?”

“Yeah. There are some great trails along the Honeywine. We could go hiking maybe before it gets cold. At least, as much as it gets cold here.” Castle Black had turned Jon into a cold snob, in Arya’s opinion—and that was saying something, given how she felt about weather that was too warm for her to wear a sweatshirt.
“Binoculars?”

“You always liked bird watching.”

“I like birds, Jon. I’ve never ever been a birdwatcher.”

Jon rolled his eyes. “You’ll thank me for it one day. Especially if White Ravens actually live there in the winter like Robb says. See you later, little sister.” He got off the bed, gave her a hug, then descended the staircase.
The last thing that Gendry expected when he walked through the front door covered in oil, grime, and sweat, was to be met with the sight of two girls sitting at the bar in the kitchen chatting with Jon. Jon was spooning a large square of lasagna onto each of their plates and talking about a working as a Teaching Assistant for a class in the Geology Department—something wholly unrelated to his field.

“I really don’t know anything about it, but it seems ridiculously excellent. Besides, most of the students are in their final year so they probably won’t be too much trouble.”

“That’s provided they do the work. I mean, it’s a geology class. Who wants to be studying rocks?” said the smaller of the two. She was a compact person, which was, he supposed, a politer way of saying she looked almost like a little girl. Short dark hair, small framed, small chested, small hipped and a surprisingly long, thin face. She carried herself as though she had muscle somewhere underneath the sweatshirt she was wearing.

“They might just be taking it for the science credit,” agreed the other one. She was taller, with long reddish brown hair. She looked the more womanly of the two. Words like “slender”, and “willowy” popped into Gendry’s mind. “Arya’s taking an ornithology class just for a science credit, after all.”

“Ornithology?”

“Yeah, Robb said it was ok.”

“So those binoculars might come in handy, then?”

“Shut up.”

“Hello,” smiled Gendry as he passed through the kitchen. They had not noticed when he had entered, but they noticed him then. The redhead’s face tightened slightly, the short one looked at him with eyebrows raised. Jon waved the hand that was holding the spatula.

“You’re back early,” he smiled. “Arya, Sansa, this is my housemate Gendry Waters. Gendry, these are my sisters. They live in old Frey’s other house.”

Gendry nodded at each of the girls, who said hello.

“Why are you covered in oil?” demanded the smaller one, Arya.

“I work in a garage. Mott’s, down on Harbor Street.”

“Oh.”

“You’re welcome to join us if you would like. Jon made plenty of lasagna,” said Sansa. Her voice was quiet and there was a determined set to her jaw.

“That sounds nice. I might go clean myself up first though.”

“Why?” asked Arya, her mouth full of lasagna.

“I’m covered in oil, as you pointed out.”
“So? I eat covered in dirt all the time.”

“Much to mother’s joy,” commented Sansa dryly.

“Not everyone’s like you, Arya. Some people like to be clean sometimes,” grinned Jon, reaching from a mason jar full of wine and taking a sip.

“Like you’d know, you dirty hippie,” smiled Arya, nudging him.

Gendry snorted.

Some of Jon’s clothes looked as though they had never been washed. Others he picked up from the thrift store for less than a stag. Still others were clearly the ones that Robb had worn through and thrown out, but that Jon still thought could be useful and had swiped before they had reached the charity store in Winterfell.

They were often covered in dirt, which he claimed were vestiges from the hikes he had taken when doing his undergrad degree in Environmental Studies at Castle Black. Indeed, at that very moment, Jon was wearing a pair of jeans that looked at least thirty years old they were worn so thin, a Castle Black t-shirt that he could only have gotten in thrift since it referred to a graduating class from before Jon had been born, and a red and black lumberjack flannel shirt. If Jon wasn’t wearing flannel, regardless of the heat outside, something was wrong. If Jon’s hair looked manageable, he probably had something important to do sometime that week, though it would be unclear precisely when.

Perhaps Gendry would not have described Jon as a “dirty hippie,” but the description was not far from the mark.

Jon rolled his eyes. “Hey, I’ve showered this week. I think that’s quite the achievement, personally.”

“I was wondering what smelled funny,” deadpanned Arya.

“Dirty hippie,” confirmed Sansa, also taking a sip of wine out of another mason jar.

Gendry slipped out of the room while they were arguing.

He was very glad he didn’t have sisters. Jon’s seemed like a handful.

Though Jon said he got on quite well with Arya, the younger one, she seemed more confrontational than he would have expected of someone related to Jon. And then of course, there was Sansa.

Jon said that she had spent most of the summer shying away from her brothers, who were related to her. A strange man was probably exactly what she wanted to deal with. And yet she had not been hostile. Nor had she been particularly distant. It surprised him some.

After Jon had warned him about Sansa, whose situation Aurane and Daemon were both familiar with having lived with Robb Stark the year before, he had gone onto the internet and read the articles surrounding her case.

They weren’t pleasant.

Joffrey seemed like an evil little shit.

An especially evil little shit. He wondered if the University had been relieved of the charge of
plagiarism in his own uncle’s course, since it would make him that much easier to expel. For some reason (according to the disgusted editorial Sarella Sand had written for The Citadel) perpetrators of abuse never got as harsh a punishment as those who committed academic dishonesty. There were some other articles about how the University was changing its policies about that, which was good. Unfortunately, that was too late to be of any use to Sansa.

By the time he reentered the kitchen, Arya was holding a wooden spoon like a sword and showing Jon the proper technique for sabre fighting.

“I thought you could only stick ‘em with the pointy end,” Jon was saying.

“With épée and foil, yeah. But with sabre,” she knocked him with the side of the wooden spoon, moving so quickly that Jon yelped more from shock than pain, “sides are fine too.”

Jon shrugged and grinned. “Whatever. I can still take you any day.”

“Don’t be so sure of yourself young man. I know damn well how you fight. You have no idea how I fight,” growled Arya, her stance changing.

“I think between me and Gendry, we’d have you, wouldn’t we Gendry?”

Arya turned around and cocked her head, looking Gendry up and down.

“He’s too big. Probably really slow. I’d run circles around him.”

“Oh really?” asked Gendry, crossing the kitchen and pouring some wine into a jar for himself.

“Yep.”

“But I’ve got more muscle than you.”

“In fencing, speed is everything.”

“I don’t think Jon was talking about fencing. Besides, I’d never hit you.”

“Why, because I’m a girl?”

“That and because you’re tiny. It wouldn’t be fair. You’d probably end up halfway across campus if I knocked you thoroughly.”

“If you could hit me, that is. Remember, I’m fast.”

Gendry shrugged. It’s more likely that he would never hit her because she was a Stark of Winterfell. But he’d never say that—not in front of Jon at least.

He wondered briefly if Jon hated being a bastard. It had, after all, been his idea to call their house “Bastard House” but his face did darken whenever Gendry spoke of what his mother was doing back in King’s Landing.

Gendry wondered if his own face darkened similarly when Jon talked about his father.

“Can we talk about non-violence for a while?” requested Sansa. “What do you study Gendry?”

“Anthropology.”

“Why?” demanded Arya.
“Because it’s interesting.”

“It sounds boring to me.”

“That’s because you probably don’t know what it is.”

“It’s studying people, isn’t it?”

“Basically.”

“Yeah, boring.”

“And what are you studying?” he asked.

“Linguistics.”

He had to choke back a laugh. “And how is linguistics more interesting than anthropology?” She rolled her eyes, but did not answer. “You see?”

“Well, I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

“That means you’ve won, Gendry,” grinned Jon, clapping him on the shoulder and taking a sip of wine.

“It does not. It just means he’s probably too stupid to follow if I talk about phonemic variations and the like.”

“He’s a grad student at Oldtown’s University, Arya. I doubt very much that he’s too stupid for anything,” intoned Sansa.

“I wouldn’t count on that. Look at his face. It looks pretty stupid to me.”

Gendry raised his eyebrows as Jon barked, “Behave, Arya.”

“Sorry,” she mumbled after a moment. But the sentiment did not quite reach her eyes, which were positively alight.

“You shouldn’t insult people who are bigger than you. It could get you into trouble.”

“Then I wouldn’t get to insult anyone.”

Gendry laughed.

For the rest of dinner he did his best not to interfere. It seemed that Arya and Jon liked to get into hypothetical arguments. They would argue over what kind of dog was the best (Arya had a doberman, Jon had a sheepdog; Sansa’s golden retriever, it seemed, had died mysteriously last spring), how one ought to go about selecting workout music (Jon suggested the importance of a bass-line; Arya was determinedly in favor of heavy percussion), and which trails near their home were the best to run on. Sansa would add in perspective where she had it, but Gendry felt almost as though he were watching dinner theater between two very passionate characters.

He did the dishes (it was only fair—he had barged into their meal) and escaped upstairs before the girls left.

When he entered his room, he made immediately for his coffee maker and set it percolating. Then he pulled out the first few readings for the course he would TA this semester, to prepare to take
notes.

When his coffee was ready, he stood by the window and looked out at the backyard, the little brook running down the middle of the yard, the big elm tree in the middle.

He sighed, and set to work.
September

“Why are you even here? I don’t like you.”

“We were having a conversation,” mumbled the fat boy.

“No, you were talking and following me.”

They were sitting in Arya’s kitchen before Arya had really been aware that he had followed her home. They had been working together on a project due the next week in Semantics (“Food Terminology and Semantic Roots”) and when they had finished, the boy, whom Arya had taken to calling Hot Pie because of his obsession with the food, had continued chatting with her about High Valyrian morphology until she had zoned out.

“I’ll go then…” mumbled Hot Pie, looking so dejected that Arya felt guilty.

“No—” she paused, “I have to leave in ten minutes anyway for fencing. Do you want something to eat? I usually make a quick sandwich before practice.”

Hot Pie smiled, said he wasn’t hungry, and launched into a discussion of the kinds of pies that he baked in his dad’s shop.

Arya only half listened, and soon she led Hot Pie out of the house. He turned left, back towards campus, she turned right, towards the Bastard House.

“What are you doing here,” asked Jon, as he sprawled himself on one of the couches in the living room after letting her in.

“Avoiding someone. I said I had practice.”

“Don’t you have weight lifts on Wednesday mornings at some ungodly hour?”

“Yep. I just didn’t know how to get rid of him.”

“You could have just asked him to leave,” shrugged Jon.

“Don’t know how he would have taken that. First years are so needy.”

Jon laughed. “You’re a first year, little sister.”

“So I can speak on it with authority.” She threw herself into a chair.

“As you will.”

“What are you up to?”

“I was trying to take a nap between the class I’m taking and the discussion section I’m teaching so that I can stay awake tonight at my shift. But if you’ve got something important to talk about, I can triple shot an espresso tonight.”

“I’ve got nothing. Just here to say hi.”
“Right-o.” And Jon closed his eyes.

Arya was half-dozing herself when Jon’s phone buzzed on the coffee table. Jon was snoring lightly and clearly hadn’t heard it. Arya glanced at the screen.

*Gendry Waters: I've left my keys at work. Can you let me in so that I can grab my notes before heading to section?*

Arya went to the front door, and found Gendry standing outside.

“How do you forget your keys at work. Don’t you keep them in your pocket?”

“Not when I’m at the garage. I know someone back home who accidentally electrocuted himself because his keys were in his pocket. Don’t ask how.”

“It seems kind of stupid.” She was hardly aware of following Gendry upstairs, but suddenly she was in his room.

It was a very neat room, small. His desk was a mess with papers, and his laptop was sitting open and charged, but apart from that, everything seemed to be in its proper place. Even the bed was made. Arya didn’t know *anyone* who made their bed themselves—not even Sansa. There was a faint smell—of coffee and something else—that she found rather pleasant.

“D’you mind leaving so I can change? If I can’t shower, I should at least be mildly presentable to my students.”

Arya turned around and asked him over her shoulder, “What class do you TA for?”

“Chivalry and the Hook-Up Culture. It’s an anthro course.”

“I figured as much.”

“It’s decent. The lecturer is boring though, so I have to be really on my shit. I kind of feel bad for the undergrads who take it.”

He was passing her, heading back down the stairs at a decently quick pace. He had replaced his oil-covered t-shirt with a button down. He stopped in the kitchen and rubbed some water on his face.

“There’s some oil on the back of your neck,” pointed out Arya.

Gendry tilted his head, as though expecting to be able to see it. Arya guffawed.

“It’ll just have to be there, then,” he muttered. “Thanks for letting me in,” he called as he headed back out the front door. “Lock up after me?”

She heard the door click shut and went to lock it. She saw Gendry hopping on a bike and taking off in the direction of Harbor Street.

Jon stirred.
“What time is it,” he mumbled.

“Four thirty.”

“Perfect,” he sat up, stretching and yawning. Then he looked at her. “We really should try and get you a key, if Frey lets us make a copy. You and Sansa both.”

“It would be handy,” she said, leaning against the couch. “I’m going to head home, I think.”

“Cheers. See you, then.”

She got home to find Sansa curled up in the couch, wearing sweatpants and a light sweater, reading through an enormous textbook.

“What on earth is that for?”

“My seminar on the War of the Five Kings. It’s fascinating. There is some really crazy documentation on it.”

“Is that Tyrion Lannister’s class?”

“Yes.” Sansa’s voice was completely neutral.

“How is it?” Arya was not asking about the class.

Sansa had already registered for Lannister’s class by the time that Joffrey was kicked out, and he had written her a long email to the effect of “I completely understand if you want to drop my class. But know that 1) I’m not my nephew 2) I abhor what he did to you 3) I would love to have you in my class. I wouldn’t have accepted you otherwise.” Sansa had decided not to drop it in the end, though no one really understood why.

“That book looks like it could be a murder weapon.”

“Well, if you don’t shut up, there’s always the possibility that it might yet be one.”

Arya really liked Sansa’s new sense of humor.

She climbed the stairs to her own room and settled at her desk to begin her Ornithology homework.

She hoped Robb was right about the easy part of Ornithology. She didn’t see how birds could be surprisingly interesting. She lost track of time doing a reading about the mating tendencies of seagulls, and before long, she heard Roslin calling her downstairs for dinner.

“I made grilled vegetables. You’re welcome to them if you like.” She was already pouring some into from a cookie sheet into a bowl for herself.

“Where’s Sansa?” asked Arya. This was the sort of meal that Sansa would probably like. Arya preferred meat.

“She went off to Ballroom, I think. Should be back around nine.”

“This is really good!” Arya exclaimed, popping another grilled pepper into her mouth.

“You don’t have to sound so surprised.”

“I’m not. I just meant…Usually vegetables don’t taste so good.”
“That’s because you aren’t cooking them right. My stepmother always used to talk about how vegetables need to be cooked differently from meat. I didn’t believe her until I tried being a vegetarian.” Roslin hadn’t sat down at the table. She was leaning against the counter.

“What did you stop eating meat?”

“I eat meat now. I did it in high school to tick off dad. I mean, I try to eat more vegetables than meat because they’re good for you, but meat’s tasty.” Roslin grinned.

“Did it work? Ticking off your dad?”

Roslin cocked her head, considering. “Well, this was around the time that Olyvar started dating men, so I don’t honestly think he noticed.” She sighed. “He was too busy trying to convince Olyvar that no son of his should be gay. As if he didn’t have enough straight sons to be getting on with.” She rolled her eyes. “Olyvar’s always been better at rebelling than me.”

“I think I’m the best rebel in my family, personally.”

“Yeah, well. You have less competition. I’m his twelfth child. And there are four more that are younger than me.”

Arya almost choked on her food. “And I thought I had a big family.”

Roslin laughed. “That’s generally the response that piece of information gets.”

“Sixteen children? That’s crazy. How does he feed you all?”

Roslin shrugged. “He’s got some money put away somewhere. And he rents houses to students. I dunno. He does a good job supporting us, even if he can be a bit…well…hard to deal with.”

Arya nodded and took another bite of vegetables.

Then Roslin asked, “Are you having fun? Being at university, I mean. I know it’s different when you are so far from home.”

Arya finished chewing, swallowed and replied, “It’s fun. I’m getting on better with Sansa than I anticipated, so that’s good.”

“You two used to fight a lot?”

“Like wolves over a scrap of meat. I think just because we could.”

“Well, keep it that way. I like peace in my house, thanks.”

“I’ll do my best,” grinned Arya.

“Fencing’s good?” Arya wondered briefly why Roslin was grilling her (luckily in a way different from the vegetables).

“I like Syrio. It was a good choice to come here for fencing I think. The team’s nice. I don’t know them too well just yet. But I figure they’ll haze me at some point and then that will change.”

“Any boys you like?” Roslin winked.

The immediate answer was a no, but fearing that that might be a little too rude, Arya settled for shaking her head and murmuring, “Not yet. I’m not looking for anyone though.”
“You’ll find someone. One day he’ll just cross your path and you won’t know what to do without him.”

Arya wondered if that was what had happened with Roslin and Robb. But she knew better than to ask. Or rather, there was a Sansa-voice in her mind telling her not to.

It was bloody hard to have a conversation with Roslin sometimes. How are you not supposed to ask your brother’s ex-girlfriend how she could bear living with you, when he had left her in such a humiliating manner last spring?

Roslin was watching her, and Arya scrambled for something to say. “What about you? I mean, you aren’t…you’ve haven’t been…seeing anyone?” she asked lamely.

A slight smile crossed Roslin’s face. “Well, not really. I mean…I’ve been crushing a bit on your uncle. He’s very good-looking. But I’m not pursuing it or anything. He pops around sometimes when you and Sansa aren’t here because he doesn’t know your schedule and we chat some.”

“Well…good luck with that. I think he’s a bit of a twit.”

“Yes, but a nice twit. And I could go for nice right about now.”

When dinner was done, she went back upstairs to start a very long, very boring reading on syntactic methodology and why it was important to the study of syntax.

Her phone buzzed.

Robb Stark: How’re birds?

Trust Robb to text her when she was trying to get something done. He really did have the worst timing imaginable. He had spent most of the past few years texting her when she was preparing for fencing tournaments, or when she was three seconds away from falling asleep. Mum had always blamed the distance. Arya just thought he didn’t really know how to gauge timing.

Arya Stark: Boring thus far. How is law.

Robb Stark: Similar. Jeyne says hi.

Arya rolled her eyes. She didn’t know Jeyne very well. But she was frustrated with Robb’s interruption and was feeling some house loyalty to Roslin—perhaps because she had cooked dinner.

Arya Stark: So does Roslin.

That would shut him up, she hoped.

Her phone buzzed again a few minutes later.

“What, Robb?” she mumbled to herself.

But the number was unknown: Thanks for letting me in earlier. I got your number from Jon.

Arya Stark: Gendry?

Who else?

Arya Stark: You could have said something.
Gendry Waters: Do you go about letting random people in to random buildings all day?

Arya Stark: No, stupid. I just didn’t have your number until now.

Gendry Waters: Well of course you didn’t. I only just gave it to you.

Arya Stark: Don’t you have better things to do than pester me? I’m trying to get work done.

Gendry Waters: Ahh work. That plague of the undergraduate. How fare the languages?

Arya Stark: Like you would even understand it if I told you.

Gendry Waters: I’ll have you know that I have taken a linguistics class before. I know some of the things you think would go straight over my head.

Arya Stark: Did you take a socio-linguistics class?

Gendry Waters: Yes. Language Death.

Arya Stark: That’s not real linguistics.

Gendry Waters: What do you mean, that’s not real linguistics? It was in the linguistics department, taught by a linguistics professor.

Arya Stark: Yeah, but socio-linguistics does too much stuff with, you know, the socio- bit. So it doesn’t count.

Gendry Waters: I’m pretty sure that’s not how that works.

Arya Stark: I’m turning my phone on silent. Go away.

True to her word, phone silenced, she turned back to her linguistics reading. But the combination of Robb and Gendry had set her completely off her syntax reading. Within ten minutes, she sighed and looked out the window.

The lights of the Bastard House glowed across two back yards. She wondered vaguely if she could see into Jon’s room with binoculars. It might prove useful for blackmail one day.

She reached for the binoculars he had given her and trained them on the second floor of the house. She could just make it out through the trees.

She almost fell out of her chair.

Gendry was standing by the window of his bedroom, a towel wrapped around his waist, drinking a mug of something—coffee she imagined, based on the smell of his room. He placed the mug on the desk and stretched, yawning.

The towel dropped.

And Arya did fall out of her chair.
Gendry

There are some things that are considered acceptable treatment of one’s roommate’s younger sister. Carrying groceries for her, for example, or pointing her in the direction of said roommate when she comes over for a visit.

Flirting with her over text message (using the phone number you got from your roommate’s phone when he went off to work without it) probably would not be considered acceptable.

Gendry knew that.

He knew that very well.

He also knew that Arya Stark was quite a bit younger than him, and that she was a first year, which probably made him the worst kind of lecher (after, of course, those people who watched child pornography. Those were worse than him).

He set his mug of coffee down, stretched, the towel he was wearing dropped from his waist, and he set about dressing himself.

Though he slept naked, he always felt uncomfortable doing work naked. There was something off about it he couldn’t place.

He sighed looking at the reading he had to lead a discussion on the next day. It was from the late 6th Century, AL, and it was really quite an atrocious text, for any number of reasons, academic and otherwise.

He woke up with his head pressed against the open book. The page he had fallen asleep on was slightly creased from his face.

It was a testament either to the dullness of the text or to the state of his coffee addiction (and he wasn’t sure which) that he had fallen asleep while working for the first time in three years.

He winced at the stiffness in his neck when he sat up. The pre-dawn light was beautiful, and as he looked out the window, he thought he saw movement in one of the windows in the house across the yards. He wondered briefly who, by the old gods and the new, would be up so early, then sighed. It looked like he was going to be unprepared for his seminar on the history of urban waste management.

He packed up his school bag, figured that the clothes he had slept in were probably not too rumpled to wear today, and headed downstairs and out of the house. If he was going to have to work this early in the morning, he decided he deserved good coffee, so he walked in the direction of central campus, and Chataya’s, the best source of Sothoryosi coffee on this side of the Narrow Sea (or so they claimed).

Chataya’s was a wonderful little shop, tucked in between two larger clothing boutiques. It was open twenty-four hours, perfect for a university student, though it was mostly empty between the hours of two and six in the morning. It was full of warm colors and comfortably cushioned chairs, and the baristas were very beautiful.

Gendry ordered his drink, then set about picking a table. They were all empty, save one, which was occupied by a girl on a computer, who was typing away fervently.
On second glance, he saw that it was Sansa Stark. But not the Sansa he so often saw walking to and from campus, a composed and impeccably dressed young woman. This girl was dressed in ratty sweat pants and her long auburn hair was in a loose ponytail. Her eyes had dark circles under them, and the tea that she was drinking did not seem to be giving her any energy.

When he crossed the room, Sansa looked up and smiled at him. It was not a smile that reached her eyes, but she did not wince at the sight of him, which he supposed was good. Not that he should expect that. She hadn’t at any interaction with him. Why did he assume she would wince?

“Good morning. What brings you here so early?” she asked, her voice warmer than her face.

“Fell asleep doing work last night. So early-birding it. Yourself?”

“I don’t sleep much. And it’s always more peaceful to work in the morning. I have a reading response for my history seminar later today. Would you like to join me?”

“Yes, thank you.” Gendry was almost too surprised at the invitation to realize that he had accepted it.

Sansa set back to typing, her brow furrowed.

When one of the baristas brought Gendry his coffee, he set about working too. Maybe twenty minutes later, Sansa chuckled at something.

Gendry looked up.

“Sorry. My professor seems to be as much an insomniac as I am,” then she began reading an email aloud to him. “Dear Sansa, I understand your concern about the reading response due later today and the only thing that I can say, without reading the thing, is try. You won’t get it perfect. I’ll give you comments. You’ll do better on the next one. It’s called progress. It’s what one does in a class. Best, TL. P.S. It is four in the morning. You should either be asleep or questioning life choices about why you are awake this early. As if he shouldn’t apply that to himself. He sent that email an hour ago, when it was four thirty in the morning.”

“Have you slept at all?” asked Gendry. At least he had slept.

“Nope. I’ll sleep tonight. I only fall asleep if I wipe myself out, and by the time I get home tonight, I should be ready to sleep about twelve hours, which will have me up and ready for tomorrow afternoon’s lecture without any trouble.”

“This doesn’t seem healthy,” commented Gendry.

“I’m not a healthy person,” smiled Sansa. Gendry hoped she was joking. “It’ll be fine. I’ve done this before. Do it pretty regularly, actually.” She frowned briefly, then the smile was back in place.

Gendry could see from the smile that it was a well-practiced one—the kind that Sansa had undoubtedly used thousands of time to stun people with her beauty, so that they would forget whatever was troubling them. The movement was the same, the composition perfectly prepared, but the life behind it was low.

Maybe she was just tired.

“Why are you so worried about a reading response? They usually aren’t worth too much, are they?”
Sansa chuckled darkly. “Not for this class. They are the only way you’re graded in the seminar—apart from participation. Each one isn’t worth very much, but a shitty paper can devastate your final grade.”

“That’s odd.”

“It’s an odd class. It’s the only seminar I’ve ever taken that doesn’t have a final paper. Lannister said his goal was that by the end, the term’s reading responses would be about as long as a final paper—if not longer.” She shrugged and settled back in her chair.

Gendry returned to his unbelievably dry reading.

“Gendry, stop falling asleep,” came Sansa’s voice after an hour.

“Thanks,” mumbled Gendry.

“It must be really dry stuff if you are falling asleep after that coffee.”

“Yeah, just don’t tell Arya,” he mumbled.

“What’s this? Anthropology isn’t the most interesting subject in the world?” teased Sansa.

“Oh, it’s very interesting. This,” he gestured in disgust at his book, “is the driest pile if shit I have ever read.”

“That’s fortunate,” chuckled Sansa.

Gendry rolled his eyes and checked his watch. He sighed and turned back to his reading.

Then Sansa laughed again, “Another email from Lannister. Dear Sansa, Forgive the snippiness in my last email. Apparently I should not write emails while both tired and drunk. Best, TL.”

“Good ol’ TL.”

“Why do professors always sign emails with their initials? It’s really hard to tell how to address them when you write them.”

“They do it on purpose. They like watching you squirm. Probably took seminars on it in grad school. I’m surprised I haven’t seen one in the course listings.”

“What are you lot doing here so early?” demanded Arya. Gendry and Sansa looked up. Arya was covered in sweat and appeared to have been running.

“Coffee,” said Gendry at the same time that Sansa said “Work.”

“We just happened to bump into each other. It’s a coincidence,” supplied Sansa.

“Why didn’t you invite me? I have birds to read about you know.” Her hands were on her hips, making the fabric of her sweatshirt clutch to her frame, and Gendry couldn’t help but notice that she looked much less like a little girl when you could see the curve between her shoulder and waist. It was a more womanly frame, even if it was a different kind of womanly frame than the ones he was used to seeing.

“It’s not an invitation thing. It’s an I-fell-asleep-doing-homework thing,” replied Gendry.

“Besides, don’t you usually jog or weight lift for fencing in the morning?” asked Sansa.
Arya rolled her eyes, but did not reply. She looked over Sansa’s shoulder.

“Why are you getting late-night drunk emails from your professor?”

“He seems not to sleep either. But instead of tea, he drinks alcohol.”

“Fair enough. I’m headed home. See you both later.”

And she was gone. Gendry watched her out the window. She was jogging, her legs lifting higher than he would have imagined, and he did his best not to look at her rear as she disappeared.
It was the first time in a very long time in a long while that Arya heard Sansa talk on the phone. Part of her was thrilled—Sansa had taken to screening her calls lately. Part of her was infuriated.

“Wait, he said that? You’re kidding me. You’re kidding me! Jeyne, that’s hilarious! You didn’t!”

They were in the living room, and had all been peacefully doing homework until Sansa’s phone had buzzed and she had surprisingly and gleefully answered. Roslin was curled up in an old armchair, reading a novel for class; Sansa had Ethics and Government readings spread across the couch and Arya and Hot Pie were taking up the floor, books about food and linguistics open to random pages.

Arya wanted to throw her semantics textbook at Sansa, but Hot Pie was using it.

“Can’t you go somewhere else to talk? We’re working here,” she demanded loudly.

The look that Sansa gave her made Arya want to throttle her. Sansa was supposed to be doing better, wasn’t she? She was supposed to be acting more like a human and less like an oblivious pink princess, wasn’t she? Where was the girl who had the dark sense of humor and the quiet commentary? Sansa sounded rather like a squawking hen as she jabbered away to Jeyne Poole.

“It’s just Arya. Don’t worry about it. Yeah it’s fine. It’s not usually a problem.” Sansa was getting up and moving towards the staircase, where she sat down. It was better, if only slightly. Arya could still hear every word coming out of her mouth. “No, really it’s been fine so far. I think it’s just being away from Winterfell. But go back to…uh huh. Uh huh.” She squealed.

“Please, dear gods, shut up!” shrieked Arya.

Hot Pie looked as though he would like to sink into the floor.

“Just a second, Jeyne. Arya, I’m trying to have a conversation with my best friend.”

“Can’t you do it in your bedroom, where you can close your door and not distract me and my friend while we try to finish our Semantics project.”

“I was here first.”

“Sansa, we’re not twelve.”

“Arya, you can also go to your room.” She paused, listening to something that Jeyne was saying. “Jeyne says hello,” she snapped.

“Tell Jeyne I say hello, and ask her to either call back later, or to convince you to be reasonable and go somewhere else.”

“Or perhaps you can be reasonable and let me finish my phone call.”

She knew this all too well.

This was the stalemate. When Sansa had power and Arya had rage and neither of them would back down. It was the way that they usually interacted when they were home, and the way that she had hoped to every god imaginable that they had put behind them.
She supposed she could blame Jeyne Poole for the fucking phone call.

But it was hard not to blame Sansa when Sansa was like this.

She stared at Sansa and Sansa stared back.

Robb had once jokingly called this glare the Greatsword, because Arya’s eyes were steely grey and Sansa’s were like ice and thus the combination of those two made them the great Stark Heirloom—the Valyrian Steel Greatsword Ice. He’d been over proud of the analogy.

She hadn’t found it funny then and she certainly didn’t find it funny now.

Then, something happened that Arya was not anticipating.

Sansa looked away.

Sansa never looked away.

Sansa always sat there, beautiful and smirking, until she and Jeyne Poole had convinced Horseface Stark to go away, or until someone had intervened on Arya’s behalf. (Arya had stopped being able to win on her own when she hit puberty, for some reason that she never fully understood.)

But Sansa was climbing the stairs, and saying into the phone, “It’s fine. It’s over. Sorry to have interrupted. You said that he liked matching underwear—who cares about that. Honestly!”

Arya heard the door slam, and then Sansa’s voice was muffled to a light murmur.

“I would have thought with that many siblings, you’d be used to the noise,” muttered Roslin.

“I can do noise. I can’t do Sansa.”

Roslin nodded. “Well, figure that shit out, because I won’t put up with it and with as many siblings as I’ve got, I think I can take both of you.”

Arya took a deep breath, turned back to Hot Pie and, without saying a word, glanced at the outline he had been working on.

She didn’t see it though.

She saw Sansa looking away.
Gendry’s phone buzzed and roused him from his nap.

Arya Stark: Is Jon there?

Gendry Waters: Why in bloody fuck are you asking me?

Arya Stark: I asked him first, but he didn’t answer.

Gendry Waters: He’s probably at work then.

Arya Stark: His job’s a night job, moron.

Gendry Waters: He’s also a TA. He might just be in section.

Arya Stark: He doesn’t teach today.

Gendry Waters: I killed him and threw him into the bay. Is that a problem for your plans?

Arya Stark: It’ll be a bigger problem for you when I sic the fencing team on you. I have a plan all worked out. Admittedly, it was for Joffrey, but you can be a test scenario.

Gendry Waters: Maybe he’s balls deep in some Forestry School hippie.

Arya Stark: EWWWWWWWWW.

Gendry Waters: I think I won that.

Arya Stark: EWWWWWWWWW.

Gendry Waters: Yep. Definitely won that.

Arya Stark: You’re an awful human being.

Gendry Waters: I’ve heard that before. To be fair, it usually when I am uncaffeinated, which, ooh! Look! I am.

Arya Stark: Well, use your shiny coffee maker and stop making offensive comments about my brother, the Forestry School, women, and hippies.

Gendry glanced at his watch. She had a point about the coffee. He set some to brew before replying.

Gendry Waters: But hippies are fun to make fun of.

Arya Stark: Point.

Arya Stark: Do you know where Jon is. For real?

Gendry Waters: Fraid not. The hippie is literally my best guess. That or he’s on his bike.

Arya Stark: Ignoring first guess. Bike still does not answer the question.

Gendry Waters: True. It just explains why he hasn’t answered your message.
Arya Stark: Maybe he got abducted by aliens?

Gendry Waters: Grumkins and Snarks are more likely.

Arya Stark: That would be amusing.

Gendry Waters: It would indeed.

Arya Stark: How many do you think Jon could take before they got him?

Gendry took a sip of his coffee.

Gendry Waters: Four.

Arya Stark: Four? Definitely at least 10. He’s more with it than he looks.

Gendry Waters: Yeah, but he’s kind of scrawny.

Arya Stark: He is not. You’re freakishly big.

Gendry Waters: Not freakishly. Above averagely.

Arya Stark: Yeah, so he could take 10 because he’s average. And you could take sixty seven because you’re a freak.

Gendry Waters: Am not a freak. And thought you’d get in a snit over “averagely.”

Arya Stark: Meh. Seen it. Used it, actually. You’re not as clever as you think.

Gendry Waters: You wound me, my lady.

Arya Stark: DON’T CALL ME MY LADY.

Gendry Waters: As M’lady commands.

Arya Stark: Oh, fuck you.

Gendry Waters: That would be inappropriate.

Arya Stark: That’s not what I meant. Why am I still talking to you?

Gendry Waters: Boredom, I imagine.

Arya Stark: Go die in a fire.

Gendry Waters: Boring. I liked the idea of the fencing team better.

Arya Stark: Off to text them to plan your demise.

Gendry Waters: Let me know how it goes.

Arya Stark: Not bloody likely. Surprise is key to this plan of mine.

Gendry Waters: How can I be surprised if I know it’s coming?

Arya Stark: You’ll be surprised.
Ten minutes later, Gendry decided to ask her,

_Gendry Waters: How surprised?_

_Arya Stark: You’ll shit yourself, have a heart attack and wish you’d never been born, all in the space of 13 seconds. But since you’re not Joffrey, you should feel free to deviate from that plan._

_Gendry Waters: I might. The shit part sounds unpleasant._

_Arya Stark: Good. It’s supposed to._

_Gendry Waters: Could I maybe fart in panic instead? A lot easier to clean up after the thirteen seconds are over._

_Arya Stark: I suppose. I don’t really care how you react to be honest. How Joffrey will react is important._

_Gendry Waters: Got it. Will there be a feedback form I should fill out? Levels of surprise and all that? Customer service?_

_Arya Stark: If you like. It’s up to you. Of course, if you do have a heart attack, you’ll have to convince the nurses to do it for you._

_Gendry Waters: Can they be sexy nurses?_

_Arya Stark: That is beyond my power._

_Gendry Waters: I bet you could make it happen._

_Arya Stark: True. But I don’t feel like looking into it. What if I do it for you, and then when it’s Joffrey’s turn he also gets sexy nurses because they think it’s part of the routine._

_Gendry Waters: Good point, that._

_Arya Stark: Yeah. I’m a vengeful little bitch._

_Gendry Waters: Truth. Jon’s downstairs by the way. He just got in._

_Arya Stark: I know. I’m here too. Reading all your texts aloud to him. Jon asks whether big burly nurses of dubious gender might suffice._

Gendry stared at the screen of his phone, mortified. How much had she been reading to Jon? When had that started?

He supposed it didn’t matter. Even if Arya wasn’t aware of it, Jon knew him well enough to know when he was flirting. And he was flirting with Jon’s sister.

This couldn’t end well.

_Gendry Waters: It might. I’ll get back to him upon further reflection._

Gendry put his phone down after that and refused to look at it for the rest of the night. When he woke up the next morning, there were three new messages from Arya.

_Arya Stark: Come down and eat with us._
Arya Stark: Are you pouting?

Arya Stark: Goodnight, Gendry.
Arya

She always wore black and white. She was very skinny, to an unhealthy extent, and her hair was lank.

Arya was fascinated.

Arya always sat behind her in syntax, and marveled at how she never took notes, never even seemed to pay attention. But Arya saw her grade after the first midterm and it was highest in the class.

She too seemed to live off campus, and sometimes Arya would follow her home part of the way, simply because their routes were the same.

Today, as always, the girl lit a cigarette along the way and the scent of tobacco mixed with something filled Arya’s nose from several feet away. When they walked passed the old sept, the girl stopped and turned around.

“You live over on Pate’s Way.” It wasn’t a question. The girl’s dark eyes were very, very dilated.

“Yes,” replied Arya.

“Let’s walk together.”

And so they did. The girl did not start up a conversation, the way that Hot Pie tended to. She did not say anything at all.

“What’s your name?” asked Arya after a moment.

“Names don’t matter,” said the girl.

“Yes they do.”

“No. They don’t. You aren’t defined by your name, Arya Stark. You are defined by who you are.”

“That sounds stupid.”

“It’s not. Maybe you’ll see that one day.”

Arya did her best not to roll her eyes.

“What should I call you then?” she demanded.

“Nothing. Don’t call me anything. I’m no one.”

“You’re not no one. You’re at the top of the class for syntax.”

The girl shrugged.

“I’m no one,” she repeated.

They stopped outside of Arya’s house.

“Can we study for syntax together sometime?”
“If you’d like.”

They exchanged numbers. Arya, still not knowing the girl’s name, saved her number as Syntax Waif.

“Hello,” she called as she walked into the house.

“Hi,” called Roslin. “You’re uncle stopped by, but both you and Sansa were in class. He is really very nice.”

“He still seems a bit of a twit to me,” grumbled Arya. She had done her best to avoid Uncle Edmure. She knew he was only looking in on them because her mother had asked him to, and because he wanted to ogle Roslin. He was not the most interesting conversationalist and always managed to say something that made Sansa pale.

Arya could often forget that bad things had happened to Sansa. Then something would make her remember.

Sometimes, it was Edmure bringing up a place where Sansa and Joff had been on a date, other times it was when she walked home late at night from Ballroom all by herself and came home jumpy and shaking. Sometimes, Arya would hear her crying in her sleep.

“Oh, he’s nice,” said Roslin calmly. “He looks a bit like Robb, actually.” Her voice turned wistful.

“Did you love Robb?” asked Arya suddenly. She’d wanted to know for as long as she’d known Roslin and she was in a reckless mood.

Roslin considered. “Not in the sense that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him or anything.” She blushed. “Sex was pretty good though, and I thought we got on well. I don’t begrudge him Jeyne though, if he’s really happy.” She smiled, and Arya recognized the smile. It was the one that Sansa wore every day.

“He was really quite the dick to you, wasn’t he?”

Roslin sighed. “I really don’t care at this point. There’s no point dwelling on it. Not when he has a hot uncle who digs me,” she winked.

“Don’t do anything with Uncle Edmure. Your dad will probably kick me and Sansa out of the house if things end badly. I’m surprised he even let Jon move into the other house.”

“He almost didn’t,” confided Roslin, “I had to talk to him. It was ridiculous. Jon had nothing to do with the way that Robb handled things. He wanted to kick out Aurane and Daemon too.”

“Your dad seems like a right fine fellow to me.”

Roslin cocked her head, considering. “He’s a good father,” she said simply.

Arya shrugged. Her father was a good father. Walder Frey seemed like a right pain in the ass as a father.

Later that night, after fencing and when she couldn’t take reading about penguins anymore, she walked down to the harbor where Jon had his shift.

She often went down to Jon’s shift to keep him company. He guarded a wall. That was it. As far
as they had been able to figure out, there was nothing behind the wall. They often spent evenings guessing. So far, they had come up with a crypt, a voice-less lion, and a naked commune.

“Hello, little sister,” grinned Jon.

“It’s dumb that they have you dress all in black like that. What, do they expect you to blend in with the night?”

“I expect so,” shrugged Jon, “What’s on your mind today?”

“Sansa was crying again last night,” mumbled Arya.

Jon nodded slowly. “Is it getting less frequent?” he asked.

“I think so? Only because she’s sleeping less frequently.”

“And she won’t go see someone?”

“She insists that she’s fine.”

Jon sighed.

“I don’t know. I’m bad at this sort of thing,” he confessed.

“Me too,” said Arya very quietly. She shivered. It was starting to get cold out. Leaves were changing, and beginning to fall. She had noticed this the other night when she had been watching the geese that were migrating south who had settled in her back yard for the night through her binoculars. They had been chasing leaves, and she had looked up at Gendry’s window and found it less obstructed than before. He was wearing a shirt this time, but his arm muscles (covered in motor oil) bulged from underneath his t-shirt.

“What was that face?” asked Jon.

“What face?”

“The one that looked like Summer when Bran’s rubbing his tummy.”

“I didn’t know I could look like a wolfhound.”

“I didn’t either until just now.”

“Do you think mum will let me bring Nymeria down next semester?”

“You’d have to ask Sansa. She’s still upset about Lady, I think. And I’m wary about upsetting Sansa.”

“Yeah. You’re not always stupid, you know.”

“Thanks? I think?”

“I miss dogs. They’re much easier than people.”

“Sam’s going to bring Ghost down sometime soon. When he and Gilly come to visit. You can play with him when he gets here.”

“Which one’s Sam again? Is he the fat one?”
“Yes, Arya, he’s the fat one.”

“Why does he have Ghost?”

“I wasn’t sure if my roommates would let me have a dog.”

“They let Robb have Grey Wind.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know how Gendry would feel.”

“Gendry’s stupid. You shouldn’t care about how he feels.”

Jon rolled his eyes. “You can’t call everyone stupid all the time, Arya. You might hurt their feelings.”

“Do you think I’m going to hurt Gendry’s feelings by calling him stupid?”

“No, but—”

“So it’s fine then. I don’t go around just calling anyone stupid. I only call stupid people stupid. And Gendry is stupid.”

“He’s not.”

“He is. I promise you.”

“And what makes you say this?”

“He doesn’t close his shades when he walks around naked,” she blurted out before thinking.

“That’s stupid of him.”

Jon’s jaw dropped. Arya froze. Dammit.

“Arya...How in seven hells do you know that?”

“Sometimes when I birdwatch—”

“Please tell me you aren’t using the binoculars I gave you to spy on my housemate.”

“Not to spy on him. Sometimes he’s just there and the birds are in the way. He’s not unclothed all the time. He just doesn’t close the curtains when he is.”

“Please tell me—no. Don’t tell me anything. I don’t want to know.”

“You can’t tell him Jon.”

“Can’t tell him that my little sister is leching on him while he is in his room? Why the hell not? Do you enjoy it?”

“It’s not that. I’d never be able to look at him again.”

“I’m surprised you can look at him now.”

“Look, if you tell him, just don’t tell him it’s me.”

Jon took a deep breath.
“All right. But you’ll owe me one. Big time.”
“So, Arya’s been spying on you with her binoculars.”

Gendry spat out his cereal and began coughing. “What?”

“She birdwatches out her window sometimes, and sometimes spies on you with her binoculars. You might want to consider wearing pants more frequently.” Jon was leaning against the sink, eating oatmeal. He looked very much as though he would prefer not to be having this conversation, but that he was morally obligated to.

“Right then,” said Gendry. He didn’t know what else to say.

He supposed the only thing he could think of that was worse than him perving on Jon’s sister was Jon’s sister perving right back on him. Because she was young. And not supposed to be interested in the tired, over-worked, underpaid grad student. She was supposed to find some ridiculously idiotic, good looking fellow to have her way with. He groaned internally.

This just got even more complicated.

Why is it that fantasizing always got complicated?

It was raining outside, and the leaves were falling under the rain. Great. That would probably give perving Arya a better view.

Gendry felt distinctly uncomfortable with how much he liked the prospect of that.

He’d never had a girl interested in him before. To be fair, he wasn’t sure that Arya was interested in him. She might well just be looking around. But if she was interested…

He’d only ever dated girls that he had asked out before. There’d been Ros in King’s Landing, an orange-haired girl who had laughed at all the wrong jokes. She had been his first girlfriend, and she had left him because she said he was too slow in the sense that she had wanted sex—lots of it quickly—and he was determined not to be disrespectful of her the way whoever his father was had been disrespectful of his mother.

When he had explained this to his mother, she had laughed, saying that respectful doesn’t mean not fucking a girl when she wants to be fucked, it means not treating her like dirt.

With that knowledge, he had asked out a girl named Victoria, a blonde girl with bright blue eyes from Brightwater Keep. They had had sex—lots of it quickly—and Gendry had fancied himself in love. But things had fallen apart sometime after a year of dating and that was it.

He’d had hook-ups between then and now, when he was convinced to forget that he didn’t feel comfortable taking off his clothes in front of people he did not know.

He supposed he could be pleased with it all, to the extent that Arya found him worthy of her perving. But that was coupled with the fact that she was eighteen years old, and he was twenty-three. That didn’t even fit into the half-your-age-plus-seven bounds. He should not be ok with any perving involved between them, whatsoever.

But the thought of Arya watching him through her binoculars kind of turned him on.
Then he yelped—what if she saw him on the days when he would stretch and let his towel drop. That would mean she would have...seven hells. It just got a lot creepier.

He continued to feel uncomfortable with that as he biked over to Mott’s through the rain. When he got to the garage, he shook the wet out of hair, locked his bike to a pipe just inside the door, and settled himself behind a desk because no one was there.

He’d worked in garages since he was too young to be legally employed. His mum had never made much money off of her bar—a small thing in Flea Bottom that often attracted the kind of person who tried to sneak out before paying their tab. Gendry had always been good with his hands, and he enjoyed working on cars, and he found that it paid very well. It’s what put him through his undergraduate degree—as much as the financial aid and his mother’s savings—and it was what was putting him through graduate school as well. The money he made off TAing was enough to supplement his life needs.

It made him glad that Jon was also working his way through grad school. Daemon and Aurane both had money from home. Jon felt uncomfortable asking for money from his dad, for some reason that Gendry didn’t fully understand.

Thinking of Jon made him think of Arya, from whom he had so successfully distracted himself. He groaned.

“Hello, good sir,” came a voice. He looked up from his desk. A dwarf was standing in front of him. One eye was green, the other was black, and his hair was a bright blond. His nose looked like it had been broken six or seven times.

Gendry knew who he was at once. How could he not? Especially after his internet research of Joffrey Baratheon.

“Hello, welcome to Mott’s. How can I help you?”

“You look lost in thought.”

“I am. What can I do for you?”

“Well, something about my car doesn’t seem to work. I imagine that my ex-girlfriend did something to it. She’s a crazy one.”

“What’s the nature of the problem?” asked Gendry, standing up. He’d never been more aware how tall he was than when he was standing next to the dwarf.

“It won’t turn on. It’s here now. I called a tow-truck when it wouldn’t turn on this morning.”

“Great. I’ll take a look.”

Tyrion Lannister led him to the car. It was a very nice car. The gearshift had seven gears on it, and Gendry, as so often happened when nicer cars than he could dream of appeared in front of him, wished he could take it for a spin. Instead, he contented himself with grinning and saying, “Nice Harpy.”

“Came in straight from Astapor in June. Now it doesn’t work. I tell you—what’s your name?”

“Gendry Waters.”

“Tyrion Lannister. I tell you, Gendry, never date a crazy woman. Never date someone who is
going to be unfaithful. Never date someone who is after your money more than your love. Never
date someone who is more interested in how she looks than how she feels about you. And never,
as my idiotic nephew decided to do, date someone who is too good for you and then abuse them.”

Gendry did his best not to let on that he knew that Lannister was referring to Joffrey and Sansa.

“Women. What can we do without them. Many things, I suppose. But never cross them. They
don’t like that. And are quite vicious in the revenge, I find. No man would ever hurt another
man’s car. I’m honestly surprised that Shae didn’t do worse…” sighed the dwarf.

“Seems to be your battery,” commented Gendry, “You could have just jumped it on the road. You
didn’t need to bring it in.”

“Well, I am here now. The little light indicating a dead battery did not turn on.”

“Can’t really explain that. It should have.”

“I assume you can you jump it.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem.”

Gendry jumped the car in five minutes and instructed Lannister to drive it for an hour before
turning it off again.

“Excellent. I thank you for your work, Gendry Waters.” The dwarf nodded to him through the
window and reversed out of the garage.

Gendry watched him go, then felt his phone buzz in his pocket.

Aurane Waters: Will be having a get-together in the house tonight. Should be out of the common
spaces by eleven, but if you could be scarce before then it would be much appreciated.

Daemon Sand: So long as underwear does not end up on my doorknob again I will be fine with
that.

Jon Snow: Have work starting at 8. Should be fine.

Gendry wondered briefly what he would do while he couldn’t go into his house.

He knew what he wanted to do, but also knew that he bloody well shouldn’t do it.

He looked at the screen of his phone, wondering if he was as strong as his mother told him he
ought to be.

He wasn’t.

Gendry Waters: Aurane’s kicking us out of the house. Can I eat at your place and do some work?

Arya Stark: I’ll be at a fencing tournament in Highgarden. Ask Roslin.

Gendry wished he had the brains to take that as a sign from the seven heavens of the wrongness of
this whole thing. But he couldn’t.
Sansa was crying. It was around noon, and she had gone to sleep (Arya imagined) around six that morning. Arya had been up to go to lifts at the gym, and Sansa had stumbled upstairs, hardly walking straight she was so tired.

Ordinarily, Arya did not come right back to the house from Ornithology. She usually went to Hot Pie’s to work on Semantics, or found a nook in the library where she could lie on the floor and read. Maybe, if it was nice out, she would sprawl on the ground of the main quad. When she did that, Syntax Waif would always appear out of nowhere, pull out a cigarette, or maybe some weed, and smoke next to her, without saying anything.

But it was raining today, and Hot Pie and his roommate Lommy were being abnormally stupid. She knew that, in the rain, everyone would be in the library, and she wouldn’t have sprawl-space, so she had made her way home.

Syntax Waif had caught up with her about halfway there, smoking quietly. She said nothing, and Arya didn’t feel much like talking.

When they had stopped outside Arya’s house, Syntax Waif had finally said, “She’s not doing better.”

Arya hadn’t known how Syntax Waif could know, but it was true. She had grimaced, and gone into the house. When she deposited her bookbag on her desk chair, she heard Sansa.

At first, it was almost to quiet to hear, but it got louder and louder. Then, there had been the moans. “No…no…Joff, please…I didn’t…no.”

Arya stood in the doorway, unsure of what to do. Roslin wasn’t home, and Jon was probably teaching or sleeping—the things he did during the day.

Arya steeled herself, then opened Sansa’s door.

Her sister was twisted in her blankets and sheets, which she had tugged so forcefully in her sleep that they were no longer tucked in.

Arya crossed the room, and began shaking Sansa.

“Sansa, please wake up. Please.”

Sansa tried to knock her hands away, whimpering.

“Sansa, please, please, please wake up. It’s just a dream. You’re fine, you’re here. I’m Arya, not Joff.”

Sansa’s eyes jerked open, unfocused. When she saw Arya, she began to cry harder. She was trembling, and for a moment, Arya wanted to reach out and hug her. But she and Sansa didn’t hug. They had never had that kind of a relationship, and so Arya watched.

“Hey, it’s ok. You’re fine,” said Arya lamely.
A minute or so later, Sansa was perfectly composed.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“Are you all right?” whispered Arya.

Sansa smiled, the shadow smile that Arya saw so often these days. “Completely fine. It’s just a nightmare.”

She looked so tired.

Arya swallowed. “All right,” whispered Arya. “I’ll let you get back to sleep then.”

She helped straighten Sansa’s blankets, and her sister was asleep before she had even finished.

She quietly closed the door.

An hour later Sansa was crying again.

Arya grabbed a rain jacket and left the house, moving across the backyard.

As she walked she imagined running Joffrey Baratheon through with the most blunt sabre in the weapon’s rack. Repeatedly.

She climbed through the thin line of trees and hopped over the brook, crossing into Jon’s backyard. She unlocked the backdoor to the Bastard House and slipped inside.

Daemon, Aubane, and Gendry were sitting in the living room.

“You look like hell,” commented Daemon.

Arya dropped into a chair.

She didn’t know either Daemon or Aurane very well. They were so rarely around when she was over at the house. Daemon, it seemed, lived at his chemistry lab, and Aurane (according to Jon) spent most of his time at some girl’s place on most nights. It had always seemed to her that they were closer to each other than their new housemates, and so they always seemed to be on the periphery of her experience there. But they, more than Jon and Gendry, were the ones that she wanted to talk to now.

She looked at Daemon. “What happened last year when Sansa was…you know.”

Daemon glanced at Aurane.

“How much do you already know?” asked Aurane.

“I know that something bad happened. I don’t know what. And I don’t know what kind of treatment she got.”

Aurane sighed, then glanced at Daemon.

“Robb didn’t talk about it much. It was in the spring, and he was going through all his shit with Law School and Roslin and Jeyne. I think he was too overwhelmed to really talk about everything. I mean,” Aurane ran his hands through his hair, “We know what happened. Everyone did. It was in the news and everything. But I don’t know what kind of treatment she got or anything. She was out of school for a while. And then she was back.”
“As for what happened…should we be the ones telling you?” asked Daemon uncomfortably.

“Mum and dad won’t talk about it. Robb’s tight-lipped and Sansa pretends it didn’t happen. If Jon knows more than I do, he’s also very tight-lipped about it. I get trying to keep Sansa’s private life private. But…” Arya reached for words. It was Gendry who supplied them.

“If you don’t know, you can’t be what she needs you to be right now.”

Arya nodded.

Daemon sighed. “All right then.” He leaned back in his chair, and his eyes darted to the ceiling, as though he were trying to remember a complicated equation. The corner of his mouth dragged sideways and then he looked at her again. “So, you know that Sansa and Joffrey,” his voice tightened when he said the boy’s name, “dated for most of the last two years, yes?”

“Yes.” Arya remembered distinctly the extreme frustration she felt every time that Sansa came home and gushed about how perfect her blond boyfriend was, giggling to Jeyne Poole about everything imaginable (and unimaginable).

“Well, sometime last year, things turned ugly. We don’t really know how or why, but we do know that one night Joffrey was arrested for…well…” Daemon glanced at Aurane. “He had these friends, right? These goons, who basically did his bidding. And they all three of them got arrested because they had basically stripped her down in a park at night and started beating her. I don’t think there was rape involved? But who can know. They don’t tend to report that quite as publicly—they could just hide it under the label of sexual assault, since that’s what happened. Anyway, one of the Campus Policemen turned them in. He heard her crying and begging while on his way home from work and went to investigate.”

“She wasn’t going to submit a campus report,” said Aurane quickly, “I remember Robb trying to convince her to. But then Lannister brought up plagiarism charges up and it was clear that he was going to be suspended for at least a year. And I think that gave her the courage to submit her charge. And they kicked him out as fast as they could. No one gave a damn who his mother was. He was out.”

“I guess that explains the scar on her back,” muttered Arya to herself.

“Yeah. Clegane’s report was that they had beaten her so badly he was surprised there wasn’t spinal damage. They definitely broke the skin. I think one of them was using a belt…”

Arya rested her head in her hands and closed her eyes. Sansa beaten and bloodied filled her mind, and she felt sick. When she opened them, she looked at Gendry. He was watching her. She had never realized how blue his eyes were. They weren’t the same blue that ran in her family though. That was more of a sky blue. Gendry’s were darker, electric.

“You ok?” he asked quietly.

She jerked her head up and down. Gendry didn’t look convinced.

She was surprised at how glad she was at that.

That night, when she pulled out her binoculars to watch the Westerosi White Ravens nesting in the naked elm tree in the back yard, she looked at Gendry’s eyes as much as the rest of him. They were clouded, lost in thought, and there was a slight crease in his brow. He took a sip of his coffee, then turned away from the window.
The snow was falling in thick chunks. He didn’t know when winter had come, and hadn’t realized that it could come this early in the year. He did not approve.

Gendry Waters hated winter. He hated having to wrap himself up so carefully, and he especially hated the feeling of the inside of his winter coats. They always started out so nice and always ended up so covered in engine grease.

He took one look at the streets and refused to ride his bike.

So—walking to campus it was, then.

Gendry was a rather impatient person when it came to some things. He hated moving slowly when he was used to moving quickly. He was used to speeding along on his trusty bicycle, and a fifteen-minute walk to campus suddenly seemed unbelievably long. He sighed and set out.

Five minutes later, he saw Arya. She was wearing spandex (he did his best not to notice how well it showed off her muscled legs) and a fleece. A fleece headband kept her short hair out of her face, and her cheeks were bright red, her grey eyes bright from blood flow.

She smiled at him and he had to reprimand his stomach for tightening.

“You are going to fall and die,” he said, when she paused to talk to him. Or rather, stopped moving forward. She was still running in place.

“No I’m not.” She sounded breathless and he almost groaned. She made it so hard for him to ignore how attractive she was. There. He admitted it. She was attractive.

She was very attractive, dammit. With her laughter, and her frankness. She was attractive when she was poking Jon with a cooking spoon, or when she was studying Ornithology on the floor of their living room, with her tongue stuck slight out in concentration. (He didn’t think she was aware she was doing it, which made it cuter still.) She was stunning now.

“Yes you are. There’s ice everywhere. You’re going to fall and break your neck.”

“First of all, breaking my neck does not mean that I’m going to die, stupid. Second of all, I’ve run in worse than this. I’m from Winterfell. This barely constitutes a smattering of snow.”

“And the ice on the ground?”

“Keeps it interesting. I’m well practiced in this. I know what I’m doing. You on the other hand should be worried about yourself.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’re bundled up so much I could hardly recognize you. You’re probably going to fall and die just because you can’t see the ground in front of you.”

“I have enough padding to prevent me from dying.”

Arya’s eyebrows shot up. Her cheeks were already flushed from the run and the cold, but he wondered if he saw them get a little redder.
“The coat, Arya. And the sweater. And the other sweater,” he supplied before he could help himself.

“Right… In any case, I’m fine. I have always been fine and I will continue to be fine. Now if you don’t mind moving your stupid self out of my way, I need to get home and clean before I have Syntax.”

Gendry stepped aside and she was off. He watched her go, his eyes falling to her backside, which bounced lightly as she went.

Oh, he was in trouble. That was going to haunt him for the rest of his life, of that he was quite sure.

It certainly haunted him through the discussion section for Chivalry and the Hook-Up Culture that he was leading. Every time Ned Dayne or Myranda Royce opened their mouths (they were the long-winded ones), Arya’s ass bounced right into his mind, and it was all he could do to force his attention back to the discussion at hand—in this case (appropriately) the manifestation of objectification in popular culture.

After section, he found a quiet bench on the quad, sat in the snow, and, for the first time in over a month, called his mother.

“Gendry?”

“Hey mum.”

“What’s going on? Is everything all right?”

“Yes and no.”

“That’s not cryptic.” He can hear the smile in her voice.

“Well, there’s a girl—”

“And it just got less cryptic,” laughed his mother.

“She’s a freshman.”

“And now I see the not all right. Please tell me you aren’t teaching her, Gendry.”

“No. No. She’s not in Anthro. She’s…She’s a neighbor.”

“I didn’t realize they let freshmen live off campus.”

“They don’t usually. Mostly because they don’t know where they would live. She’s living with her sister though.”

“I see. How do you know her?”

“She’s my housemate’s younger sister.”

His mother made an intensely pleased noise. “Gendry, I swear, you are more scandalous than half of the idiots I serve at the bar. Does your housemate know about all this?”

Gendry wondered whether he should tell his mother about the birdwatching conversation.
He decided against it.

“He might have an inkling. I don’t know. It’s not something you say. Hey Jon, I fancy your younger sister. You know, the one you are really close to and is much too young for me. That’s ok though right? It’s not the one who’s suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder for the physical and emotional abuse in her last relationship, so that’s good.”

His mother laughed. “She’s got to be what, nineteen?”


“Young, but she’s an adult. She can do as she pleases. Besides, you’re as good a person to make a youthful mistake with as anyone.”

“Thanks mom,” said Gendry dryly.

“Go get ‘er, champ! I really should run. This isn’t the best time to talk. But I want you to keep me updated. She sounds like a delightful girl.”

“She calls me stupid pretty regularly.”

“I like her already. Goodbye, love. And call me more frequently. I miss you.”

The line went dead and Gendry sighed. His phone buzzed, and he read a message from his seminar professor saying that he couldn’t get his car out of his driveway and thus was cancelling class.

Suddenly, gloriously, free, Gendry got up from the bench and made his way home again. He saw Arya walking up ahead of him, her gym bag over her shoulder, on her way to practice he assumed. He paused, watching her.

Seemingly out of no-where, a very fat boy appeared and walked with her. He seemed to be talking with her, but Arya wasn’t saying anything. The two of them rounded the corner that would take Arya to the gym and disappeared.

Well, thought Gendry, she’s not the only one spying at the moment.
Arya

November

Gendry was shirtless again.

She liked it best when he was shirtless.

Honestly, if she was going to be inappropriately creepy, she might as well reap the benefits. His body gleamed that in his post-shower coffee drinking. (She couldn’t decide whether to be proud or ashamed of the fact that not only did she know that this was a habit of his, but that she had come up for a name for it.) It was one of the nights when he had a towel wrapped around his waist. He hadn’t let the towel drop since she let slip to Jon that she’d been watching him, so she assumed that he knew that someone, if not her, spent her evening spying. He seemed to care only enough not to give her a full show.

She couldn’t decide if she minded or not.

Sighing, she put down the binoculars and set about writing an outline for research on Westerosi White Ravens. She was extremely pleased she could just use writing about them as an excuse for a final research paper. She could do it easily from the comfort of her own room, and wouldn’t have to hunt down books in the library where she might run into Hot Pie or Ned Dayne.

Ned Dayne was proving to be a very annoying member of the fencing team. He fought épée and somewhere over their tournament in Highgarden, he had gotten it into his head that he needed to be nice to her. He took every possible opportunity to wave to her, or ask her how her day was going, and it seemed that she need barely set foot in the library before he was hailing her for some reason or another.

Hot Pie was barely any better, but at least she understood why he wanted to be nice to her. She was better at Semantics than he was, and he usually needed her to finish problem sets.

Her phone buzzed.

Gendry Waters: What are you doing?

Arya Stark: Outlining a research plan for Ornithology. Why?

Gendry Waters: It’s a Friday night, shouldn’t you be out with one of your friends or something?

Arya Stark: Roslin’s on a date with my uncle, Sansa’s at a ballroom competition. I decided to take full advantage of an empty house to focus on work.

Gendry Waters: Don’t let me keep you from it then.

Arya almost laughed. She didn’t see how Gendry could possibly distract her more than he already had.

Arya Stark: Shouldn’t you be out with one of your elitist anthropology friends?

Gendry Waters: That’s tomorrow night. Tonight I’m supposed to be nice to your brother and his guests from undergrad. They brought his dog over, if you want to play with him.
Arya Stark: I’d forgotten that Sam and Gilly were in town.

Gendry Waters: They’re nice, but a bit soporific.

Arya Stark: I am not entirely sure that that’s the right word for them.

Gendry Waters: What would you choose?

Arya Stark: I don’t know. I can’t think of the right word.

Gendry Waters: Some language nerd you are.

Arya Stark: Shut up, stupid. Being a linguistics student does not automatically make me knowledgeable for every word ever.

Gendry Waters: I beg to differ.

Arya Stark: That is because you are a moron.

Gendry Waters: Or because I won.

Arya Stark: You did not win. Winning is not possible in this situation. Can you go away, I’m trying to do work.

Honestly, it was ridiculous that someone that good-looking could be so infuriating. If she hadn’t just had her brain numbed looking at his body, she probably would have given up on him faster.

She sighed and turned to her laptop.

Her phone buzzed.

Gendry Waters: I definitely won.

Arya Stark: 1) Shut up. 2) No you didn’t. 3) Leave me alone I’m working.

Gendry Waters: Yeah yeah.

An hour later, when she could no longer stand the concept of staying put on a Friday Night, she called Syntax Waif.

“What are you doing anything?” she demanded.

“I’m high out of my mind. Do you feel like joining me?”

Arya thought for a moment, then made an excuse and hung up. She called Hot Pie. There was no response.

She called Ned Dayne who would be able to tell her if the team was doing anything that night, and there was no response.

Honestly, why was it that no one picked up their phones on a Friday night. Were they all stupid? That’s what phones were for on a Friday night.

She looked at her phone one last time, weighing the choice. Then called Gendry.

“I thought you were working,” he teased when he picked up.
“I was, until someone idiotic and distracting made me lose my focus. Do you want to go for a walk?”

“A walk?”

“Yes. It’s a thing people do when they want to get out of the house.”

“It’s eleven at night. Where would you want to walk?”

“Just around the neighborhood. I don’t care.”

“I’ll be over in a few minutes. Let me put a shirt on.”

Arya almost suggested that he skip that step, but bit her tongue.

A few minutes later, she and Gendry were walking through the snow towards a park by the seaside.

“I miss my dog,” sighed Arya as a squirrel ran away from them.

“Understandable.”

“She would have ripped that squirrel apart.”

“Less understandable. She sounds like a monster.”

“That’s because you don’t know her. She’s the best. Her name’s Nymeria.”

“Like the Rhoynar queen?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t take you for one who believes in legends.”

“I don’t believe in legends. It’s a great story though. A warrior queen who burns her ships in commitment to her new territory? Pretty cool.”

“Do you believe in Daenerys Targaryen and her dragons?”

“Dragons aren’t real, stupid. They never were.”

“They say that there are dragon skulls underneath the Red Keep somewhere.”

“They also say that there used to be an eight hundred foot ice wall north of Last Hearth. You don’t believe everything you hear, do you?”

Gendry shrugged. “I’d believe in dragons, maybe.”

Arya rolled her eyes. “You’re like my brother Bran. He says that there are dragons in his dreams sometimes. And that somehow makes them real.”

“And who are you to say that they aren’t?” he demanded.

“That doesn’t make them real. Just because I can’t prove that they are fake doesn’t mean that they are real.”

“It doesn’t mean that they are fake though.”
They looked out over the water for a while. They had diverted from the original plan of going to
the park, and were standing on the cold boardwalk, leaning over the railing. The wind blew over
Arya’s face. She hoped it would rub her skin raw.

It was what she missed most about the North—the unbelievable cold. Lips chapped even if you
put on seventeen layers of chapstick, hands dried to the point of cracking in your gloves, numb
cheeks if you were stupid enough to expose them to the wind, nosehairs frozen solid…

She missed rolling around in snow drifts that were bigger than she was, racing Nymeria across the
Godswood. She missed racing Bran too, though Bran hadn’t run in years—not since the track meet
that had ripped apart a ligament in his left leg. She missed Rick’s snowball fights and she missed
snuggling up against her father after a long day romping.

“What’s your family like?” asked Arya at last.

“Just me and my mum, really,” said Gendry. “She owns a bar in Flea Bottom.”

“Do you know your dad at all?”

“No.” Gendry’s voice was clipped. “I don’t know who he was. Mum doesn’t talk about him. I
don’t ask. If he wanted to be part of my life, he would be.” He sounded gruff. She wondered if
she had angered him. She knew that Jon got tetchy when someone brought up that he didn’t know
who his mother was.

“Sorry,” mumbled Arya.

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault,” sighed Gendry. “Your dad is a good guy. He raised Jon. It was
hard, but he was responsible and he took that responsibility. My dad’s clearly just a shit.”

“Mum hates him for it.”

“Your dad?”

“Jon.”

“Why would she hate Jon for it? It’s not his fault.”

“No. But I think it’s easier than hating dad for it. I mean, I’m pretty sure she does hate dad for it,
but she has to hide it. He cheated on her when they hadn’t even been married a year. Not even a
few months, really—given how close Jon and Robb are in age. But they worked on it, so she can’t
just hate him for it openly anymore. She doesn’t have to hide hating Jon though. Everyone just
understands that.”

Gendry nodded.

She wondered if he really understood.

“I suppose I’m lucky I don’t have to deal with a step-mother,” Gendry said. She saw him looking
at her out of the corner of her eye, gauging her reaction.

“Jon takes it pretty well, I think.”

“Jon’s a good guy.”

“The best,” murmured Arya.
“I wish I had siblings sometimes. Little brothers that I could roughhouse with.”

“Your mum never married then?”

“Nah. She didn’t want to. Figured most guys would be bastards to me, and figured I deserved better than that. She’s a good mum. The best. And I’m grateful for it, but you get wistful sometimes when you see other people’s siblings.”

“I suppose it must be lonely. I never really thought about that. I’ve had five siblings all my life.”

“Five might be overmuch.”

“I used to think that. When I was little, and we were all at home, and Robb and Rickon and Sansa got all the attention. Bran did too, just because he was mum’s favorite. But me and Jon… We were on the outside.” She shrugged. “Got used to it though. And when Robb and Jon left for school it got easier. It was easiest when Sansa left though…”

“You didn’t used to get on with her, did you?”

Arya laughed bitterly. “She and her friends would make fun of me when I was young and impressionable. Jon thinks I got into fencing to let out my pent up aggression towards Sansa.”

“I can see that.”

“She was always… she was always so perfect. And I was always trouble.”

“I feel like that happens when it comes to siblings.”

“Doesn’t make it any easier.”

Gendry leaned against the railing, considering what she said. “I suppose not. Probably makes it harder, since it’s acceptable. Siblings fight. Girls don’t get along with each other when they are too close in age. All those things.”

Arya nodded, biting her lip. It was chapped.

She smiled.

“What’s that for?” asked Gendry.

“I like the cold. I love the winter.”

“Fair enough.”

“You don’t, do you?”

“I never said that.”

“You implied it. Wimpy southerner.”

He chuckled.

“You know, most people in Westeros live in the South. Even if the South is the size of the North, the population spectrum is—”

“I know that. I’m not an idiot. But you lot are wimpy. Very very wimpy. This is barely cold.”
“This is brisk.”

“You just said it was cold.”

“Relatively speaking it is. Compared to August and September, it’s positively frigid. But I promise you, this is like late summer in Winterfell.”

“Late summer?” The corners of his lips were curled in disbelief.

“All right, maybe early fall.”

Gendry laughed.

“I think you’re making that up.”

“I’m not. I’d never do such a thing.”

“Yes you would.”

“I’m offended, Gendry Waters.”

But she was laughing too. Somehow his laughter was infectious, and she wished it weren’t. She wished she could stand her ground, but something about him made her unable to breathe and she figured that made her particularly susceptible to his stupid laughter.

She was glad she had the railing to hold her up, as their howls of mirth tore into the sky.

When she settled some, she looked at him out of the corner of her eye. He looked at her, and for one wild moment she thought that he was going to kiss her.

But he didn’t. Instead, he looked out over the bay again, his brow furrowed in thought.
The first thing Gendry heard when he came into the house again was laughter. Daemon and Aurane were sitting in the kitchen with Roslin Frey, and she sounded gleeful.

“But besides that, though! I mean, I know he’s a silly man. And gods know that Arya and Sansa don’t have any patience for him. But he makes me smile, and he treats me well. So I can’t really complain. Hello Gendry!” She beamed at him.

“You have a man in your life?” asked Gendry, dropping his messenger bag and pulling off his coat.

“Edmure Tully.”

“The councilman?”

“Yes. He’s been taking me out for about a month now and…well…” she blushed.

Gendry didn’t know Roslin very well. She had become friends with Daemon and Aurane when she had been dating Robb, a friendship that they all seemed to have maintained for the simple reason that Robb had left Oldtown. But he did know her well enough to know that she only blushed when not bringing up explicit details about her sex life. He had learned that during one drunken evening when somehow Daemon had convinced all of them it would be a good idea to talk about first times. Roslin had been so horrified at the conversation that she had taken five shots in twenty minutes and (a testament to her liver) was still upright to tell the story of her first time with Robb. Her face had been practically purple from her embarrassment and the alcohol.

“Good for you,” smiled Gendry.

“Thanks. I’m really happy,” smiled Roslin, her face still red.

“If you’re happy with Tully, can you convince your dad to stop being an arse to us now? He is threatening to raise the rent on us because of Ghost, which is complete shit given that Grey Wind was here for three years without an added rent and he was louder and harder to manage than Ghost,” whined Daemon.

Roslin sighed. “I can try. He really sees red when it comes to Starks these days. Even if Jon isn’t fully a Stark…”

“How come he’s letting you live with two of them then?” demanded Aurane, popping a cookie into his mouth. “Seems to me he’s the kind of cunt that would kick them out just to spite Robb.” He raised his hands defensively. “I’m not saying that Robb doesn’t deserve some kind of something for what happened between the two of you. Just that—”

“My dad’s malicious like that? Yeah, I know.”

“Good, because it’s rough pretending he’s not,” grinned Aurane.

“Like you’ve ever been good at pretending anything,” commented Daemon.

Gendry glanced over at them from the counter where he was beginning to put together his dinner. Aurane gave Daemon the finger.

“He’s a filthy liar, this one,” Aurane said loudly to Gendry, “I know. I’ve lived with him for years
“Yeah, sure,” grumbled Daemon.

“Well.” Roslin’s voice rose in volume and the men looked back at her. “Sansa’s thing happened before Robb…and he couldn’t very well kick her out after what happened. And as long as I’m living there, it’s my choice who lives with me. Unless he wants me to move into a little flat above Chataya’s.”

“Rebellious Roslin Frey,” grinned Aurane in approval.

“I’m plenty rebellious!”

“What Aurane is trying to say,” supplied Daemon, reaching for a cookie, “Is that he approves tremendously of everything that might cause your father harm, since Aurane finds your father to be a right pain in the orifice of your choice.”

“Ass, I think,” suggested Aurane.

“All right, a right pain in the ass. He thus approves of your attempts to show your father that you are your own boss, however that might manifest itself.”

“Well, I told him last spring if he doesn’t want me to live with them, I’m renting the little flat above Chataya’s. And he hates them because they bought the coffee shop before he could. You should hear him go on about it. It’s like they did him a personal insult.”

“Remind me never to get on your dad’s bad side,” said Aurane, “Oh wait. I did that just by living with Robb last year. Silly me.” He sighed. “D’you know, he calls the police on us if we have the stereo up too loud on a Saturday night.”

“You’re kidding.” Roslin’s eyes widened in shock.

“Nope. Not at all. I had Megga Tyrell over a few weeks ago, and we were listening to some music, and the cops showed up at around nine thirty. It was ridiculous.”

Roslin shook her head and leaned it on her hands.

“I don’t really know what to say. He’s ridiculous. Maybe my dating Edmure will put him in his place. He hates old Hoster Tully, and probably doesn’t like the idea of his one of his baby girls dating Hoster’s only son.”

“I imagine not.”

“He probably just doesn’t approve of all the extra-marital sex. I mean, look at him. He clearly gets it on all the time with your step-mums, Roslin—”

“Please, please, please don’t make me think about that.”

“But it’s all intra-marital sex. He probably gets unbelievably angry at the concept of all the sex our fine young Aurane is having. And probably doesn’t want Edmure Tully in your bed.”

“Cheers, mate,” winked Aurane.

“He does have a bastard, you know. Walder, he’s called.”

“Really? He should live with us,” grinned Daemon.
“You wouldn’t want to live with him.” Roslin shuddered. “He’s pretty nasty.”

“Have any of you fed Ghost?” asked Gendry. The bowl that the great albino sheepdog used was empty.

“Not yet. He’s outside playing with Arya, probably.”

Gendry glanced out the window. Sure enough, Arya was wrestling a stick out of the dog’s mouth, laughing as she did. A moment later, she pretended to throw it, and Ghost raced off towards the Bastard house, leaping over the stream between the two yards. Then, he stopped, cocked his head and turned back. Seeing that Arya still had the stick, he darted back towards her and knocked her over. She was laughing.

Gendry filled the bowl with kibble, replaced the water and turned back to his stir-fry.

As he turned the vegetables back and forth until he heard a scratch on the door. He opened it for Ghost who made his way over to the food bowl that Gendry had just filled.

“Hey, can I get some of that? I overslept.” Jon had just come downstairs and was scratching Ghost behind the ears as he ate. He was watching Gendry stirring.

“Yeah. There’s plenty.”

“Cheers, mate.” Jon yawned. “God I’m fucking tired. Late night shifts don’t do well for me. At least, not when I can’t sleep.”

“Why can’t you sleep?” Gendry asked, doling some of the stir-fry into a bowl for Jon, then dropping the rest into his own bowl.

“Well, I usually get back around five in the morning or so, and Professor Rayder put me on an analysis for the end of the semester with a nutjob who wakes up before dawn and goes to sleep before sunset. So I have to work with her then. And then, of course, I have to head to lecture and seminar and section and whatever else I’ve sworn to do when giving the bloody school my money.”

“Can’t you make her stay up a little later?”

“I tried that. She fell asleep halfway through. It would have been cute if I hadn’t wanted scream at her.”

“You’re too nice, Jon Snow.”

Jon sighed. “That’s what people tell me.” He smiled. “Maybe I should take lessons from Arya about how to not take shit from anyone. She’s got it down to an art, she does.”

“That she does.”

Jon stretched and yawned again. “Fuck. I don’t want to go to work tonight.”

“We all must do things we do not wish to do. For me, it is grading papers. For you, it is staring at a wall. I’d swap, but I don’t think I could pass for you, and I don’t know if you would even want to touch the essays I have to grade tonight.”

Jon laughed. “You’re not that much taller than me. And I could probably get by just giving everyone a moderately average grade, couldn’t I?”
“Fuck the curve!”

“Fuck the curve,” Jon agreed. He finished his stir-fry, put his bowl in the sink, went to pat Ghost (who was now lying next to Roslin on the couch) and made his way to the front door.

Gendry did the dishes, went to shower, and then made himself his evening coffee. The snow-covered ground was ripped to pieces now that Ghost was here. The White Ravens in the elm tree were *qorking* louder than usual (he could hear it through his window) and the light in Arya’s room was on.
“Do you think that we’ll need more crackers than this?” Ned dumped three boxes of crackers into the shopping cart.

Arya consulted the list. “Dacey says we should have five boxes.”

Ned rolled his eyes. “Is the Lannisport Fencing Team so fucking huge that they eat like motherfuckers?”

Arya snorted. She liked Ned Dayne better when he swore. It was better than him trying to be chivalrous. She had told him so last weekend, when they had been on a long bus ride out to Sunspear. She had finally snapped and told him that she found him fucking annoying sometimes and he had laughed and said that he knew, and that if she weren’t such a bitch all the time he would probably have asked her out already. She had stared at him blankly and he had shrugged. “I figured that you weren’t interested though,” he had said.

“Nope.”

“Good. Now I can stop wasting our fucking time.” His tone had been surprisingly cheerful. It was the first time that she had heard him swear and she had told him so. “That,” he had said leaning back against the window of the bus, “is because my Aunt told me that girls like it better when men are polite. I suppose that she would be wrong in your case.”

“Your aunt sounds like a ninny.”

Ned had proceeded to make her feel properly ashamed of herself for insulting someone she didn’t know—a point she had conceded—and by the end of the bus ride, Ned had been cussing like a motherfucker and she found herself enjoying his company for the first time since Highgarden.

“Go and get more crackers. I’m going to look for salsa,” she told him. He returned whence he came and Arya turned the shopping cart into another aisle and consulted Dacey’s shopping list again.

Ned had dragged her into this, and she had to admit she was enjoying herself. Usually, she went shopping with Sansa, who took control of the process and spent however long they were in the grocery store sending Arya back and forth, fetching various “health food” items. She finally understood why Sansa liked it so much. It was fun to send peons out to do her bidding.

She supposed that that was why Dacey had sent Ned to the grocery store. He was the social chair of the Fencing Team, which usually meant that he was responsible for buying enough alcohol to get everyone completely blitzed at a party. But when they hosted teams from other schools, in this case Lannisport, Dacey Mormont—the assistant coach for épée—sent him out for food as well as libations. Ned had asked Arya’s help several times, and she had usually begged off.

Ned found her again, dumping the rest of the crackers into the cart, as well as several bags of cheese puffs that looked as though they would probably coat their throats with synthetic orange cheese material for the next three weeks.

“My TA’s here,” he grinned, “It’s always funny to see TA’s out of class, don’t you think?”

Arya shrugged. “It’s never happened to me before.” She couldn’t really see the draw. She supposed it had to do with the fact that none of her TAs interested her, or perhaps the fact that she
spent a good deal of her time with Jon and his graduate student friends.

“He’s buying dog food. Must have a dog.”

“That’s nice.”

“I know you don’t care, but Myranda and I have a bet going to see if he’s gay or not. I think he is, she thinks he’s not.”

“Why would you care if he’s gay. You’re not gay.”

“I don’t really. It’s mostly just to peeve Myranda. But now I’m invested in it. So I keep an eye out for him to see.”

“So you stalk him.”

“Stalk is a strong word—one that implies binoculars and obsession.” He did not notice when Arya found herself suddenly very interested in reorganizing the cart. “We just hypothesize while we wait for him to get to section. He usually looks remarkably disheveled.”

“Why don’t you go and grab some cheap wine. That’s over by the dog food and you can spy on him some more.”

“Cheers.” Ned really was very pretty when he smiled, his blonde hair falling into his eyes. Arya found herself thinking that he was the kind of boy that Sansa would go mad for—before remembering that he had enough similarities to Joffrey.

She rounded the corner and saw Gendry putting several cans of soup into his shopping cart. She pulled back into the other aisle and hurried back along it. At the far end of the aisle, she saw Gendry strolling past, glancing down. She bent behind her cart to tie her shoe.

She had no idea why she was being such an idiot. It was just Gendry. She wasn’t the kind of girl who went crazy because she had thought for one wild moment that a boy was going to kiss her. But when she had straightened, he was gone and Ned was strolling down the aisle towards her, carrying several bottles of wine.

“Any luck?” she asked.

“He’d moved on by the time I got to that aisle again. You should probably come with me for the beer,” he suggested. She nodded.

Gendry was standing in front of the shelf, head cocked, comparing beers.

“Hello,” said Ned tentatively. Gendry glanced around and his eyebrows shot up.

“Hi Ned. What are you up to?” His eyes flickered between Ned and Arya.

“Buying beer for Fencing. We’re hosting this weekend.”

“Ah. Well…I’d normally say moderation is good for life, but my mum owns a bar, so I guess that might be hypocritical of me…” He chanced a small smile.

“Little bit, yeah.” Ned began pulling a thirty-pack off the bottom shelf and lugging it onto the cart.

“I thought you don’t drink,” accused Arya.
Gendry shrugged. “I’m just getting stuff for the house. We’re out of food for Ghost and Aurane and Daemon and Jon annihilated our alcohol stores last night. Since I’m here, I’m replacing the beer.”

“Last night was a Wednesday.” Arya tried and failed to keep the judgement out of her voice.

“Jon had it off work and decided he needed to relax some. Apparently relaxing means finishing off two handles of whiskey and all our beer.”

“Between the three of them? Seven hells.”

“I think they had help. I was working and heard other voices.”

“D’you two know each other?” asked Ned, perplexedly looking between them.

“Gendry’s my brother’s housemate,” she explained. Ned nodded slowly.

“Anyway,” Gendry pulled a twelve-pack into his cart, “I’ll see you both later.”

“Bye,” Ned said lamely. When Gendry was out of sight, he rounded on Arya. “Is he gay then?”

“Gendry? He’s your TA?”

“Yeah. For Chivalry and the Hook-Up Culture. Is he?”

“I don’t think so?” Arya certainly hoped not.

Ned nodded slowly, then sighed. “I guess I owe Myranda a beer, then. Why doesn’t he drink?”

“He mentioned almost getting run over twice in one night when blacked out in undergrad. Ended up in the hospital. Decided it was probably best to stop after that.”

“Hot damn.”

Arya chuckled and consulted the list again. “I think that’s everything, shall we check out?”

“Let’s go.”

Gendry was paying when they reached the line. Ned began loading their cart at another cashier, and Arya watched Gendry. When he glanced up at her, he looked surly.

She smiled at him.

He smiled back, took a deep breath, and turned away.

“Are you going back to Winterfell for break?” asked Ned once he had paid.

“My mum bought round-trip tickets for me and Sansa a while ago. Why?”

“I was going to ask if you wanted to come to Starfall for a bit.”

“Ned, I thought you weren’t trying to date me.”

“I’m not! Seriously.” He turned to look at her, and there was something brightly genuine in his eyes. “I just thought you and Sansa might like Starfall. She’d be welcome to come too if she likes. It’s rugged and has a beautiful view of the sea.”
“I want to get back to the cold.”

“It’s freezing here, Arya.”

“No. There was one freakishly early snowstorm and the snow from that just hasn’t really melted yet. It’s not really cold here. I’m only wearing a fleece right now.”

“Wierdo.”

“Why would you want us there? Don’t you want to spend time with your family? Don’t you have siblings?” she asked. She lived easily without Rickon and Bran, but when she remembered them it hurt like hell not to have them there.

“Nope. Not really. My parents died a while back, and it’s just me and my aunt. She’s only a few years older than me and…yeah.” His voice sounded heavy. Arya wanted to ask him if he was ok, but couldn’t put the words in her mouth.

He took a deep breath. He seemed to be about to tell her without her prompting him anyway.

It came in a rush, like he had had to tell it too many times. “My aunt Allyria is only a few years older than me. She’s excellent, and was my best friend growing up. I guess she’d be about the same difference in age as you and your brother Jon. She met this guy from Blackhaven when she was getting her degree, and they got engaged. He died in a car accident up by the Green Fork a year ago, and she just hasn’t been the same ever since. It’s…hard. It’s hard that she’s not the same.” He was blinking more than necessary and his voice was constricted.

Arya suddenly hoped that he wouldn’t cry. She didn’t know how to deal with Sansa when she cried, how in seven hells was she supposed to know what to do with Ned.

“Anyway. I like to bring people back home. It helps pull Allyria out of her depression some.”

“She’s lucky to have you to take care of her.” Arya’s voice sounded quiet, even to her own ears.

“Except I’m not home to do it, and I don’t honestly think I help that much,” mumbled Ned.

“You’re good at taking care of people.”

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she remembered arguing with Sansa when she was about ten until her voice hurt, she felt Sansa pulling at her hair when they fought, she saw Sansa’s blank eyes but perfect smile, she heard Sansa’s sobbing, and suddenly she felt like crying too. She looked away from Ned, biting her lip until the sensation had passed.

“Well, now that I have thoroughly put a damper on this conversation, shall we drive this over to Dacey?” There was a forced cheeriness to Ned’s voice.

“I should go,” mumbled Arya, “I told Sansa I’d help her do laundry tonight and this took longer than I thought.”

“Oh. Ok.”

“Bye!” Without looking at him, Arya raised her hand in farewell and walked away through the darkened parking lot.
“You sound glum, darling? Is everything all right?”


“Your housemate’s sister again?” His mum sounded positively gleeful, even though he could tell she was trying to keep it at bay so as to be sympathetic to his need.

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

Gendry glanced over his shoulder. He was walking from campus to Mott’s, a route that took him by the gym. He really did not want Arya to be strolling behind him. Or Ned Dayne, for that matter.

When convinced that they would not hear his phone conversation, he said, “Oh, the usual.”

“She’s too young for you? You feel creepy? She should be off limits as your friend’s sister?”

“Well yeah, but…”


“I ran into her in the grocery store the other day.”

“Don’t you see her pretty regularly?”

“Yeah, but she was with a guy this time. Someone on the fencing team with her. Someone who I teach in my damned section.”

His mother made a sound of intrigue. “Do you think they’re seeing each other?”

“I don’t know. I don’t care. He’d be a hell of a lot more suitable for her than I am though. He’s an undergrad, he’s athletic, he’s handsome. He’s even from a good house—a Dayne of Starfall and I’m…”

“Don’t you dare pull the ‘I’m a Bastard’ card because you know as well as I do that that doesn’t matter in things like this. And don’t you ever let me hear you saying that someone is handsome is a good reason to think they’re better than you. First of all, you are a very attractive young man,” Gendry snorted, “second of all, look at Joffrey bloody Baratheon. He’s about as handsome and well off as it is possible to get and he seems to be the most horrid little shit imaginable.”

Gendry conceded the point, but said, “It still might matter to her. I don’t know.”

“Has she given you the impression that it matters to her?”

“No, but—”

“Then it shouldn’t and it probably doesn’t. We don’t live in the bloody middle ages, Gendry. People date. People marry for love, regardless of birth. Just because she comes from a good family doesn’t mean you’re beneath her.”
“I’m not saying I’m beneath her,” mumbled Gendry.

“Whatsoever it is, you’re trying to talk yourself out of it, and that’s not the best route because you’ll spend the rest of your life wondering what might have happened if you’d only just tried it.”

“Are you inserting something from your own life into this conversation?”

It was his mother’s turn to sigh. “I loved your father. But he was engaged to about as well-off a woman as you can imagine and I figured it probably was a bad idea to try and convince him to break it off with her. I used all the same reasons you are using now: I’m a poor woman from Flea Bottom, he was from a good old house with a long history. He saw it as having fun and I wanted more, but didn’t know how to ask for it. So I didn’t and now he’s gone.”

It was the most he’d ever heard about his father in his entire life.

“Who was he?” he asked tentatively.

“It doesn’t matter, Gendry.”

And Gendry knew that tone of voice, knew that pushing it wasn’t going to work.

He wanted to tell her that it did matter. That he wanted so desperately to know, so that he could either make his father proud or show him up—prove that he was more than just a bastard from Flea Bottom. But he and his mother had argued about it so many times and he knew that she wasn’t ever going to budge about it.

He knew enough about genetics to know that’s where his black hair came from though. And probably his blue eyes. He wondered sometimes if he looked like his father in other ways, if it caused his mother pain just to look at him and remember what she had once had, and had never been able to attain.

So he asked a different question, one he’d never asked.

“Am I like him at all?”

He heard his mother’s breath catch. “Sometimes. You’re as tall as he was, and you have his coloring and his smile. But...You’re a better man than he could ever have been. I saw to that. You make me so proud, Gendry. So unbelievably proud.”

Gendry didn’t respond.

“This girl of yours—”

“Arya. And she’s not mine.”

“Arya then. Is she worth all this? Is she worth making yourself feel like crap all the time? Because if she’s not, then stop and find someone else. But if she is, stop your whining and go and win the girl. I raised you better than to be defeated without trying.”
Arya

December

Arya hated girl’s night with a fiery passion.

She was not, nor had she ever been, a “girly” type. It had been one of the larger points of contention between her and Sansa growing up. Sansa liked pink and purple and nail polish and perfume and hairstyles. Arya liked wrestling with Jon and practicing fencing and maybe, if she was in the mood, doodling on one of their father’s seven trillion pads of paper.

But the only thing she hates more than girl’s night was girl’s afternoon. You couldn’t even get drunk during girl’s afternoon, because it would bring you under scrutiny.

But Roslin had a big date with Edmure (“Two month anniversary!” she had squealed in a way that made Arya almost feel sick) and Sansa had decided that some in-house bonding (Arya hated that word) was in order.

And so she found herself in a room with Sansa and Roslin, helping brush hair, wax legs, and paint nails.

Sansa was in her element for the first time in months. She knew exactly what color would look best on Roslin, and even offered up one of her old Ballroom dresses (one with a ridiculously low-cut back) for the occasion. It was a dark blue, and shiny in ways that Arya couldn’t approve of and Roslin was positively beside herself with joy at the prospect of wearing it.

The entire afternoon, Roslin would gush about Edmure. How handsome he was, how kind, how chivalrous, how thoughtful, how strong, to the extent that Arya wondered if Roslin was dating the same oaf that was her uncle.

Sansa asked all the right questions, clucked in approval at all the right times, and Arya couldn’t bring herself to say anything snarky, not when Sansa looked truly and utterly happy for the first time in months.

When it was Sansa’s turn for preening, Roslin asked her about her life, and Sansa (whose social life had been decidedly quiet this semester) began talking at great lengths about her history seminar, and how she was thinking of changing majors, and how Tyrion Lannister was really a very good man and an even better professor.

Roslin looked surprised at the comment, and when she questioned Sansa more, Sansa simply shrugged and said, “He understands everything better than anyone. I kind of want to be him when I grow up.”

“Especially the rich bit, I imagine,” teased Roslin. Sansa’s glance was skeptical.

When the two girls turned to her, Arya raised her hands in self-defense. “Don’t you dare,” she growled.

But they did dare. They attacked her hair with a vengeance she had not thought possible. They were kind and did not touch the make-up though, and, by the time they were done, Arya’s short hair looked more like a bob than it ever had before. She had to concede that they were good at what they did.
“Anyone in your life?” teased Roslin. “What about the dreamy fencer? The Dornish one?”

“Seven hells,” grumbled Arya, thinking of Ned Dayne. She had made the mistake of letting him follow her home once, and ever since Roslin had been teasing her. She could only be glad that Roslin hadn’t found Hot Pie worthy of teasing. “No. There isn’t anyone.”

She was surprised at how sad that made her feel. She was quiet for the rest of the evening, and when Edmure showed up to pick up Roslin, she disappeared into her room and grabbed her binoculars. She trained them on the White Ravens, taking notes, and then, as always, she found Gendry’s window.

There was something taped there, that she could only read through the reflected light of the snowy porch roof.

*Sorry A, I’m out tonight. G.*

She’d kill Jon. She’d kill him dead.

Oh, she couldn’t believe it. Why hadn’t he told her that he knew? They’d spent time together, acted as though everything was normal. Had he been laughing at her secretly the entire time?

The thought made her stomach twist.

She reached for her phone.

*Arya Stark: What is that supposed to mean?*

Immediately after sending it, she wished she hadn’t. She wished she hadn’t conceded that she did sometimes—all right, often—watch him. She began knocking her hand against her forehead, muttering “stupid, stupid, stupid!”

Her phone buzzed.

*Gendry Waters: Precisely what it means. Am out tonight. Friend’s band is in town. Thought you should know that you wouldn’t get your usual show.*

*Arya Stark: What’s that supposed to mean?*

*Gendry Waters: You and I both know what that means.*

*Arya Stark: No. No we don’t. You’re delusional and stupid.*

*Gendry Waters: You spy on me when you do your Ornithology project.*

*Arya Stark: I do not. Your window gets in the way.*

*Gendry Waters: How does my window get in the way? It’s behind the tree with the ravens.*

*Arya Stark: Exactly. You think I’m watching you when I’m watching the ravens.*

*Gendry Waters: Then how come you noticed my sign?*

*Arya Stark: I noticed you put up a piece of paper and wanted to see what it said.*

*Gendry Waters: You and I both know that that’s not true.*
Arya Stark: Yes it is.

Gendry Waters: I think we should talk about this in person.

Arya Stark: No. No we shouldn’t. It’s nothing important.

Gendry Waters: It’s everything important. Look, I’m coming over now. Stay where you are.

Arya Stark: Don’t you dare.

He did not reply.

Arya sat there, panicked, humiliated, terrified.

Arya Stark: I want to get blitzed. Where are you.

Syntax Waif: At home. Come over.

Arya called to Sansa that she was headed out, pulled on her coat and raced out the front door before she even heard Sansa begin to respond.

She was at Syntax Waif’s door in five minutes, breathing hard. The other girl opened the door carrying one of the largest bottles of rum Arya had ever seen.

Within a minute, they were sitting on the floor in Syntax Waif’s living room, each with a large glass in front of them. As Syntax Waif poured, she said, “These are the rules. We tell each other things. If you lie and I catch you, you drink. If I guess wrong, I drink. Same for me. Got that?”

“What the hell kind of drinking game is this?”

“The interesting kind. I’ll start. I’m from Myr.”

“That can’t be right,” said Arya immediately. Syntax Waif spoke like she came from Lannisport.

“Drink. Your turn.” Arya drank, and thought.

“I’ve always hated my mother for the way she treats Jon.”

“A lie.” She did not wait for Arya to refute her. “I watched my child die in my arms.”

Arya stared at her. Syntax Waif’s face was inscrutable. “True.” Syntax Waif drank. “I caused my best friend’s death when I was twelve.”

And so they went. Back and forth, back and forth until Arya couldn’t sit up straight. She heard her phone buzz many times, all of them Gendry calling her.

“Gendry loves me.”

“A truth.” Arya drank.

“I have never been in love.”

“A lie.”

“Drink.”

“I love Gendry.”
“A truth.”

And Arya slowly, almost unbelievingly, lifted her glass to her lips.

It was the last thing she remembered from that night.
“Oy Assface, my band is playing in Oldtown tonight and you should come.”

“You are, as ever, the poet, Lem.”

Gendry had met Lemoncloak in a bar in King’s Landing, when he (Gendry) had been too drunk to stand up straight. Lem had seen him home safely, asking only that Gendry come see his band the next night at a hole in the wall on Rhaenys’ Hill.

The band had been bloody awful, and Gendry had sat through the whole thing. He wished that he hadn’t in the end, because every time Lem and Tom and the rest had performed, Gendry had been dragged to their shows.

He had hoped that Oldtown would never hear the likes of the Brotherhood Without Banners. He was, most woefully, wrong.

He had known this was coming from the moment he had answered his phone. He hadn’t realized just how quickly the command would come.

“We’re performing tonight at Quill and Tankard at eight.” Lem had hung up without waiting for Gendry’s response. Gendry looked at his watch. He had half an hour to get to the bar. Cursing Lem under his breath, he closed his laptop and got to his feet.

Then he froze and looked out the window. Arya’s room was dark across the yards, and he wondered…It would be funny, probably…and sometimes on weekend nights she didn’t watch the birds…she might not see.

So he had scribbled a note and stuck it to his window.

He was listening to the worst imaginable arrangement of *Valonquar and King* when his phone buzzed.

Gendry rolled his eyes at his phone when he read Arya’s messages. This was not a conversation he particularly wanted to have over text message. Indeed, it was not a conversation he particularly wanted to have at all, since it would probably end up with him being thrown out of her life forever, labeled as a pervy creep.

Gendry grabbed his coat and was out the door before the set was done. He was privately grateful that he had an excuse that Lem might understand. Getting a girl was always a good excuse.

*Arya Stark: Don’t you dare.*

He didn’t get the last message until he was standing in the doorway of the darkened house. The door had been unlocked, but as far as he could tell, no one was there.

“How?” he called.

There was no response.

“Dammit Arya,” he muttered. She would run away from this conversation, even if she were not sure if he would be deterred by her last text.

It was when he was making to leave, feeling cold dejection in his stomach, his buzz worn off and
frustration high, that he heard it, somewhere between a gasp and a sob.

“Who’s there?” he called into the house.

There was no response.

He turned on the hall light and made his way upstairs.

He found her huddled behind her bed in her darkened room. Her hair was knotted and chunks of it were lying on the floor, tears were streaming down her face, and her breaths were coming in short, shallow gasps.

“She must be scared.” His voice cracked. He clicked on the light and she flinched away from it.

She cried louder.

“Sansa, what is it, what’s going on?” When he made his way into the room, she began to moan.

“No, no, no…”

Gendry froze. Then pulled his phone out of his pocket and called Jon. But Jon was at work and Gendry hung up halfway through the answerback to his voicemail.

He called Arya. She did not pick up.

“Sansa, everything is fine. You are safe. I’m not going to hurt you.” But every time he tried to get close to her, she started hyperventilating even more. She was trembling and shaking and clearly terrified of something and he, Gendry, was making it worse.

He stepped back into the hallway and tried calling Arya again. “Pick up,” he muttered into his phone as it rang. “Pick up, I’m not trying to confront you, I need you.” But she did not pick up.

Completely at a loss for what to do, Gendry called the police.

For ten minutes, Gendry waited for them in the hallway outside Sansa’s room. He sometimes would peek in to check on her, usually when her crying got more hysterical or when she spoke.

She did speak. Well, mutter to herself really. Things like “No, no, no, please no,” and “He can’t find me,” and “Gods, he’ll kill me.”

Gendry tried calling Arya again after the first time Sansa spoke. He didn’t really expect her to pick up, and was unsurprised when her voice mail came up. This time, he left a message, lowly, urgently.

“Arya, Sansa is having a panic attack of some sort. I’m taking her to the hospital. Please call me when you get this message.”

He sent Jon a text message, detailing something similar and waited some more.

“He can’t be coming back. No, no, he can’t be,” moaned Sansa.

There was a firm banging on the door. Sansa shrieked. “No! He’s here. Oh gods!”

Gendry bolted down the stairs and found two crisp looking paramedics. He did not know how they managed it, but they eased Sansa, still trembling, still crying, down the stairs and into the back of an ambulance.
Gendry steeled himself, then climbed in the back too, making one last attempt to call Arya.

She did not pick up.
Arya awoke to fifty-six missed calls, fifteen voice mails and ten text messages. But those were the least of her worries. The fact that her head was about to explode and she seemed to have fallen asleep in the worst possible position on the floor, leaving her back and neck strained and pained weighed a little more heavily on her awareness of the morning.

She groaned.

Syntax Waif was nowhere to be seen. Still lying on the floor, Arya reached for the phone and began scrolling through her messages.

*Synatx Waif: Out tutoring. Spare key by the door. Lock up when you leave and put it under the urn on the porch.*

*Jon Snow: Call me. Where the fuck are you?*

Arya called him. “Where are you,” growled Gendry’s voice on the other end of the line, sounding very tired. Arya panicked and hung up. She ignored the phone calls coming from Jon after that. It was really unreasonable that Gendry use Jon’s phone to get in touch with her.

*Robb Stark: What’s going on? Is everything ok?*

If Gendry had gotten everyone into a panic over her not being home last night, she would throttle him. Maybe with her sabre. Once she could sit up.

*Roslin Frey: Where are you? We’re worried. Please call.*

She called Roslin.

“Thank the Seven. Where are you?”

“I’m at a friend’s house,” mumbled Arya.

“What’s the address? Edmure and I are fetching you and taking you to the hospital.”

“The hospital? I’m fine.”

“Not you, though I am glad to hear that.” Roslin’s voice was very clipped. “Sansa.”

Arya had the distinct sensation that the world was falling away from underneath her. She gave the Waif’s address, forced herself to her feet (the world still turning) and made her way out of the front door, locking it per Syntax Waif’s request and sticking the key under the urn.

It was then that she took the time to go through her phone.

Most of the missed calls were from Gendry, condensed around ten pm and continuing, starting at eleven with some regularity through the night. At four am, Jon’s phone started taking over the calls, and starting shortly thereafter there were calls from mum, dad, Robb, and, starting at around eight in the morning, Bran and Rickon. Roslin had called too, and Uncle Edmure.

*Gendry Waters: Seriously, Arya. Call me. This isn’t about the spying thing. It’s important. Please call.*
Catelyn Stark: Please call home when you see this.

Ned Stark: Please call me or your mother immediately.

Jon Snow: Holy fuck. I just heard from Gendry. Meet me at the hospital?

Gendry Waters: Please call. Sansa’s in trouble.

Sansa’s in trouble.

Arya stared blankly ahead, then called her father.

“Thank the gods. Are you all right?” She hadn’t heard her father’s voice in so long. He tended to work when she was free, and she worked when he was free. As a result, she spent most of her calls home on the phone with her mother, and maybe Bran and Rick. But Ned Stark’s deep voice, no matter how agitated it sounded, calmed her nerves.

“I’m fine. I didn’t mean to cause trouble. I was at a friend’s house and my phone was on silent. I only just woke up.”

“Call Roslin or Edmure. They will pick you up.”

“I already did, they are on their way. Dad, what happened to Sansa?”

Ned took a deep breath. “She had a panic attack. It actually could have been a lot worse. She’s been sedated and is at the hospital now. Your mother and I are getting on a flight out of White Harbor, so we should be there soon.”

“But she’s all right?”

“Physically, yes. I should go. I’m about to get through security. Let Bran and Rick know you are ok. They’re worried sick about you. We all were. We thought you had ended up in pieces in someone’s dumpster.”

Arya laughed. “I’m fine. Extremely hung-over, but fine.”

“I will see you soon.”

“Bye, dad.” Arya looked at her screen, watching as her father hung up the phone.

She shivered. It had gotten much colder over night.

Edmure and Roslin pulled up in front of the house, and Arya climbed into the back of the car. They rode in silence to the Citadel, and found Gendry and Jon in the waiting room.

Jon took one look at Arya and gave her the biggest hug he could.

“She’s fine. She’ll be fine. She should be up soon too, once they lift the meds some.” He looked exhausted, unshaven, as ever, with huge dark circles under his eyes. Arya couldn’t bring herself to look at Gendry.

“What happened?” she asked at last.

“I think some of it might be my fault,” came a voice she didn’t recognize. She looked around and saw the dwarf, and knew instantly who he was. “I was saying to your brother earlier that my actions were unthinking, and that had I known that this would have been Sansa’s reaction, I would
have kept the news from her until I could find a better way to let her know.

“I wrote her last night to warn her that Joffrey had been readmitted to Oldtown’s University. He will begin next semester, starting his education completely afresh. My sweet sister,” Tyrion Lannister gritted his teeth, “pulled some strings somewhere. I had thought that the charges brought against him would mean he could never be readmitted. I was wrong.

“Joffrey is a vicious thing. He wrote me yesterday to say that he would see to it that I lost my position. I can only assume that he will exact some revenge upon Sansa as well. I forwarded his message to the head of my department, the dean of undergraduate affairs, and the president of the university. Then I wrote Sansa. My warning, it seems, did more harm than good.” He looked intensely bitter, revulsion on his face.

“Thank you for trying to help,” said Arya, aware that it would be no help to the man at all.

She sat down and checked her phone.

_Catelyn Stark: We’re on the plane. Should take off shortly. I’m glad you are all right. Please send us updates as you can._

_Robb Stark: I’m taking a train down later tonight. Shall crash with Jon._

_Gendry Waters: I’m glad you are safe._

The last message was one she must have received while she was on the phone with her father, but her head jerked up and she looked at him when she read it. He was watching her, blue eyes clouded with something she couldn’t quite understand. He did not look away when her eyes met his, and she found herself caught in his gaze.

She felt as though all the worry that was filling her was slowly fading away.

She wanted so much to tell him she was sorry, that it had been she (for once) who had been stupid. That she had been scared and it had caused more harm than anything.

But before she could open her mouth, a doctor came out.

“She’s awake, and fairly calm. She’d like to see someone, though she didn’t specify whom,” she said.

“I’ll go,” said Arya immediately, still looking at Gendry. Then slowly, she turned away and followed the doctor down several hallways.

Sansa looked a mess. Her hair was lank, and missing in chunks. She was pale, and there were dark circles under her eyes, despite hours of sedation.

When she saw Arya, she began to cry.

Arya froze.

“Oh, get over here, you great idiot,” blubbered Sansa.

Arya settled by the bed and took Sansa’s hand. “You’re fine. You’re safe. And if he comes near you, I will sic the fencing team on him. Ask Gendry—I have plans. And if he has goons, we have swords.”

Sansa spluttered a laugh through her tears, and rubbed her hands over her eyes.
“I know it’s silly—” she began.

“It’s not silly. Not stupid, not anything at all. He did horrible horrible things to you Sansa. Of course you’d panic when you hear he’s going to show up on your doorstep again. Well, not actually your doorstep. Because Jon, Ghost, and I will have something to say about that.”

“God I hope so. I don’t think he could survive you and Jon.”

“And Ghost. Don’t forget Ghost. Ghost would tear him to pieces.”

“See, you say that, but last time I saw Ghost, he was rolling in the snow begging for his belly to be rubbed.”

“I’m not saying he’s constantly ferocious. Just that he has the capacity for extreme violence. He’s like Jon that way. Cuddly on the outside, fighting machine on the inside.”

Sansa smiled.

“Mum and dad are going to want me to go to therapy, aren’t they?” she murmured, settling back into her pillows.

“I imagine so, yes. They’ll probably go on about how you should have been there all along.”

“I didn’t think I needed it until last night,” sighed Sansa, “I honestly thought I was fine. Can you believe it? I’m very clearly a mess.”

“Not very clearly. Only…only clearly to people who know you well, I’d say. You hide it fine.”

“I just didn’t want people to think I was weak, you know? Mum, or dad, or Roslin, or anyone really. Especially not you. You’re the strongest person I know sometimes.”

“Going to therapy doesn’t make you weak, Sansa.”

“I know that. But it feels that way, you know? Like you need help to be strong, be right.”

“That’s not how that—”

“I know that’s not how it works. But there’s a difference between what you know and what you feel. And I don’t want to feel weak.”

Arya had never understood her sister better. She steeled herself, then asked, “Are you so scared of him?”

Sansa inhaled sharply. She let the air out in a slow stream, as if forcing herself to be calm.

“It’s…it’s more complicated than that.” She paused, looking at the ceiling. Her eyes were suddenly bright, and Arya hoped desperately that she hadn’t unthinkingly made it worse.

“Joffrey was the first person I was ever in love with,” Sansa continued at last. “And I loved him. I truly loved him. But he didn’t love me. I don’t think he knows what love is. He was horrible, horrid, vile to me. But I loved him anyway. Even when he would beat me, I would love him, and he would always push further, as if he were trying to make me hate him, but I couldn’t, because I thought he needed me.”

She took a deep breath. Arya could hear how rough it was, could hear Sansa’s force of will.
She was riveted. She’d never heard Sansa talk about this before. She doubted very much that Sansa had ever talked about this before. She wondered if that was what made her cry in her sleep.

“Sometime about a year ago, something broke. I don’t know what it was, but I was scared of him. And he liked it. He liked that better than when I loved him. And he kept pushing, and I didn’t know how to get out. He’d push harder and harder and I lost myself in it.” She gulped.

“I was scared to turn him in. Robb made me do it. And I’ve been scared of him ever since then. But that’s not the worst part of it.”

“What is?” whispered Arya. She couldn’t imagine there being something worse.

“I don’t know who I am anymore. I don’t know who I want to be. I barely remember who I was.”

Arya felt her throat constrict, felt her own breath grow uneven.

“It’s harder to love than it is to hate,” said Sansa at last, “but either way, you lose yourself. I lost myself in love with Joffrey and I lost myself in hate with Joffrey. And I’m scared,” she looked at Arya again, “I’m scared that I won’t ever find myself again. I’m scared I’m gone forever. And I’m scared, that even if I come back, even if I find myself—gods I hate that phrase—” (Arya did too.) “I’m scared that I won’t ever know how to love the right way. The mum and dad way. I’m scared I only know how to love the Joffrey way now.”

Arya leaned over and hugged her sister, feeling the sobs that Sansa had kept at bay ripping out of her sisters body. Sansa cried quietly, though violently. She did not blubber or sob or moan. She just had trouble breathing, and trembled, and let tears stream down her face and into Arya’s sweater.

“That,” said Arya at last, “is simply false. You’ll be all right, because I won’t let you not be. And because you’re scared of it, and in my experience, nothing motivates action quite like fear.” Arya thought suddenly of Gendry, and wished desperately that she hadn’t run off last night. “Also because you know that mum and dad are going to chuck you into therapy.”

“And,” she added, “if you love that way again, I’ll have something to say about it. Maybe not to you directly. But maybe Nymeria and I will meet your boyfriend in a back alley.”

Sansa let out a strangled laugh, and continued to hold Arya close to her.

They sat in silence for a moment, Arya’s arms wrapped around her sister. She hadn’t ever hugged Sansa for this long before. They weren’t the types that hugged one another. But holding on to Sansa felt right, somehow, felt solid, felt grounding.

Then, “You don’t think I’m weak, do you?” asked Sansa. She was trying to sound offhand, but Arya heard the desperate edge to her voice.

“No, I think you don’t know how to show people that you’re strong.”

Fresh tears filled Sansa’s eyes again.

“I think that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me,” she confessed.

“That’s because it is the nicest thing I’ve ever said to you, Sansa.”

Sansa chuckled.
Arya’s phone buzzed. Sansa let go of her sister so that she could read the text message.

*Jon Snow: Stop hogging her. Is she ok?*

*Arya Stark: She’s fine. I’ll be out in a second.*

“Look, I should go. Jon wants to see you and make sure you’re ok.”

Sansa leaned back against the pillows, wiping her eyes clear of water and wiping her face clear of emotion once again. It was uncanny to see her do it.

“Look, before you go, I want to say something. I’ve been thinking it for a while, but…well…in the spirit of nice things and heart to hearts?”

Arya nodded.

“Don’t interrupt. I know that’s hard for you. But I’ve been planning this.”

“Spit it out,” snapped Arya, winking.

Sansa took a deep breath. “Since Joff, I have been having such a hard time telling people what I am feeling. I used to do that all the time, but now it hurts too much. So I’ve taken to doing what you do—you just tell people what you think when you think it. But I think you think telling people what you think and telling people what you feel are the same thing, and they aren’t. You’ve never told people what you feel. And I don’t think it’s because you’re unfeeling. I think it’s because you are scared to feel things and scared to share what you feel with anyone.” Sansa smiled bitterly, not looking at Arya. “You and I are more similar than you think, in that respect.”

Arya opened her mouth to protest, then closed it.

She sat in silence for a moment, considering.

If it were true, and she wasn’t entirely convinced that it was, it would explain things. And suddenly, inexplicably, she was crying too, looking at Sansa.

“Don’t be sad!” Sansa was saying, reaching out to her, but Arya stood up.

“I’ll go get Jon. He wants to see you.” Her voice was too loud, even to her own ears, and Sansa flinched.

Arya fled the room. She rounded a corner and stopped, wiping her eyes.

By the time she reached the waiting room, she was convinced she looked fine. “*You and I are more similar than you think,*” rang Sansa’s voice in her head.

“Go on in,” she smiled at Jon. She looked around. Tyrion Lannister was reading a newspaper, Roslin and Edmure were deep in conversation.

Gendry was gone.
It was mid-afternoon when his phone buzzed.

“I’m outside, if you still want to talk.” Arya sounded more tentative than she had ever sounded before. Gendry looked out his window from his desk, where he had been trying as hard as he could to lose himself in work. In an effort to find something to distract him from the awful night—Sansa’s terrified eyes, Arya’s disappearance—he had turned to researching his master’s thesis. It was frightfully dull, but it had successfully distracted him until the phone had rung.

He saw Arya standing outside in the backyard. She was looking up at him.

“Come on up, then.”

She was in his room in thirty seconds. Gendry couldn’t help but notice the strange feeling in the corner of his brain—the one that was elated that she was in his bedroom. He did his best to squish it though.

“My parents are here. They’re at the hospital with Sansa. They wanted to thank you for finding her and bringing her in, and would love to take you out to dinner, once they’ve settled into their hotel.”

“I’d be happy to have dinner with your parents.” He tried to keep his voice as neutral as possible and he watched as her thumbs darted across the surface of her phone, undoubtedly sending his reply on to the parents Stark.

“Do you want to sit down?” he asked after she had sent the text. Even as he gestured towards his bed, she slid down his closed door and settled herself on the floor. “Coffee?” he offered, pointing to the coffee maker.

“Yes please.”

He turned on the machine, then settled himself back in his desk chair and looked at her.

She was fiddling with the zipper of her fleece.

“What the fuck happened to you last night?” asked Gendry.

Arya flinched. He supposed he could have phrased that a little better.

“I was at a friend’s house, very drunk, with my phone on silent.”

“Would you have picked up even if it hadn’t been?”

She looked up.

“Probably not.”

Gendry nodded.

Then, Arya exploded. “Look, I’ve never done this before, ok? I don’t know what in seven hells I’m doing, and it freaks me out.”

Gendry looked at the indignation on her face and couldn’t help but laugh.
“It isn’t funny!”

“No, you’re right. It’s not.” He got up and poured her coffee then brought her the mug. “You’re really something, though.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you’re the one who’s been spying on me for most of the semester and you’re trying to get by saying you don’t know what you are doing. I mean, that’s clearly true. It’s just,” he ran his fingers through his hair, stalling while he collected his thoughts, “All right, let’s try it this way. Why did you spy on me?”

“Have you seen yourself shirtless?”

Gendry laughed.

“All right, but you would watch me when I wasn’t shirtless. There wasn’t that as an attraction then.”

Arya’s attention returned to her zipper. “I dunno. Habit?”

Gendry raised his eyebrows.

“All right, I was curious, ok? I wanted to see what you were doing.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“That’s not an answer.”

“What do you want me to say?”

Gendry sighed. He knew damn well what he wanted her to say. That she loved him. Well, he knew that was unrealistic. He’d settle for like. “How about the truth?”

“The truth?” Arya looked annoyed. “I’ve been telling you the truth, stupid.”

“Then a little more detail?”

“Detail?” Arya looked very annoyed. “Do you hate me for spying on you?”

“No.” Gendry was surprised. “I could never hate you.”

“Ok then. Here’s the truth. I went to a friend’s house last night to get blitzed because I didn’t know how to handle the fact that I like you, and I’ve never liked anyone the way I like you.”

Gendry had never realized just how bright her grey eyes were.

“Why would that freak you out?”

Arya looked at her shoelaces, and Gendry could see a shade of dejection there, a flash of frustration. She looked back up at him.

“Wouldn’t it freak you out? Liking someone more than you’ve ever liked anyone, and then being afraid that they would hate you because you have been spying on them?”
Gendry considered. “Yeah, I suppose. If it’s any consolation, I thought it was funny that you were spying on me.”

“Thanks.” Arya’s voice was dryer than the Dornish Desert.

“Also, I enjoyed the attention from you,” he mumbled. He had not intended to mumble. But somehow it had happened.

Arya’s head jerked up. She looked at him, her brow furrowing.

“Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“No.”

“I like you too, Arya. I feel like I’m perving on my roommate’s little sister, and sometimes I think you’d probably like someone more like Ned Dayne more than me, but I like you.”

Arya cocked her head. “Why Ned Dayne?”

“He’s nice enough. And you both fence. And he’s…” Gendry didn’t want to bring up Ned’s looks.

Arya snorted though. “He’s too blonde. And besides I’d probably kill him if he tried dating me. Which he did. And then he stopped, probably because he sensed that I would kill him.”

Gendry tried to keep his face from revealing just how pleased that made him. But he felt some of the muscles in his lips twitch and knew that that was one he’d lost.

“Are you saying you wouldn’t kill me?” he asked at last.

“I think you’d have different reasons for dating me.” Her eyes clouded for a moment. Then she shook her head ever so slightly and the clouds were gone. “But I still don’t understand why you’d want to.”

“Because you’re funny, smart, pretty—” Arya snorted. “You are. Don’t even try and say you aren’t.”

“And you’re stupid. Sansa’s the pretty one.”

“And yet I think you’re prettier. And for some reason, I like it when you call me stupid.”

She looked at him and he couldn’t quite read her expression. At last, she said, “To summarize. You liked that I spied on you and I enjoyed spying on you.”

“Yes.”

“This because we like each other?”

“Yes.”

“Now what do we do?”

Gendry rolled his eyes. “We have two options, I think. One is to continue as is, creepily stalking one another until our paths diverge. The other is to, you know, date.”
Arya’s eyebrows shot up.

Gendry didn’t say anything. It was her move.

“You don’t want to date me. I’m a mess,” sighed Arya.

“Everyone’s a mess.”

“No, but I really am. I—I don’t know how to be open to people. At least, that’s what Sansa tells me, and it upset me to hear it, so I assume it’s true.”

“Well, then I’ll ask you questions until you get better about it.”

“I don’t think that’s how that works, stupid.”

“How would you know, have you ever tried?”

She closed her eyes, and he could see the debate raging in her mind written all over her face.

He would have loved to have heard it. He wondered what Arya was like when she argued with herself. It had to be truly hilarious.

She opened her eyes, and there was something happy in her tired face. “This has been a surprisingly good day, given everything that happened last night.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Sansa knows she needs therapy and she and I have the kind of sisterly moment that our parents had been praying we would have since the day I was born. I got to see my mum and dad for the first time in months and, apart from the fact that I was hungover, they were very glad to see me too. And then there’s you.” She smiled at him, and for the first time, she there was a freedom to her smile, a raw joy that made his breath catch in his throat and his heart tighten.

Before he was aware of moving, he was on the ground next to her, kneeling in front of her, slowly moving his face towards her.

Her lips met his with a tentative gusto, her hands slithered around his neck, and she pulled herself up to a kneel so that she as closer to being on level with him.

And, for the first time in several months, Gendry couldn’t make himself feel bad about perving on Arya Stark.
“Are you sure we shouldn’t make her take next semester off?” Robb’s brow was creased and his blue eyes concerned in the rearview mirror.

“She’s determined not to,” said Cat, turning around to look at her eldest son. “She doesn’t think it will make a difference, and she seems to be more aware of what will and will not make a difference than she was before.”

“I’m not convinced,” muttered Robb.

“She’ll have Arya,” Ned said.

A flash of anger appeared in Robb’s eyes. “Like the other night you mean? When we couldn’t get hold of Arya for hours?”

“I believe it when Arya said that that will not happen again,” Ned replied simply.

“If you say so.”

The three of them sat in silence for a moment, waiting for a red light to turn green.

“Try and be calm, Robb. I understand, but we shouldn’t—” began Cat.

“Upset Sansa. I know.”

“That was not what I was going to say. This boy Gendry saved Sansa from doing more harm to herself than we can imagine. According to your brother, he and Arya are good friends. So let’s not make him feel alienated by alienating Arya. Besides. She is sorry. And I agree with your father about Sansa. It won’t be worrisome unless it happens again. Then, statistically speaking, it will be a trend, and that would be bad.”

Ned glanced at Robb in the mirror again. He was reading a text message, probably from the Westerling girl judging by the softened expression around his eyes. Ned recognized love when he saw it.

The restaurant was pretty empty. It was a Tuesday night, and there were several dates, several families and one business dinner. The host led them to the back of the restaurant where Jon, Sansa, Edmure, and Roslin were sitting.

Sansa stood and hugged the three of them when they arrived. She had what remained of her hair tucked up inside a winter hat. She would get it cut tomorrow, after she had finished settling back into her house.

Edmure gave his sister a kiss, and shook Ned’s hand. He did not shake Robb’s until Roslin had said hello. Robb gave her a kiss on the cheek, and ducked his head slightly, reminding Ned a bit of Grey Wind when Catelyn caught him chewing on the couch cushions. But Roslin was smiling lightly and his eldest son relaxed.

“Where on earth is your sister?” asked Catelyn when she settled herself down next to Sansa.
“Probably making out with Gendry,” Jon muttered under his breath. Ned was pretty sure he was the only one who heard. Cat certainly hadn’t.

“I’m sorry?” she asked, arching an eyebrow with a cool grace.

“She’s probably coming over with Gendry. I don’t know if he’s been here before,” smiled Jon lightly.

Ned raised his eyebrows at Jon once Catelyn had looked away. Jon smiled wryly and whispered, “They’ve been dancing around each other all semester. It’s been kind of funny to watch. But I think they might have figured it out the other day.”

Ned nodded slowly. He had always wondered if his younger daughter were gay, she had so little interest in boys. Fighting with them, roughhousing, racing them, yes, but dating… He wondered if he weren’t a little sad that even Arya was growing up and away. He was sure, at least, that Gendry would make a better boyfriend than Joffrey had. Though admittedly that didn’t take much.

He still had trouble believing that Robert’s son could do what Joffrey had done. Robert would have turned over in his grave if he knew.

Tyrion Lannister was the next to arrive, seating himself between Robb and Edmure and pouring himself a large glass of wine.

“I am glad to see you up and about, Sansa,” he said, taking a sip.

“I’m glad to be up and about. I’m afraid I might have to ask for an extension on my last reading response.”

Tyrion rolled his eyes. Sansa laughed.

“Hand the damn thing in whenever you like.”

Roslin leaned over and whispered something to Sansa, who responded in equal earnest and volume.

“King’s Landing, then?” Tyrion asked Robb.

“Yes sir.”

“And are they still daft at the law school, or have they developed common sense?”

“Still a bit daft, I’d say,” grinned Robb.

“They won’t get over it as long as Pycelle still teaches there.”

“Oh gods he’s bloody awful!” exclaimed Robb.

“I once got into an argument with him over some drinks that ended with him pulling out half his beard. It was quite amusing.” Tyrion took another sip of wine. “And how fares the North, Lord Stark?”

Ned took a deep breath, and was about to answer when he froze.

For half a second, he thought that he saw Robert and Lyanna, as they had been when they had first met, bickering and laughing. But Robert’s hair was longer and Lyanna’s was shorter and the laughter was louder.
He stood up and shook the boy’s hand.

“Lord Stark.” He ducked his head, a little awkwardly.

“Gendry,” he replied. When the man made eye contact, Ned almost had to sit down. It was Robert, but twenty years younger and without the beard.

“Please sit down,” smiled Catelyn who had stood as well and was now shaking Gendry’s hand.

“Hey dad.” He felt rather than saw Arya slip her arms around him.

“Hello, pipsqueak.” He smiled as he pressed his lips to her hair. She went to give her mother a hug, then sat down on Gendry’s other side.

Jon said something that Ned didn’t pay attention to, and the entire table broke out into appreciative laughter.

Ned was looking at Arya, who seemed so much older than when he had last seen her. There was a brightness to her eyes that was different than before, and a calm to her expression that she had never had in her entire life. But it was the smile that gave him pause.

It curved upwards and upwards, displaying an unbridled happiness that he had never seen in Arya.

He took a sip of his wine, and smiled quietly to himself, knowing.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for reading. You are incredible.
There’s a sequel to this in beta, fyi, which has more Arya/Gendry as well as Sansa and another POV. That'll happen sometime soon (ie when I finish editing...).
Happy New Year to everyone!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!