### Song of Southron County

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#### Summary

Sheltered home-schoolers, sophomore Sansa and freshman Arya enroll in Kings High after moving to Kings Landing with their father. First crushes, burly jocks, muscly nerds, creepy teachers, skinny dipping, underage drinking, and even some DnD! What's not to love?! {Teen!Sandor}

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#### Notes:
See the end of the work for [notes](http://archiveofourown.org/works/2153799).
First Day, First Meetings

SANSA

She arrived early on her first day and had already walked into two different, completely wrong, offices. The gymnasium halls remained empty of students, so there were no helpful sources to ask for directions. Sansa turned the map, printed on the back of her schedule, and tried to make sense of the tiny boxes labeled with letters and numbers. The map key was illegible, printed with exasperating tiny font. A light glowing at the end of the darkened hall beckoned and she balled the map into a fist of determination.

"Ms. Tarth?" Sansa stood in the doorway, stuffed the schedule into her bag, and smoothed her vibrant cerulean vest. First impressions are everything so she dressed to impress! The vest highlighted her eyes while the bright yellow top beneath enhanced her red tresses. An impossibly tall and athletic woman sat behind a desk inside the volleyball coach's office. Her cropped platinum blonde hair curled around her ears, not feminine in a traditional way but still pretty. The coach glanced up to reveal stunning cheerful sapphire eyes and an uncertain perky smile.

"Yes?" Ms. Tarth seemed caught off-guard at her arrival as she gestured towards the seat in front of the desk. "Come in, have a seat." She shuffled a few papers and set them aside before look of understanding dawned on her kind face. "Oh, you must be Sansa Stark, the principal spoke with me about you." It felt a little embarrassing that anyone made a fuss because her father worked for Robert Baratheon, but it proved useful.

"Thank you so much," she hung her cream backpack on the back of the chair before sitting. "You have no idea how much it means to me that you would give me a personal tryout for the team." The move to Kings Landing was exciting but it meant having to leave her old team and friends behind. The year would be ruined if she did not get to play volleyball, it was her one escape. Volleyball was also the one reason to value being freakishly tall for a teenage girl. She tried to hide the desperation likely showing on her face by returning the coach's lively smile.

"No trouble at all," coach folded her hands on the desk, "you only missed official tryouts by a week. First practice is today, come play with the team and we'll consider that your tryout." That was extremely generous and she was once again thankful for her father's connections. Principal Varys already greeted her and Arya personally when they arrived for their first day. The Baratheon name held a lot of weight in Kings Landing. Sansa grew ever more curious about Joffrey Baratheon, the oldest son of father's boss.

"That is very kind, Ms. Tarth, I will try my best," she promised. Sansa would work even harder this year, never too early to make an impression on college scouts. It would mean the world if she could manage to pay for at least some of her future university costs. There was a sizable fund her set aside by her grandparents, but it would feel good to do something on her own. Her secret dream was to get
Sansa even had some vague notion of what her prince charming looked like, handsome of course. And brave, and gentle, and strong... like daddy. Maybe it would sound gross to some other people but she really wanted the kind of love her parents had. Less kids though, maybe two or three, not five. Being the 'middle child' is that much worse when you have to share the position. This year... would be different! This year, she would find a boyfriend. Her fingernails bit into her palms as she clenched her fist, alerting her back to reality.

"You best get going before the bell rings." Coach Tarth interrupted her dreamy space-out time and Sansa flushed with embarrassment. "I will see you later on today at four." Collecting her bag, she flung it over one shoulder and started backing away and stammering her goodbye.

"Thank you again, see you then.-" At first she thought she backed into the wall, except it wasn't quite that hard and it was... warm?! "Oh!" Sansa turned around quickly, nearly losing her balance as the man she bumped into grabbed her elbow to steady her. "I'm sorry, sir!" She realized she was addressing his chest so she looked up and could not hold back her gasp of horror. His face was scarred on one side, a horrible burn covering his right cheek and trailing up his forehead onto his scalp.

He appeared young, overlooking his disfigurement, despite being the tallest person she'd ever seen! And the biggest! Sansa averted her rude stare from his scarring to his red jersey, obscured beneath his black sleeveless shirt. His arms were huge and heavily muscled, and it seemed to take forever to scan the breadth of his shoulders and chest. Sansa fleetingly wondered if his baggy clothes hid an equally sculpted form. He looked like a life-size statue of David come to life... only slightly damaged.

"I ain't no 'sir',' his rough voice growled low, sending a tremor up her spine and she felt her jaw gaping so she snapped it shut. "Do I frighten you so much, girl?" Sansa noticed he still held her elbow and they stood so close that their bodies nearly touched. Her breathing and heart raced and her face burned with shame that she let her eyes devour the broad expanse of his chest and thick arms. Unable to stop herself she looked back up at his pitiful face to see his previous irritation replaced with mocking. He was making fun of her!

"Mr. Clegane! Unhand Miss Stark and tell me why you're darkening my door." Coach's voice pulled Sansa out of her trance-like state. She took a step back from this overwhelming 'Clegane' person. It was almost disappointing when he let her arm go, a momentary thought flashed of him pulling her closer instead of pushing. Shocked by her shameless imaginings, she never regretted being homeschooled more. Clearly her brain was damaged from lack of interaction with boys not related.

"Miss Brianne." His gaze lingered on Sansa before he lazily let his eyes slide to coach Tarth, a mocking smirk scrunching the unburnt side of his face. Freed by his distraction, she gave into the urge to examine him further. Standing on his uninjured side, he was attractive despite a few blemishes. He probably did not even notice the few red dots on his face, the thought made her sad for him. Although, from her first impression on him, she doubted Mr. not-a-sir Clegane wanted her pity. His dark coarse hair was shorn short, doing nothing to hide his damaged face and scalp.

"That's 'Ms. or coach Tarth' to you, Clegane." The way coach Tarth addressed the young man made it obvious he was a student, albeit a massive one. He towered over her, a difficult feat considering she was taller than most boys her age. She actually enjoyed being on eye-level with most grown men, until it attracted too much attention. Sansa fiddled with her bag as she stepped back from the tall boy, pretending not to be listening to their conversation.
"Why you gotta be like that to me, Miss Brienne?" Sansa almost laughed at the whining tone Clegane adopted, totally at odds with his size and arrogant attitude. "I'm only here because coach Selmy wants to know when you need the field next week for cheer tryouts." He spoke as if he was explaining something obvious to a child, totally exasperated.

"Nice try, young man," coach Tarth rose from her chair to her impressive full height and crossed her arms. For once in her teenaged life, Sansa felt somewhat short! "I don't need the entire basketball team distracting the students who try out." Ms. Tarth was even less used to looking up to someone than Sansa, irritation written all over her face. "They are fellow athletes, your classmates, and deserve common courtesy."

"Sure," Clegane rolled his eyes, something catching his attention. "Athletes, right." Distracted, he took a step towards the door to study a golden flyer taped to it. He suddenly ripped the page from the door and smiled at coach Tarth. "I think I have everything I need." Then he fixed his dark grey eyes on Sansa, raking them up and down her body, paying her back for her gawking. He met her gaze again and nodded a goodbye before stalking out the door, hands shoved in his pockets.

The bell rung, startling Sansa, so she tossed a quick smile and wave at Ms. Tarth. She darted out the office and nearly ran into Clegane again, for the second time she was surprisingly disappointed. To avoid her crashing into him, he stepped back and leaned against the wall. He somehow managed to look dangerous with his hands stuffed his worn jean pockets. His snorted scoff made her realize she was scrutinizing his impressive height and bulk again.

"Not exactly top secret material." He smirked and held up the yellow sheet in victory, it had a pom-pom clip-art in the middle and 'Cheer Squad Tryouts' printed in bold on top. Poor Ms. Tarth, she did not stand a chance against a determined teenage boy. Sansa lived with a few teenage boys; they are the most relentless creatures alive. Arya pretty much counted as a boy too. She could not wait to live in a dorm room with all women. "Will I be seeing you at the tryouts, Miss Stark?"

"Oh," Sansa didn't know what to say, caught off guard by his question. "I'm new," which really had nothing to do with what he'd asked her, "and I've never cheered before." She felt totally awkward and mumbled her answer, getting quieter with each word. He pushed off the wall and stepped toward her to lean closer to hear. A most curious sensation of being magnetized towards him pulled on her body and moved her feet to step nearer as well.

"It's not hard," he smiled, twisting his face and drawing attention to his scars. He seemed to observe her fighting to control her staring with amusement. "You just have to be pretty - which you are already doing right now." It surprised her how much his 'compliment' pleased her. Case closed; she had unquestionably cracked from lack of male interaction. Or maybe it had something to do with how small and feminine she felt next to him. Whatever it was, it made her stomach flutter and her face redden furiously.

"Oh. Th-thank you," gods, please help her stop stuttering like an idiot. She didn't know how to respond to his intimidating form of... flirting? Was he flirting with her? Usually boys acted nice when they liked her but he made her nervous and seemed to like doing it. Instead of being annoyed, she thought his odd method strangely endearing.

"You should try it - I'd like to see you in the uniform." His brows waggled as he observed her embarrassed expression. "Red obviously looks good on you." Sansa hoped he was talking about her hair but from the way he grinned at her fresh blush, it was unlikely. They stood there, a breath's distance apart and faces tilted toward each other. The second bell rang, making them both jump apart, and at that moment coach Tarth stuck her head out of her office to scold them.

"That's the bell ringing," she admonished, "get to class." Sansa froze, not wanting to look back and
see the disapproval on coach's face. She needed to make a good impression if she was going to join the team! She scampered around Clegane as he smiled at coach, the way he did it made it seem like he was trying to look scary instead of nice.

"Bye, Miss Brienne!" He called a sing-song farewell to the coach before he caught up to her in a few strides of his long legs. His thumbs hooked in his pockets as his heavy booted footfalls fell in step with her quick pace easily. "What's your next class - I can show you where it is?" Sansa appreciated any help she could get; she never learned how to navigate a giant campus like Kings High as a home-schooled kid.

"Thanks, I have..." Sansa pulled her printed schedule out of her pocket and unfolded it before finding the answer. "Mr. Pycelle for Physics," she read off of her schedule, squinting to read the impossibly small text. She replaced the paper in her pocket, relieved to see him nodding in understanding. The enormous campus of Kings High proved more challenging than she anticipated.

"Damned lucky - I'm on my way to the science building for Anatomy." His giant shoulders drooped and he kicked his heel against the ground as he ambled next to her. "I have to pass this time to have enough Science credits." He sounded annoyed, like attending school was not a privilege, instead treating it like a chore. She bristled, hating the stereotypical jocks who blew off academics like they were irrelevant.

"It is practical for an athlete to learn human physiology," she informed him. "I know from first-hand experience that my serve is better for it." She blushed when she realized she was lecturing again, it was a bad habit of hers. 'Mother Hen' is what her tutor, Ms. Mordane, called her whenever she felt Sansa was sitting too far up on her high horse. Too embarrassed to look at him, she stared down at her adorable tan boots with lace detail. A good buy... perfect for her outfit, which took hours to put together last night.

"Volleyball?" He sounded distracted instead of irritated and Sansa let out the breath she was holding. "Does this school even have a team?" That annoyed her even further; she let out an aggravated groan and snapped her head in his direction to catch his eye. Who did he think coach Tarth coached...? Oh gods, he thought she was 'just' the cheer-leading coach and his lack of appreciation bothered her.

"Gods," she sighed and shook her head. "Basketball players are always clueless about their school's other sports." At her surprised expression, she made another frustrated sound. "Except the cheerleaders, of course." It had to be said; he obviously shared that common interest of his species. All the boys loved a curvy cheerleader, not an awkwardly lanky volleyballer. Most guys' eyes never went high enough to even look her in the eye, but Clegane's unbreakable stare pierced her.

"I'll come watch - if you're going to play," his serious expression broke into a grin. "I meant what I said about you joining the squad - you're the type to fit right in with those girls." He looked down at his feet when she smiled back, something she finally recognized as a sure sign of flirting. Sansa decided to try flirting right back at him, doubting she was capable of flustering the incorrigible giant.

"Why?" Her voice dripped with sweetness as she tossed her loose hair over her shoulder and peeked up through her lashes. "Because all girls you think are pretty should get along?" She actually considered what it would be like to be a cheerleader before admitting it was impossible. "Honestly, between volleyball and chorus I doubt I'll find the time."

"You sing, too?" He was amused by her again, inciting that fluttery feeling once more, and she wondered if this guy might actually be a player. "Like a real-life fucking Disney princess, do little birds help you get dressed in the morning?" He really liked making fun of her, and if she was honest, she kind of liked his teasing too.
"I'm going to take that as a compliment," Sansa held her chin higher, as if she was above it all. He still saw the smile threatening to break her indifferent expression.

"You would," he scoffed playfully as he stopped in front of a door. Before she knew it, they arrived and she was yet again disappointed. "This is Pycelle's class - see you around, little bird." He turned around to leave, seemingly not as reluctant to part as she was.

"Goodbye," she called out to him, wanting to see if he would turn around, "nice to meet you!" He did not look back, just took one hand out of his pocket, and gave her a lazy wave. "Wait!" He turned at her call, a curious look on his face, probably due to the strange urgency in her voice. "Um... I don't know your name?" Sansa was curious and wanted to stretch their time together a moment longer.

"They call me the hound," he rewarded her with his one-sided grin, even if it was on the wry side. "Ask around about me and you'll rethink how nice it was to meet me." The... hound? What kind of name was that?! The hound winked at her then, still smirking, and it sent another shiver up her spine. She really had gone boy crazy, she mused as she watched him strut away, an air of confidence hanging over him. Maybe just the regular kind of crazy.

Chapter End Notes

Hey-o! I'm taking a much-deserved break from my 'More Than a Number' series after losing some of my mojo. I needed something light(er) to take the edge off, so here's a High School AU! You're welcome. I also aged down Sandor... You're welcome again. For me it's a bit difficult to picture Sandor as a teenager. So, as far as this story is concerned I imagine a young Blake Griffin (why wouldn't I?). Basketball is pretty much the only sport that doesn't bore me to death.

Blake Griffin:

That little sexy smirk! Somebody stop me!!!
SANDOR

Leaning back in the tiny desk, he stretched his legs out as far as they could go, taking up a shitload of room. Good, it kept his classmates and their chatter away. He'd thought about sniffing out some more details about the Stark girl when she breezed into the classroom like a mirage. Her bright blue eyes swept over the room and landed on him, lighting with recognition. She smiled and gave him a little wave before walking towards him - in his direction! Sandor could watch her striped skirt swaying around her hips for the rest of his life.

"Are the seats assigned," her voice was breathy as if she ran to the classroom, "or can I sit here?" I got a seat for you right here, princess. No, seriously, she was trying to sit next to him - on purpose?! That didn't make any fucking sense. Hadn't he just harassed and mocked this girl, was she one of those types that liked being treated like shit? Nah, 'Miss Stark' looked way too hot for him to be that lucky. Sandor cleared his throat, realizing he was staring at her expectant beaming smile.

"Sit, if you want," he gestured to the seat in front of him.

"Thank you so much!" The little bird let out a relived sigh, plopped down in the chair, and turned around to face him. Her elbows braced on his desk and she rested her chin on her hands. Sandor sat up a fraction straighter, trying to catch a glimpse down her yellow blouse. "I was hesitant to sign up for this class; my Spanish is already fairly good." She bit her lip and assumed a guilty sheepish expression. "I thought I might need an easy class in case my honors classes got to be too much."

"This is actually a good class, Mr. Forel is alright." High praise coming from him, he called teachers out on their bullshit, same as the students. "He doesn't care if you already know Spanish - nobody is as good enough for him. He's one of those who never gives 100% on principle." Sandor snorted at the very idea of even trying to get a perfect grade in a class. He eyed Little Miss Perfect and thought she must be one of those dumb-ass suckers.

"I'm just glad I know someone, I haven't had much luck making friends." She genuinely sounded distressed and Sandor almost - but not really - felt bad for his snort of derision. The girl's pouty face was too much of a reward, her pink lower lip stood out and her lashes narrowed. If she didn't want him to tease her then she wouldn't look so pretty - pure logic right there. He might have felt a little bit bad so he threw in a compliment - somewhat backhanded - to soften his growls.

"That's because you're in advanced honors classes," he scoffed, "nothing but nerds in those. That's why I suggested you join the squad - they're your type of people." He smiled at the confused look on her face, she really couldn't be that smart if she didn't know how fucking gorgeous she was. A natural beauty, that's what she was, he couldn't see any makeup but her skin was flawless. Obviously, her fiery hair was natural, like a fucking Disney princess. Why was she sitting next to him? Always a possibility she was straight loony tunes, in which case - bring on the crazy.

"And what exactly does that mean; my 'type' of people?" She had the nerve to even sound offended, he laughed at her lip jutting out even further. Shouldn't tempt a hound, girl - he might bite. Sandor was quick, they never saw him coming on the court, as he leaned forward until their faces almost
touched. The girl gasped but did not pull away and it was almost too much of a temptation to capture those parted lips.

"I mean, little bird, beautiful people." His voice was low but she heard every word, to her credit, she kept eye contact with him. A pretty blush spread over her cheeks and she quickly lost the battle of wills, lowering her eyes to study the book on the desk. Sandor caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger to pull her focus back up. He held her gaze a moment longer, trying to see something in her eyes that resembled interest. The hum and bustle of the room disappeared into a blurred haze, creating an atmosphere just around them.

"Would you like to..." She was whispering but held Sandor's rapt attention, he even held his breath as he waited for her to finish speaking. Stuttering for a moment, the little bird closed her eyes and inhaled through her nose as a look of determination set on her face. Blue eye popping open along with her mouth, "would you like to-"

"Alright class, settle down." Whatever spell had overcome the girl was broken - she spun away from him and focused on the teacher. Naturally, she was a model student. "Ah, I see our new student has joined us. Welcome, Senorita Stark." Forel smiled at the pretty little bird and Sandor pictured her giving their teacher one of her bright smiles. He curled his lip in disgust at her goody-two-shoes act and slunk down in his chair. His leg sprawled out into the aisle between the desks, one large boot serving as a fire hazard.

"Gracias, Senor Forel." Chirp-chirp. The little bird was such a little brown-nosing nerd. Sandor watched her eagerly sit up straight, her tapered waist arched. If he sat forward, he would have a nice view of slim calves crossed beneath her chair. Hot little nerd, he amended, contemplating trying to scoot his desk for a better angle. He hated her loose-fitting clothes for concealing her curves, but a few secrets made her even more appealing.

"Excellent pronunciation! Your friend, Senor Clegane could use some help with his." Mr. Forel gave Sandor a look that told him to cool the eye-fucking of Miss Stark. Sorry - I'm not sorry - she's the one who sat in front of the hound. Forel addressed the class again, "I say it all the time: practice is the only way to master Spanish fluently. Let's pair up and practice giving directions." Sandor held his breath and tapped her on the shoulder, letting his fingers brush her bare skin.

"Partner?" She turned around, asking the question he planned to ask, with a sheepish smile but not quite able to meet his gaze. Averted eyes were something he never experienced - except all the fucking time. Sandor was used to it, but it felt like shit to have her avoid his face.

"You don't have to," he growled - hating himself for falling into his grouchy fucking ways. "I'm sure any guy in here would probably kill to be your partner." Sandor nodded to the hungry wolves staring at the new girl but too afraid to approach because the hound would bite their heads off. "Hell, probably a nice chunk of the girls too."

"Oh, you really take your teasing too far." She smiled and rolled her eyes - like she 'got' him or something. As if she understood his personality and liked it - liked him. The girl pulled a book out of her backpack - he guessed it was this class's book because it had Spanish in it. Setting it on his desk, she used her sparkly teal fingernail to scan the table of contents. Sandor wondered if her toes were painted too... and what color her panties would be. "Found the chapter," she proclaimed proudly.

"Yo sé cómo pedir direcciones." 'I know how to ask for directions'. Sandor slipped a finger under the font of the book and closed it, leaning close to her again. "Bella princesa, creo que sabes cómo también." 'Beautiful Princess, I think you know too'. She frowned at his words, surprising him - that wasn't the reaction he wanted. Fuck, it's not like the hound knows how to chat up pretty girls!
"Beautiful princess?" She sniffed and tossed her hair over her shoulder with annoyance. He smirked at her adorable indignation at being compared to a princess, because that's exactly what she was. Born in the wrong era... except real princess were living bargaining chips and the fairy tales were bullshit. She looked over her shoulder before nodding - a mischievous expression came over her pretty face. "You're right, I know how to ask for directions. ¿Por qué ‘princesa’?"

"¿Qué tal pajarito?" He liked the way 'little bird' sounded in Spanish - it fit her perfectly in any language. "Better than 'bella princesa'?" Though it was just as fitting to call her a beautiful princess, she was totally a little bird. Innocent, sweet, fragile.

"Mi nombre es Sansa Stark," she insisted, tilting her head to one side. 'Sansa' was the perfect name for her - it sounded like a rare flower. "¿Por qué es ‘pajarito’ mejor que ‘princesa’?" Princesa is a good name for a little girl and he did not see her as a 'little girl'. He'd been fighting some primal instinct to grab her and steal her away for himself, like some kind of wildling. It was more than just wanting her, he wanted to fuck any pretty girl, but she was different - untouchable.

"Let some other guy call you 'princesa', mi pajarito." Sandor let his eyes roam over every inch of her flawless beauty, seeing her blush again from his attention. "I want to call you something no one else will." Damn it to all hells, he damn well knew he wasn't teasing her or trying to make her uncomfortable. He was flirting - the hound doesn't flirt! Her blue eyes suckered him in, making him pretend he knew how to talk to stunning princess-type girls.

"What about you? ¿Cuál es su nombre?" She smiled and rolled her spectacular eyes, "El Sabueso?" 'The hound' in Spanish did sound badass - he might actually like it if she called him that. Sandor returned her annoyed stare with a wide grin and shook his head while crossing his arms in a position of defiance. "Come on," she whined in such an appealing way, "tell me! Te lo suplico!" When she asked a question, Sansa's head tilted and her long fiery hair spilled around her bare shoulders.

"I like hearing you beg, little bird," his voice rumbled low, sounding more scary than seductive. She lifted a hand to cover her mouth, trying to look shocked, but he saw the smile dimples in her cheeks. "Pajarito hermoso, quiero escucharte cantar." Her hand fell as her lips parted and eyes widened, a rosy flush covered her face. She seemed like the innocent type but she understood perfectly what he meant by wanting to hear her 'sing'. The words were innocent enough, but there could be no mistaking his tone.

"¿Qué canción debería cantar?" She was playing coy, asking 'what song' he wanted her to sing. Her voice was low and quiet as she watched him through hooded eyes - 'come fuck me' eyes. She leaned over her arms propped on his desk - Sandor noticed how her tits rested on top of them. "Canciones princesas de Disney?" She arched an eyebrow at him, touché little bird.

"I bet you know every fucking Disney song by heart," he taunted. She narrowed her eyes and sat back with her arms still crossed under her chest, matching his pose. It was getting increasingly difficult not to rip her clothes off and fuck perfect Miss Sansa Stark right in the middle of class. Sandor couldn't remember the last - any - time a girl had this kind of effect on him. A slow smile curled on her perfect lips, finally nodding her head in agreement.

"You're right," she bowed her head with alluring shyness. "I'll sing you any one you want, no charge." The little bird smiled and batted her long eyelashes at him. Sandor had to resist the urge to look behind him to punch whoever she must've been flirting with. He grinned, not caring how it twisted his face, and gave her a decisive nod.

"I'll take you up on that, little bird." Sandor didn't want a fucking Disney song, and she knew it, he could tell by the way she smiled and looked away. Right? Damn this girl was hard to read. For his part, he didn't try to hide the huskiness in his voice or even the fact that he was still trying to catch a
peek down her shirt. Short of telling her he'd like to fuck - thank you very much - she'd have to be
dense not to see it. Damn her straight-laced fashion sense, she looked sexy even without showing
off. He still wished she would lean forward and let her blouse slip just a bit.

"I look forward to it..." She spoke shyly and he almost bluntly asked if she was agreeing to fuck.
"You really won't tell me your name?" If she called his name... That would make it hard to pretend
he just thought she was hot, to ignore the pull she had on him.

"Nobody here even knows my real name," he sneered, annoyed she was making him 'feel' shit. "I'm
just the hound." The hound doesn't 'feel', he acts. If they weren't surrounded by other people he
would already have the girl on her desk with her long legs wrapped around his waist. The visual
made him go hard and he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Damn her still smiling face, she knew
exactly what she was doing to him.

"It's like you said," she murmured, peeking through her lashes. "I want to call you something no one
else will." Damn, this girl knew how to knock the wind out of a guy. Sandor knew he was staring
like an idiot with his mouth hanging open while she waited expectantly. Why was she so interested?
Why was she acting so nice? So that she can pretend they don't know each other once she meets
people on her level? He wasn't running a fucking charity for new kids who were lonely.

"Atención estudiantes!" Senor Forel just saved him from snapping at Sansa for literally no good
godsdamn reason other than his own insecurity. Shit, he was jealous of people who didn't have to
admit their own bullshit to themselves. Sansa turned away reluctantly, making him feel even more
like an ass. "Friday there will be a quiz. Greyjoy, put your hand down. Yes, spelling will count, stop
asking."

The bell rang and Sandor ran like the coward he was, not pausing to say goodbye or even looking
back. The hounds of hell couldn't chase off Sandor Clegane, but one leggy little bird was scaring the
shit out of him. He broke into a full run once he rounded the corner and pushed open the door to the
campus grounds. The locker room showers were always icy cold, that's just what he needed. His
body reflexively sprinted to the gym, those early morning sideline sprints paid off.

The gym was still empty since the second bell hadn't rung, so he headed straight for the showers. He
stripped his clothes, casting them on the ground wherever and grabbed a towel. The shower stall was
dark and smelled of chlorine but it was comforting in its familiar discomfort. Cold water rained down
over his head - the dead patch on his scalp felt nothing and reminded him that he was a monster.
There was no way in any of the seven hells he could manage getting a girl like Sansa Stark to go out
with him on even one date.

And where would he take her? Some burger joint or some shitty movie he didn't give a fuck about?
Just so he could attempt to get her padlocked panties off? Most girls ignore him, some wanted to fuck
him - never 'date' him. Girls like Sansa Stark... they normally couldn't even look at him. He ran his
hand over his face, the water rushed over his cooling body. Yeah he wanted her, but not just for a
fuck, he wanted to hold her hand and buy shit for her. This was shaping up to be a nice relaxing year
before perfect little Miss Sansa Stark backed into him.

"Who's in here?" Coach Selmy called out, his voice echoing off every tiled surface. Nothing like
good old Selmy's monotone voice to kill a boner. Finished, Sandor turned off the shower and
grabbed the towel off the curtain rod to wrap it around his waist.

"It's me, coach," he answered as he stepped out of the three square foot stall. It always felt like he
was packed in - good thing he wasn't claustrophobic - Sandor only had one fear.

"Clegane," coach sounded surprised to see him, "don't you have a class?"
"I needed a shower," he squatted in front of his locker to pull out some fresh clothes. "A little bird took a shit on my head." Not exactly the truth, but it didn't feel like a lie either. Coach grunted, not looking up from scribbling in his notebook, always trying to come up with a better play. Sandor dressed and gathered up his discarded clothes to stuff them in the locker and close it up with the heel of his shoe.

"Listen Clegane," coach looked up from his mastermind plans and eyed Sandor. "I know things haven't been easy for you." The man cleared his throat, looking about as uncomfortable as possible. "I want you to know, if you ever need to talk-"

"The hound," he grinned at Selmy, "doesn't need to talk about his feelings." Sandor picked up his books with one hand and waved goodbye with the other. "See you around, coach!"

"Get to Class!" Selmy had to have the last word. Sandor contemplated skipping the last few classes, both dreading and wondering if she might... Thinking about that girl was a flat waste of time - she's one of 'them', not for him. Sansa Stark... if a good little girl like that hears even half the shit he's done - the fights, the drinking, suspensions. Hells! The only reason he hadn't been expelled in the last four years was because he fucking carried the basketball team! People only tolerated him for one reason - he moved the rock and put it in the net.

If he could just finish this year and get a scholarship, that talent would get him out of this shit city. Letting some pretty little girl mess up his mind - he wasn't about to let that happen.

Chapter End Notes

Sandor is so moody ^_^ and Sansa is dying to learn his name... What do you think she wanted to ask him before Senor Forel interrupted?

The trouble's just begun! Next up! ARYA STARK! *And the crowd goes wild!*

And this is a serious question now... Am I updating too often?
ARYA

Arya Stark, model student - already skipping on her first day of school - spotted a teacher heading her way and ducked into the nearest room. It was empty and dark, except for a few desks piled on one side and a row of filing cabinets on the other side. She was about to peek out to see if the coast was clear when she noticed a light coming from a door across the room.

"Lightning!" A voice shouted from behind the door, drawing her attention. She tiptoed nearer to the sound. A sliver of light poured into the dark entryway through the cracked door open.

"Your spell hits," a quieter voice replied, "causing nine damage." Arya leaned closer to the door to hear better, wondering what in the seven hells was going on.

"Pod, stay back!" Another voice boomed from inside the room, startling her into jumping - calm as still waters. "Let my hammer crush this fucker!" Arya was on pins and needles! The suspense was killing her so she repositioned just a tiny bit, straining not to move the door.

"Your warhammer smashes into the Brain Mole," the calm voice responded, "its skull is split open."

"I eat the mole's brains," an extremely deep - and foreign voice - reached Arya's ears. Something about that voice sent chills down her spine.

"Ugh, that's so gross," a new voice piped up, echoing Arya's thoughts.

"Tastes good," the deep voice rumbled with a dark chuckle. Engrossed in the crazy conversation, Arya pressed her ear against the door and it screeched L-O-U-D. It got real quiet then - whoosh! Suddenly the door yanked open she fell into the burly arms of a handsome young man with the bluest - sort of totally pissed - eyes she'd ever seen. Shoving herself out of his grip, she peeked around to see a group of five boys sitting around a table but the blue-eyed boy quickly blocked her view. His big hand closed on her shoulder to turn her around but she slipped under his arm and walked up to the table with interest.

"What'cha guys doin'?" Five pairs of surprised eyes stared at her - one bright blue pair glared. She couldn't help it - she was dying to know what they were all up to.

"We're playing D&D," one shy boy answered. He had a friendly smile, which Arya returned. She walked over to the helpful boy's side and looked down at the sheet of paper he had in front of him.

"How's it played?" Arya picked up the paper, trying to make sense of the words written down but it was all Greek to her. That same interfering blue-eyed boy snatched the paper and slammed it down on the table, making the friendly boy jump in his seat. She narrowed her eyes at the angry boy and was again startled by how good-looking he was. Since when did she find boys attractive to distraction?

"Look it up online," he huffed at her. Why was he such a grouch?!
"Gendry, that's not very nice at all, she's just curious," the other round boy stuck up for her. She crossed her arms defiantly at this 'Gendry' person but he turned to look past his portly friends. "Drogo, you mind if she joins in?"

"No," the deep voice said. Arya jumped back when she noticed the huge man sitting in the shadow, unsure how she missed His Giantness from across the room. His answer sounded like a refusal but the two boys smiled at each other like they won something.

"There, it's settled." A handsome boy with a dusky skin tone grabbed a chair and walked it over to Arya while the boys who spoke up for her scooted to make room. Gendry gave her one more glare before rolling his eyes and taking his position at the other end of the table. Feeling badass, Arya audibly dragged the chair over to Gendry's side and sat down right next to him with a wry smirk.

"Teach me your ways, Obi Wan." Arya grinned at Gendry - who grumbled and handed her a sheet of paper with a pen. "Thank you, kindly, milord," she sang. He furrowed his brow and shook his head.

"No, I'm no lord," he scowled and pointed a finger at his chest. "Level 5 Human Blacksmith: wielder of the Hammer of Ancients." Arya nodded - a bit dazed by the authority he was speaking with. "Rather than explaining the game to you, create a character and play with us." It surprised that he was suddenly so inclusive. "Everyone, introduce your characters so she can get the idea. Drogo?"

"Level 4, Half-orc Barbarian." Apparently, giant dude Drogo was clearly a chatterbox. Gendry waved his hand at Drogo, as if telling him to go on and give a few more details. Arya didn't personally go for the whole 'tall, dark, and handsome' thing - this guy made it downright creepy. "The Undefeated," he added after an awkwardly long pause. Okeydokey.

"I'm Torgo," The young man with a dark complexion gave Arya a shy pretty smile. "My character is 'Grey Worm, the Unsullied'. Level 5, Psychic Warrior... oh, and High Elf."

"Rick Payne, nice to meet you." Rick was a bit nondescript after a colossus like Drogo and a beauty like Torgo - they should totally start a band. "Around this table I'm called Pod Pipkins: Half-Elf Cleric of the Deity Sehanine. Level 5, Drinker of Ale, and Glutton of Hot Pie's cuisine." He clapped a hand on shoulder of the portly boy next to him who had a mop of brown curls on his cherubic face.

"Hot Pie." The second boy who stood up for Arya introduced himself. Was that his character's name? "Level 4 Dwarf Fighter and Master of Cooking. I make a stew out of giant spider haunches like you wouldn't believe." He's right, she didn't believe it. Arya still hadn't made up her mind if this was the best use of her time but it was rare that anything held her attention this long.

"And what about you, smiles?" She directed her question to the first one of the group who accepted her. "What's your name and who is your character."

"I am Sam," he answered with a slight blush, "and would be a wizard if I wasn't already the Dungeon Master. My job is to present the story to the adventurers and act as a moderator of sorts," he explained. "Everyone reacts to the situations I create, and the effectiveness of their actions are based on rolling one or more dice. It's a fair bit more complicated than that but it's more fun to pick it up as you play."

"Alright, I'm game, deal me in." Arya was willing to give it a shot, besides these were the first people she actually talked to since she started school. Unless yelling counted as talking, which she didn't think it did. "Wait! Just checking - we're all skipping and breaking the rules right?" Everyone around the table nodded again, some a little wary of her bluntness.
"Not me," Sam smiled sheepishly. "I only have one credit left before graduating. I'm currently taking three separate art classes, trying to stretch out the year." Arya threw her head back and cackled with laughter, she really liked Sam a lot. He was going to be her best friend, she decided. "So, back to the game. The first thing you have to do is create a character, if you could be anyone who would you be?"

"Well, I'm already incredibly awesome," she made a show of brushing her shoulders off. "I want to be sneaky like a cat - like an assassin!" Sam nodded, writing down something on her piece of paper. "Also! I want a wolf that will fight with me and follow my commands." This was getting pretty fun, she always dreamed of growing up to be an assassin beastmaster. Sansa would call her stupid for wasting time playing this game, which made it even better.

"Alright," Sam finished scribbling on the page. "How does this sound? You would be an adventurous Halfling, small in stature but very quick. You wear a dark tunic, breeches, and a cloak so that you can fade into the shadows, and your hiding skills are exceptional. You'll be a Ranger, I think you'd be partial to the bow and arrow, and when you make it to level 4 you can have your very own wolf companion."

"Great," she grinned around the table at her new friends, "just call me 'Arry Wolfborn'."

"You are alone in a small bare chamber," Sam's voice lulled her into the story. "You see nothing but a large ironbound chest. It is big enough for a man to fit inside and bears an iron lock. The floor has a layer of undisturbed dust upon it..." Arry glanced around the dark room, tightening her fingers around her dirk's hilt.

Not knowing how she came to be in the narrow space, escape did not seem an option as there was no door. The chest itself appeared non-descript, she approached it and inspected a blurred inscription. Unable to read it, she tugged on the lock and the lid flew open! A swirling cloud of black fog gusted around her head, whipping her short hair into her eyes. Laughter, dark and mocking, filled her ears... or was it inside her mind?! Then the storm ended as quickly as it began, just in time for the wall opposite the chest to burst open.

"You fool!" Gendry roared, stepping over the rubble he created with his warhammer. It hung heavy and menacing from his powerful hands. He removed his polished steel helmet, shaped like a bull, to reveal a snorting red face beneath it. "We've been chasin' that bloody bastard for a fortnight!" He pointed his weapon, lifting its bulk without effort, with threatening intent straight at her head. "And you go and free him!"

"I didn't know," she shouted back, trying to brush past the rude human and his companions but he held out his hammer to block her way.

"How do we know you're not in cahoots with that dark wizard?" He narrowed his bright blue eyes at her, glittering with murderous spite. Arry scoffed at his accusation - she didn't have time for this. Quick as a shadowcat she drew her bow and aimed it at his unprotected temple.

"Get - out - of my way," she threatened. Gendry smirked, looking her tiny frame up and down with a snort of derision.

"Anybody ever tell you to pick on people your own size?" Gendry look a step towards her, aiming the arrow directly at center of his steel breastplate. His armor appeared in immaculate condition and expertly crafted, too strong for her arrows to pierce.

"Then I'd never get to pick on anyone," she taunted, pulling the arrow back another fraction of an inch - Arry refused to back down. The High Elf stepped forward to put a gloved hand on Gendry's
shoulder. His lightweight leather armor was all black and draped in an open black hooded robe that billowed around him.

"Please," Grey Worm's calm voice appeared to cool Gendry's temper, "I can sense her uncertainty and fear-"

"I'm not afraid," she cut him off, unwilling to let herself be painted as some helpless little girl. Other races always saw Halflings as children - made going to get a pint at the tavern mighty troublesome!

"She did not know the contents of the chest," Grey Worm continued, "I can sense no dishonesty from her."

"I could've told you that," Arry relaxed her bow. "I have no idea how I even got here - or even where 'here' is."

"We're in the Lightstone Stronghold." Pod explained as he approached, garbed in a simple robe concealing light armor. "We chased Warlock Brawlis the Wrathful here, after he stole the Ordovician Staff." Arry raised an eyebrow at the Cleric's meaningless words and he blushed before stammering. "It allows the owner to breathe underwater, but causes great pain when used."

"Sounds like a real treasure," she quipped, earning another scowl from the blacksmith.

"It is: if you need to breathe underwater," a little red vein was popping out of his forehead and Arry had to fight the urge to poke it. Gendry opened his mouth to probably berate her some more when they were interrupted.

"We waste time," the giant shadow looming in the background was not even noticed by Arry - who prided herself on being sneaky! The barbarian clad his muscular body in heavy furred iron armor but kept his arms bare.

"Hot Pie," Gendry groaned, "was kidnapped by a bunch of mermaids who fell in love... with his cooking." He swung his hammer over his shoulder and scowled at her. "We needed the bloody staff to get him back!"

"Ah," she rubbed a hand through her hair, "and I mucked it up, didn't I?" Arry squared her shoulders and made eye contact with each of them - including the creepy guy in the back. "I will make it right, on my honor as a Wolfborn. I will go with you to retrieve the staff and help you save your friend."

"That's mighty generous, milady," Gendry sarcastically sneered, "we can handle it on our own."

"Actually..." Pod looked like he'd rather do anything else besides contradict Gendry - the clear leader of the group. "If Brawlis went back to the Tower of Shadows, a little Halfling could sneak in and take the staff from under his nose."

"Oh, just that easy," she wasn't so convinced. "What's the catch?"

"She can't do it-" Gendry never got to finish his sentence and Arry had nothing to do with it.

"Hot Pie is our COMRADE!" Drogo's face flushed with terrifying anger. "We go save him now - she comes." He turned his massive body around and ducked under the crumbled wall and into a hallway. Arry realized her earlier mistake - Gendry wasn't the leader of this group after all. The hall opened into a massive cavern with pale stalactites, like icicles dripping diamonds. The rock formations glittered with ribbons of some kind of reflective metallic sediment.

"How are we going to get to this 'dark tower' place?" Arry marveled as the beautiful cave opened
into a marble fortress built into the face of The White Mountain of Lightstone. It formed a massive shimmering structure from base to spire. Pod laid a hand on her shoulder and pointed up at the inky dark tip of the mountain.

"Brawlis is proud of his magic tricks," the Cleric's finger traced down the side of the mountain to the winding staircase carved into the side. "He just took the easy way up." Arry gaped at the insurmountable trek ahead.

"Even better," Gendry smirked and jerked his head up at the peak. "The steps don't go all the way: you'll have to climb the last of it."

"Then that's exactly what I'm going to do." Arry pushed past Gendry and caught up to Drogo, already taking the steps three at a time.

"We cannot go with you, Wolfborn." His deep voice rumbled and echoed off the white stone of the fortress. "Get out if the danger is too great."

"It's a slice of elderberry pie," she waved a hand in dismissal of the giant's worries. "I'm as quiet as a cat - no one will even notice I stopped by." They hoofed it up the steps, which abruptly ended in a steep drop and climbing became the only way to continue. She peered up at the black spire, surrounded by clouds tossing out purple bolts of lightning. Then she looked down over the edge of the endless precipice. "Maybe not so easy..."

"Show us how sneaky you can be, milady," Gendry gave her a lazy grin and a nod of encouragement. She quirked her eyebrows at him with a smirk and he actually blushed and looked away.

"I'm no lady," she declared, setting her foot in the first foothold up the mountain peak. As she climbed, the smooth rock beneath her hands and feet became rougher and jagged. A few times, she almost slipped but Arry finally made it to the swirling black clouds surrounding the mountain peak. It turned out to be neither a peak nor a mountain at all - it was a dormant volcano! The very tip was open, creating a perfectly Halfling-sized opening into a bottomless darkness below.

"Fear cuts deeper than swords," she muttered to herself before shifting her body over the edge to hang by her hands. There was no way to descend the smooth inside of the volcano - so only one way down. "Old Gods, protect me," Arry never found much cause to pray but this seemed as good a time as any to start. She let go... and landed on solid rock, tucking and rolling to soften the landing. With no permanent damage done, she jumped to her feet and hugged her body to the wall in the shadows. The whole cavity was in shadow, only lighting up with eerie purple light with every lightning flash, revealing a hatch in the center of the floor. She crept towards the door, avoiding a pressure plate in her path and bent to slowly open it. A loud creak from the hinges made her freeze, straining her ears to listen beyond the endless storm above. A ladder led further down into a narrow cave lit by only a few torches, and looked the opposite of the beautiful cavern below.

Jagged onyx stalagmites covered the floor and poked the soles of her boots if she did not focus on each and every step. Rocks and gravel beneath her made the ground unsteady and each footfall announced her approach. Arry followed the wizard's tracks deeper into the cave, straight to a hallowed out portion arranged like a ritual burial chamber. As she peered into the eerily silent cavernous chamber, a sense of foreboding tingled up her spine. She crept into the room, toward a large altar that contained only two items.

The skull featured intricate symbols and runes she could not begin to decipher, beside it lay the staff she sought. Carved from white driftwood, with a slight bluish tint in the grain and a deep cobalt
gemstone embedded in the center. Arry reached out to grab the staff and dash away but could not shake the feeling... those empty sockets were watching her. For some reason, her hand diverted towards the grinning skull.

On gut instinct, she walked around the room and gulped as the fleshless head slowly turned to watch her. Worth a shot, she stripped off her dark brown cloak and draped it over the depthless sockets watching her. Victory within grasp, Arry grinned as she curled her fingers around the staff. Mocking laughter filled the chamber, echoing off the walls and stopping her heart cold. Her cloak rose up over the altar, a black cloud of smoke curling out from under it and taking shape - she didn't stick around to find out what.

Arry flew out of the room as fast as her little feet could carry her, not bothering to avoid the jagged rocks beneath her soft leather boots. She clutched the staff tightly in both hands and stumbled as the ground shifted under her feet. The sharp stalagmites pierced through the ground and rose toward the ceiling. With no plan whatsoever, she leapt over a rising spire just as it pierced a wooden rung on the rope ladder just in time. She rode the growing rock to the top and slammed the door shut. A whistle from above caught her attention - a flash of lightning lit up Gendry's cocky grin.

"Need a hand, milady?" He shook the rope lowered down and she quickly tied the staff to it and then held on tight. "Ready?!" The door burst open and a black fog spilled up into the cavern, the harsh laughter seemed to come from everywhere at once.

"Pull me up, godsdammit!" She yanked hard on the rope as she barked the command.

"Alright boys: together, heave!" Gendry and the others pulled her up just a fraction faster than the rising fog followed her.

"Incite Agricola quam elegant isomer deicer!" The wizard's voice rasped a whisper into her ear, lulling her to sleep. Arry never felt the ground after she fell and darkness surrounded her. She awoke inside a cramped container, knowing she could only be in one place - the ironbound chest! She shrieked and screamed but no one came to help her... The first bell rung.

"Wulp, that's it!" Hot Pie jumped out of his seat, happy as a clam even though he never even got to play his role.

"Wait a minute!" Arya stood and held her hands up to stop everyone from collecting their belongings. "It was just getting good!"

"That's how Sam works it," Pod shrugged with a smile, "he always leaves us hanging." He walked around the table to pat her on the back. "You did good. We'll be back next week, don't you worry."

"Next 'week'?!" Arya slumped back into her chair in defeat. "I can't wait a whole week in that damned chest." Gendry chuckled next to her, shoving his D&D books into his backpack. "You guys are horrible," she sulked, "going off to save Hot Pie and leaving me."

"Hey, now!" Hot Pie sniffed. "I've been wiff those merfolk for a lot longer 'an you've been in that chest." Arya nodded, still sulking from her embarrassing capture. "You comin' ta class, Gendry?"

"Nah," he answered, "I'll ditch today and head over to the forge." Gendry pulled out a red baseball cap and slicked back his unruly black hair to put it on and twist it backwards.

"Ooooh," she leaned into his vision, "what's 'the forge'?"

"What's it sound like?" Gendry rolled his eyes, "it's a forge: you know, smithing weapons and whatnot."
"That - is - amazing." Arya latched onto his arm and noticed for the first time he wore a metal linked bracelet. "Like this?" She held onto his wrist to inspect the chainmail accessory with rapt interest. Gendry yanked his arm away and stood to finish zipping his bag while ignoring her. "Please, take me to see it!" She rubbed her hands together in a begging pose and he glared down at her for a moment before reluctantly nodding his consent. "YES!" She jumped up from her chair and slung her back over her shoulder.

"Pain in my ass," he muttered as he passed her on the way to the door but Arya ignored his bad attitude. She was way too excited at the prospect of seeing a real gods-to-honest forge - and maybe even play with some weapons! This move to Kings Landing seemed like complete bullshit before but now that she found her kind of people, it might not be so bad.

Chapter End Notes

Got a little bit carried away there, didn't I? Thanks for the commenters who helped with my Spanish in the last chapter - BIG help. With DnD, I upfront confess I've only ever played one game and am much more interested in the high-fantasy lore and drama of storytelling. Ergo... fanfic.

Next up: Gendry POV! Chillin' in the forge ;3 I love me a nerdy hottie with a body. I think I should have them go to a Renaissance fair date later on...

Why can't I write meet-cutes where the femlead doesn't clumsily run into the malelead? Gotta remedy that nonsense!
GENDRY

Even though she dressed like a boy, talked like a boy, and acted like a boy: Arya was definitely not a boy. Gendry unintentionally felt more than enough to know for sure, under her baggy clothes she was full-on female. That too-close-for-comfort mishap was plenty of reason not to spend any time more with her, but the annoying girl was resolute to a fault. She followed on his heels, keeping up even though he was taking longer strides to shake her. Nothing he did deterred her from following and asking endless questions about nothing and everything.

Gendry struggled to ignore Arry's chatter, wondering for the hundredth time why he agreed to let her tag along. His distraction caused him not to notice a teacher walking right towards them until too late. In a shit attempt to play it cool, he just kept walking and hoped they looked like they were on their way to class. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck as they moved ever nearer to the authority figure.

"Do you have a hall pass?" The unremarkable middle-aged woman pushed her thick glasses over her weary eyes. She knew they didn't have passes but still gave them a chance to explain themselves. That's a quality educator right there: willing to help students perfect the fine art of lying through their teeth.

"Uh..." Gendry scrambled to invent some brilliant excuse and came up with squat. "Ah!" Arya suddenly latched onto his hand and yanked him down another hallway. The teacher called after them but he couldn't hear over the sound of raucous laughter and quick footfalls. This girl was made of pure energy: it traveled from her fingers grasping his hand, and straight into his thundering heart. Her devil-may-care role-playing impressed him and it seemed she lived her life the same way.

He stumbled behind as she dragged him down the hall, cutting sharply down several turns until they burst though the main doors. Gendry, still shocked they were holding hands, led her to the side lot where he parked his car. They were in no danger of being caught but Arya slid across the hood of his beat-up Lincoln like they were in a buddy cop movie. She performed the action as if she was born to do it: laughing the whole time until she yanked open the door bigger than her and hopped in.

"Drive," she ordered loudly, pointing a slender finger forward.

"Yes, milady," he answered with a grin: and away they went. They chatted about music, since the radio didn't work and his car only had a tape player. Most of the bands she mentioned he never heard of but she said she liked it that way. Gendry felt embarrassed to admit he liked classic rock because his mom did and Arya told him she thought that was 'really cool'. He never met a girl like her before, one he could actually talk to without breaking out into hives. It was a short drive to Kings Forest National Park and since it was the middle of the day, he got a great spot to park.

"Curiouser and curiouser," she grinned at him as she took off her seatbelt. Gendry watched her use her full body to heave open the heavy door. Usually even guys his size had a hard time opening that stuck door! Arya leapt out of the car with nimble grace and bumped the door closed with her hip: don't think about her hips. He shook his head to break the spell she was casting over him and vacated
the car with a quickness. "Lead the way, Mr. White Rabbit - where's your Wonderland?"

"This way," he marched ahead to the secret path only he and his friends knew, briefly considering blindfolding her. Nah, then he'd have to hold her hand again and it was still tingly and warm from their sprint through the hallways. "You're a freshman, right?"

"Yeah, what of it?" Arya walked quickly to match his strides and eyed him sideways. A few times, Arya's hand or arm brushed against his as they walked alongside each other. For him, the contact sent bolts of lightning shooting up his arm: she didn't seem to notice at all.

"I'm thinking it might be kinda dumb," Gendry laughed and shook his head for being so bloody stupid. "To help you skip school and leave campus."

"Pish!" She waved her hand in dismissal and jumped lightly over a large stone jutting up from the ground. It reminded him of how Arry rode that spire to run away from Brawlis: damn impressive role-playing, had him on the edge of his seat. "You worry too much," she huffed, "I cause enough trouble without your help - thank you very much."

"I'm throwing you under the bus if we get caught," he warned, only half-teasing. "I'll say you held a gun to my head." Arry guffawed at his threat and left goose-bumps where she slapped his arm with the back of her hand.

"They'll probably believe you," she quipped. Sure, she might say that now but this is exactly the kind of situation he liked to avoid: being alone with a girl. Anything could happen, or nothing, Gendry didn't know which option he disliked more. His neck was getting itchy and he had to focus on squeezing the straps of his backpack so he wouldn't scratch. She never complained about the hike or the heat, just babbled on about the forests back in her hometown.

"This is it," he announced, sweeping a hand in a flourish as the trail opened up to the clearing.

"Wow!" Arya's big grey eyes somehow grew even larger and Gendry felt pretty damn pleased she was so fascinated. "This is brilliant!" She ran into the clearing, dropping her bag on the ground, up to the mostly historically accurate medieval forge.

"You should be impressed: it took the last three years to get it looking this good." Gendry walked up behind her, keeping careful watch as she poked and stroked over every inch of the forge. Arry didn't care a whit if she got her hands dirty, wiping them on her faded and worn clothes. She whirled around, the motion ruffling her short hair, astonishment all over her elfin features.

"You did this all yourself?" She waggled her head like she couldn't believe it and then spun on her heel again to pace around the forge. Arya walked, leaning forward with her hands clasped behind her back: all she needed was a pair of Groucho Marx glasses and a cigar.

"All of the guys have helped in one way or another," he set his backpack down by the forge and crouched to unzip it. "I based the design on old medieval forges and it's been mostly trial and error." Gendry grabbed his lunch and his water bottle and waved to get her attention. Once her grey eyes trained on him, he cocked his head toward the shady oak tree. "Come on, let's eat first: I'm starved."

"Ah!" Her startled cry made him to turn around to see a look of pure dismay on her usually cocky features. "Ugh - I brought lunch money, not actual food." Arya shrugged and made her scowl-smirk expression, scrunching her nose: he never saw that look on anybody else. "It's cool - I can just eat a lot at dinner." She caught up to him and they both sat in the shade while he cracked open his lunch bag.
"Here," he held out half of his ham and cheese and she eyed the triangle with predatory focus. "Go on," he encouraged like she was an untamed animal, "take it." Arry snatched the food out of his hand and Gendry watched her devour the half sandwich in three bites and lick every one of her fingers.

"Not that this isn't amazingly badass," she wiped her mouth on the front of her shirt, revealing just a flash of her stomach. Gendry grabbed his water bottle and gulped the cool liquid as she continued oblivious to his sudden discomfort. "But it must have been a lot of work and you'll be leaving it when you graduate." He recapped the bottle with a sigh and forced himself to answer her never-ending questions.

"That's still more than another year from now." In truth, he thought of little else since the school year started: next year he would be too busy looking for colleges to keep up the forge. "I hoped someone would want to take over after I graduate."

"I'm a freshman," she reiterated the irksome fact, "I could be your apprentice."

"You have to be strong to be a blacksmith, milady." Gendry knew she was strong, but it wasn't just arm strength that a blacksmith needed. Patience remained the true skill of the trade, smithing could be tedious with a lot waiting and even more failure.

"I'm stronger than I look," she insisted, pounding her fist on her knee. On both of her jean legs, the knees were completely ripped out and he could see scrapes and scars on her pale skin. "Kimosabe, teach me your ways." Arya folded her fingers together and tucked them under her chin, making her eyes open so wide they sparkled. They should change the expression from 'puppy-dog eyes' to 'Arry-wolf eyes'. That's what she looked like: a wide-eyed innocent wolf pup... just waiting for her fangs to grow in.

"On three conditions: you can't cry..." he paused while she sorted at the mention of crying. "And you can't fall in love with me-" Arry burst into laughter, doubling over to flop on the ground and shaking with the force of her amusement.

"Oh," she panted to catch her breath, "I think I can promise those two things will never happen!" Gendry gritted his teeth at her overreaction and pretended it didn't completely deflate him.

"Last: the forge is and always will be a secret." Gendry narrowed his eyes on her in all seriousness, held out his hand, and extended his pinky finger. "Promise?" She quirked a thin dark brow at his stretched little finger and raised her mischievous eyes to smirk at him.

"Pinky promise?" Arry did a cocky little head jiggle as she questioned his methods: her first mistake after asking to become his apprentice.

"You think I won't break it because you're a girl?" Gendry waiting for her to rise to his challenge, something he noticed she liked to do.

"Let's do this," she bumped her tiny fist against his and locked her itty-bitty pinky with his. Seriously, how did she do anything with such impossibly small and dainty hands? Then she crooked her linked finger and Gendry winced in pain, remembering how freakishly strong she was. He yanked his hand away as soon as the deal was made, surprised he wasn't getting used to the 'shock' of touching her. If anything, the sensation just got stronger every time their skin made contact! Arry acted utterly unaware: she had to notice how on-edge he was.

"Alright," he stood, pulling off his t-shirt to make the day's heat a bit more bearable. "The first thing you gotta know about smithing is-"
"Whoa!" Her exclamation drew his attention back to her, catching her gaping at his revealed arms before she put up her own arm in a muscle pose. "Maybe I'm not strong enough." Arya poked her small but defined bicep with a glum expression.

"No backing out now, you pinky promised." Gendry smoothed a palm down the front of his undershirt, feeling self-conscious.

"Damn - the unbreakable pinky promise," she rolled her eyes. "That shit is a binding legal contract." Arya put her hands to her hips and looked him over head-to-toe. "You might look big, but I've got the heart of a warrior," she pounded a fist over her heart with gusto. "Give me the biggest hammer you got!" Gendry grinned and squatted in front of the forge to pull out a pair of pliers and wave them at her. "That's not a hammer," she pouted.

"I'm gonna teach you a little something about patience, Arry," Gendry gathered the supplies he needed and walked over to the oak tree to set them in the shade. "A little caution might've helped if you'd taken the time to realize Brawlis set a trap for you."

"Please," she made a disgusted sound in the back of her throat, "I got the staff, didn't I?"

"Yeah," he chuckled, "now we can go save Hot Pie, and then figure out how to save you."

"Are you really coming back for me?" Her thick lashes lowered, revealing a softer side to the wild rebellious girl, as she stared at his feet. "Or did I end up trapped so I wouldn't want to come back?" Arya pushed her narrow shoulders forward and pursed her lips in contemplation before meeting his eyes. "I know most people find me a 'nuisance'."

"We're coming for you Arry," he assured her, feeling guilty about how abrasive he was after she first stumbled in. "As long as you sit around the table with us, we'll always come for you." Then Arya smiled and he remembered exactly why he tried to chase her out: his heart can't take all this racing and stuttering! From the second she tripped into him, he knew she could only cause trouble and so far that was turning out to be truer than he could've guessed.

"Wild horses couldn't drag me away," she replied with a beaming smile. Arya's expressions and body language were nothing like he'd seen from other girls, or boys for that matter. She truly was 'one of a kind' and if he wasn't careful... she could take over his life with a snap of her petite fingers.

"You wanted to know how I made this?" Gendry held up his wrist and jingled the chainmail cuff, changing the subject. She nodded eagerly and followed him down to the ground as he took a seat and opened the box of chainmail supplies. "Use the scissors to cut and the pliers to bend the rings, linking them together like this." He provided a demonstration, starting the first link in the chain that would become her first step into Blacksmithing: Level 1.

"This is going to take forever," she stared into the box of supplies like she hoped there was fire hidden somewhere inside.

"Do this first: then you get to use the forge." Gendry had his doubts about her showing up to either the game or this forge ever again. She might find something more interesting to fill her time tomorrow and he'd never see her again. "Unless you don't think you can do it..."

"I can do it!" Arry took the bait and snatched the pliers out of his hand to get to work. "I'll make a bracelet just like yours," she promised, "and then you teach me the good stuff."

"As you command, milady." Gendry left her, struggling with the first few links, to set up the forge and continue with his latest protect.
"Stop calling me that!" Arry growled in frustration, putting him in a good mood for some reason as he set to work. Gendry heated the forge, set out his tools, put on his apron: all the while feeling watched. As subtle as he could, he peeked at her to catch her obviously glancing away, looking up into the trees, and putting a hand to her chin. Sure, he just caught her deep in thought about something... What a bizarre girl: plays D&D with a bunch of strange guys, then hops into the car of someone she just met to hang out with him while he forges!

Everyone always told him his standards were too high but there she was, Arya: the girl of his dreams. And Gendry had no bloody clue what to do with her! If he somehow managed to convince her to go on a date with him, what if he messed it up after? He'd be crushed and never date again in his whole life. Say it went well: he'd have to go to local college because a long distance might break them up. And then they'd get married when she turns eighteen, after a few years have maybe two... three kids tops.

Gendry dragged in a ragged breath as he started cleaning out the cast with a wire brush. He snuck another peek at her and watched her lick her lips in concentration. Yep, he was in it deep: 'trouble' with a capital 'A'.

Chapter End Notes

I had to keep him a blacksmith - I HAD to. Poor Gendry is straight-up smitten as a kitten and completely terrified. Honestly, can you blame him? Arya is pretty freaking awesome.

Ready for more Sansa POV? Wanna meet the Kings High Volleyball team?!
Practice Makes Perfect

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Practice Makes Perfect

SANSA

She made it just in time for volleyball practice, having to jog a bit around the gym to find the girl's changing room. Inside, the team was already getting ready and Sansa thought it awkward just walking in and announcing herself. Her eyes searched to find a quiet corner to set down her bag and start changing. Of course, the girls all noticed her right away and one of them walked over to her with a toothy grin.

"Hiya, you must be Sansa?" The girl was wearing white panties and a grey sports bra and Sansa was unused to seeing strangers so undressed. Her old team always showed up to practice already dressed. The nearly naked girl was thin but wiry, athletic and defined with wild flaming red hair and a dusting of freckles all over her body. "I'm Ygritte Freefolk," she pointed a finger with black chipped polish on the nail at herself, "senior and team captain. Coach told me to expect you."

"Yeah, I am Sansa Stark," she held out her hand and received a firm handshake, "nice to meet you." Introduction over, she began undressing to change, fighting the instinct to hide her body. None of the other girls seemed ashamed of their various states of undress and she did not want to seem like a prude. Another dark-haired girl with and a sweet crooked smile walked up to stand beside Ygritte. She waved hello shyly as the captain hooked an arm around the girl's shoulders.

"This here is my cousin and best friend, Gilly Freefolk," the captain introduced. She pointed at another girl pulling on her clothes "Over there is the co-captain, Yara Greyjoy." The co-captain looked up to scowl at Ygritte and pulled a jersey over her head with a growl. "She's always testy the practice before a game - it's her 'thing'." The tough-looking Yara emphasized Ygritte's point by punching the metal locker and storming out.

"I'm Irri Khal," a lovely dark-haired girl approached as Sansa was pulling on her own gym shorts she brought from home. She discreetly admired and envied the way Irri filled out her red uniform. "Over there is Jeyne Poole," a willowy girl lacing up her shoe looked up to offer a shy smile and a wave. A tanned gorgeous young woman ran into the locker room, ripping off her shirt and running past Ygritte who rolled her eyes.

"And Talisa," Ygritte scowled at the beauty. "The best on the team but is so focused on getting into a good medical school she misses every other practice!" The captain threw her hands up in mock disgust and left Sansa to finish dressing. Confident she was getting along with everyone, she started to feel excited about this tryout. Honestly, she was already starting to feel like part of the team! She grabbed her pink parka and water bottle and followed the team to the gym.

Walking out to the court, Sansa saw coach Tarth set up the net and had a whole mesh buggy cart full of volleyballs just waiting to be served. A sense of overwhelming 'belonging' washed over her and calmed her nerves. Everywhere else in the world, Sansa is just a meek, gangly, teenaged girl with no real power or sense of self. With a volleyball in her hands... she can make magic happen. Coach blew her whistle to start practice and held up a coin.

"HEADS!" Yara cracked her neck and stretched out one arm across her chest, a fierce scowl of
"Alright," coach Tarth flipped the coin and nodded at Ygritte, "Gritt, split 'em up." The captain gave back a mock salute and ran to pick up a bundle of colored practice jerseys off the top of the buggy of volleyballs. The team took their positions as they received their designations, six players on each side of the net. Sansa received the second to last yellow jersey, and the captain winked at her before pulling the very one last over her head.

"We redheads have to stick together," Ygritte grinned and grabbed a ball as she jogged over to the other side of the net. "Think fast, Stark!" Sansa caught the volleyball and moved into position to serve first. Bouncing the ball once, she sucked in a breath and balanced on the balls of her toes. Bounce, breath, balance... serve. She threw the ball up. POW! The ball sailed over the net to be passed from Irri to Talisa, who spiked the ball back over. Jeyne leapt forward, landing hard on her knee-pads and saved the spike but passed it back to no one!

Sansa went for the dig, diving behind Ygritte and Jeyne, and bumped her fist against the bottom of the spinning volleyball. It bounced off her hand and went sailing towards the net, just in time for Gilly to bump the ball over the net. The captain, in a breathtaking display of athleticism, attained an Olympic-worthy vertical jump. She leapt just in time to punch the ball straight down, counterattacking Yara's defensive block. First Point!

As Jeyne helped her off the ground, Sansa realized this team was much better than the one she left and planned to stop at nothing to join it. An athlete can only improve their skills if they train with those who are better! Practice continued at a whirlwind pace; their team made it to 15 points first, only three ahead. Coach Tarth blew her whistle and the team walked to the side of the court to huddle up.

"Most of you know, I don't like to tire the team out in the practice before a game," she held a clipboard in one hand and crossed her arms. "This is the first of the year, so I expect my starting players to be well rested and ready to..."

"CRUSH THEM!" The team all cried in unison, making Sansa jump.

"That includes you," coach looked at her with a half-smile, "Ms. Stark."

"Me?!" Sansa resisted the urge to do her point victory dance as the information processed through her brain. She made the team!

"I need someone who can fill Talisa's position this week." Coach Tarth nodded at Talisa, who gave an awkward wave. "Are you up to it?"

"Yes, coach!" Sansa beamed with happiness and pride that she played well enough to serve as a starting replacement for one of the best players! Whoo-hoo! She saved the victory dance for when she was alone in her bedroom. The first day passed in a delightful whirlwind... meeting Clegane and making volleyball the team!

"Alright, ladies!" Ygritte winked at Sansa as she tossed her jacket and water bottle to her. "Let's hit the showers!" A tittering chatter rose from the team as they broke apart into their sub-cliques. The nameless freshmen bench-warmer scampered to clean the gym and Talisa sprinted to the locker room. Everyone else strolled at a leisurely pace into the hall and chatted about classes and boys. One rather large boy still loomed in the back of her mind. Pinpricks of irritated fascination compelled her to uncover his name.

It would be far too awkward if word got back to him that she had been asking questions... the last
thing the ‘the hound’ needed was an ego boost. Sansa felt a moment of brilliant inspiration when she thought of looking him up online; 'Clegane' is not a common last name. If he was one of those weird people who have no online identity then she could always find the yearbook in the library! She felt like a regular Sherlock Holmes, without all the addiction problems, and vowed to solve this mystery by week's end!

"Yo, hound!" The captain's voice jerked Sansa out of her thoughts and she scanned the hall for a particular towering figure. "You lost?"

"Sup, Gritty?" He leaned against the wall in jersey shorts and sleeveless tank, a basketball pinned between his forearm and hip. Most of the volleyball team, especially the freshmen, scampered past him as he grinned horribly at them. "How's it hanging?"

"Longer than you!" Ygritte skipped ahead to stand in front of him, her duffel bag slung over her shoulder. The captain held her own against the hound and Sansa felt an unfamiliar twinge of jealousy rising in her stomach.

"Doubtful," he sneered. The familiar way the pair spoke to each other had Sansa squeezing her water bottle as she watched the horrifying scene. Did he have a thing for redheads?!

"Don't be a tease, now," Ygritte quirked her brows at him and raked his long length with a lingering leer, which he rolled his eyes at. "You'll be on the court later?"

"Nah," shook his head, "I got things to do." His eyes flickered to Sansa and she felt her cheeks starting to burn.

"I'll take you down," the captain spun on her heel and walked away with a wave, "anytime baby!"

"Sure," he called after her, "when I got time to waste." The hound's dark eyes traveled slowly back to Sansa and alighted on her. "Pajarito," he shoved off the wall, causing the ball to fall and bounce back up into his waiting hand. He caught the basketball palm-down with just the strength of his fingers and turned it over to hold it in both hands. Those were some mighty strong fingers, attached to powerful hands and arms and shoulders... All the way up to stormy eyes that pierced right through her.

"El sabueso," she finally managed to reply. "You are looking for... me?" He snorted as if she asked a stupid question but she did not think it was at all.

"Why else would I still be at school?" He sauntered a little closer, taking in the sight of her volleyball getup. Sansa pulled her jacket tighter and sifted on her feet, feeling naked in the revealing shorts and sports bra. "I should've left hours ago, but I thought about my poor little bird - lying awake all night... thinking about me."

"I will not!" Sansa meant to shout in indignation but it came out a squeak as she studied his basketball shoes.

"You aren't still curious about my name?" He frowned, shrugged, and started bouncing the ball as he turned to walk away. "Alright, see ya!"

"No, wait!" She scuttled into his path and hung her head. "The suspense is killing me, but I really need to get changed because my dad is coming to pick me up." Her last words were barely audible and she wondered where all of her confidence went. Sansa had to admit, off the court she really was a helpless little bird. He moved even closer to smirk down at her with a predatory glare in his eye.

"What you have on now looks fine to me." His eyes seemed to see right through her cover-up and
Sansa felt her blush spreading down her neck.

"Give me two minutes," she begged, glancing up to see his amused expression.

"I'll wait forever for you, little bird." He smirked as she reacted to his words with a gaping stare before snapping her out of her brain fog. Sansa whirled around, clutching her bottle to her chest and dashed into the changing room.

"What is going on-" The captain waggled her red brows as Sansa breezed into the locker room.

"No time to talk!" Sansa attacked her bag on the bench and tugged the jacket off to stuff it inside. "Sorry!" The fabric of her blouse muffled her apology as she pulled it on, followed by her striped skirt. She did not bother to strip her sports bra or shorts. Still wearing her sneakers, they clashed horribly with her outfit; she threw a wave over her shoulder at the team. They all stared at her with varying expressions of shock and some looked positively worried. She pulled her mussed hair into a tight bun and took a deep breath before calmly walking out of the locker room.

"That was fast," he commented, still dribbling his ball with effortless deft skill. Sansa stalked right up to Clegane to stare up into his piercing eyes with her best imitation of her mother.

"Either you tell me your name... or I'm never going to talk to you again." Sansa gave the ultimatum with butterflies flapping up a storm in her stomach but she stood firm.

"I'm hurt - really," he placed one giant hand over his massive chest and pouted like an overlarge child. "I'm wounded for life that you would make such a cruel threat toward me."

"That's just the kind of girl I am," she could not fight the smile tugging on her lips. "Walk with me?"

He nodded to her question and without an invitation, he tugged at the strap of her bag until she released it and he slung it over his shoulder. Sansa led the way to the front of the campus, wishing she could linger at school just a little longer. He lazily dribbled the ball as he walked, sometimes catching it in his hand before letting it fall again.

"How about this..." He tossed the ball up in the air to catch it one handed and toss it behind his back into his other hand. "I give you my name and you give me a song?"

"I... uh..." Sansa was not so naive that she did not know he was using 'song' as a euphemism for intimate relations. Panicked, she wondered if she gave him the wrong idea about what kind of girl she was.

"Kidding," he scoffed, "I really have got shit to do." Clegane ran a lazy raking gaze over her disheveled appearance with appreciation. "I just wanted to see you again - in case I dreamed you up."

"You're so..." She waved a hand, trying to think of the right word, "forceful." He raised an eyebrow and Sansa blushed and looked away. "I like it," she confessed.

"Huh," he grunted a laugh, "you're the only one." Not exactly true, Ygritte seemed to like the hound's blunt brashness and she had some of her own to match. They would make a much better
"I wish I could be more like you..." Sansa cut herself off as his eyes widened and he raised his one intact brow. "My game would certainly improve," she explained the half-truth. In reality, every facet of her life could be improved if she would just show more initiative and take more chances. The very notion of speaking whatever came to mind without censoring herself made her cringe.

"I like you the way you are," his intense eyes never left hers, "mi pajarito."

"Could you..." Sansa poked one of the raised gnarled roots with her toe and clasped her hands behind her back. "I don't really mind the nickname, I just..." With more bravery than she felt, she met his eye. "Call my real name, every once in a while, please."

"I can do that, Sansa." The way he growled her name, soft and almost awed, sent chills down her spine. "Do you still want to know my name?" She nodded eagerly and strained forward as he leaned down to whisper. His calloused fingers scraped the soft shell of her ear as he tucked a stray hair in place and her breath caught in her chest. Her heart thundered as his hot breath tickled her ear and his lips almost touched her... HONK-HONK! Sansa jerked away from Clegane, taking several steps back, and whirled her head around.

"Oh!" She spotted the blue sedan pulled up in front of the school. "That's my dad!" Sansa glanced back to the hound to see he had already begun walking away. "Bye!"

"See ya!" His indifferent wave killed her enthusiasm at discovering him waiting for her after practice. She always dreamed of having a boyfriend who waited for her and carried her books... It seemed the hound was not exactly 100% 'boyfriend material'. Sansa gathered up her bag and rushed to the car to meet her father, who eyed her unkempt state with disbelief. "Good for you, honey." His eyes darted into the distance, in the direction the hound headed. "Was that a student?"

"Yes," she answered, "he's on the basketball team."

"Ah, I see." There was a tightness to his expression that made Sansa smile and pat his hand. "I'm glad you are making friends, lemoncake. Just be careful." She had not realized the hound's eye color was just a shade darker grey than her father's eyes. Grey-eyed men were the most handsome, she decided.

"Don't worry, daddy," she beamed, "I am always careful." They both jumped as Arya, breathless and dripping with sweat, yanked open the car door and slid into the back. She seemed to melt down onto the seat, panting and groaning.

"What happened to you?!" Sansa stared at her ridiculous sister, wondering how she always managed to look like she just survived a year in the desert.

"I fought a warlock and became a blacksmith's apprentice," she heaved a heavy breath, "it was a good first day." Father chuckled as he put the car into drive while Sansa groaned at her little sister's wild tales.

"I'm a lucky father," he told them, "to have been blessed with such wonderful daughters."

"It is hard to take that as a complement," Sansa sulked, "considering the company."

"Right back at'cha, sis!" Arya stuck her tongue out at her sister's reflection in the rearview mirror.
"Can you not speak like a normal person?" She turned around to glower at her younger sister.

"Can you not talk like an automated customer service voice?" Arya sneered and slicked back her dampened short hair. "Seriously, grow a personality."

"Girls!" Father abruptly applied the brakes, sending his youngest daughter flying forward. He waited for her to put on her seat-belt and inhaled deeply. "Are we getting Thai or Italian tonight?"

"Thai!" Arya blurted out first.

"Italian!" Sansa quickly shouted her vote.

"Steakhouse it is!" He chuckled as he started driving out of the parking lot and onto the street.

"Aww!" Both girls whined in protest but Father grinned and headed towards his favorite restaurant in Kings Landing.

Chapter End Notes

As per tradition - I know next to nothing about volleyball... I'm not 'athletic' per se. So, you know the drill, tell me what I messed up and I'll try to fix it!

The First Day of School is officially OVER <3 We're cooking with fire now! I think I'll go straight for another Arya chapter... she has a certain blue-eyed blacksmith to annoy :D
Camping

ARYA

The woods at sundown were cast in a heavy orange glow with a hint of blue perched on the treetops. Arya spotted him crouched on the ground a little ways from the forge, appearing to be starting a fire. Gendry heard her approaching and gaped at her in shock before throwing down whatever was in his hand and marching up to her. Hands on his hips, he took in the sight of her sleeping bag and other camping gear and shook his head.

"When I said 'I' was camping out here this weekend: it wasn't an invitation!" Gendry never actually said that she couldn't come, which was as good as an invite to her. In truth, Arya knew she wasn't welcome but the week dragged on without any more D&D or forging. The second day, she waited for him on the hood of his car only to find out he'd be working every day after school that week. That was when he told her of his plan to camp out and forge all weekend and it starting the wheels turning in her head.

"Then why even bring it up, huh?" She cocked her head to the side and stuck out her lower lip. "You gonna have more fun alone?" Gendry frowned at her before closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. Arya almost felt bad - except it was far too amusing to get a rise out of him.

"Without a doubt I'd get more done," he muttered before throwing up his hands in defeat and returned to building the campfire. Arya followed, dropping her stuff near the forge, and walked over to kneel by his side and watch as he coaxed the small fire to life. The pit was circled with large grey stones and in the center stood a teepee of small logs. Gendry leaned towards the firewood, pursing his lips to blow softly toward the base. The flame grew and he sat back on a section of a felled tree trunk near the campfire and heaved a sigh at her. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Master," she shuffled her kneeling position in front of him and curled her fingers together under her chin. "I am but your humble servant." Gendry shifted uncomfortably, Arya moved closer and pressed her hands against his knee. "I do not deserve your guidance... but I will cherish it."

"Go to the seven hells," he spun around to face the other way and Arya hopped up on the log to sit beside him facing the fire.

"Went there once - they kicked me out." Arya leaned back to see a hint of a smile on his attractive lips. Why did she keep thinking about his lips? At least she stopped thinking about his gorgeous blue eyes - oh dammit!

"I don't doubt it," he chuckled before giving her another serious look, "what about your parents?"

"My dad knows I'm sleeping over with a friend," she answered honestly. "He just didn't ask that friend's gender or if I was going to be inside a house." Arya shrugged her shoulders, refusing to take the blame for her father's lax parenting. "I think he was just happy that I even made a friend."

"Well," he scoffed and tilted his head back to shake his head at the heavens, "then that makes it all right then." Gendry turned those fabulous eyes in her direction and Arya fought the urge to sigh at
the way they shined in the firelight. Great - she's become one of those girls who gets all dreamy over a pretty boy's eyes. "Fine, you can stay, but only."

"I know," she raised a hand to cut him off, "I know - no tears, love, or loose tongues." Arya smirked at him and his stupid rules, raising a brow. "I miss anything?"

"I was going to say," he grinned at her, "you gotta shit in the woods." Arya rolled her eyes at the insinuation that she never relieved herself out-of-doors before. She doubted anyone in all of Westeros had marked more trees. Her stomach growled, reminding her of the contents of her satchel so she leapt up off the log to hunt for provisions.

"I was born to shit in the woods," she called over her shoulder as she jogged to her bag, rifling through it until she found what she wanted. "And I raided the fridge before I came." Arya pulled a grocery bag stuffed full of takeout leftovers and held it up to with a game-show flourishing gesture.

"Well done, young grasshopper." Gendry actually looked impressed and for some reason that made her feel... good. Arya reasoned that she should want to please her master - any good apprentice would. It had nothing to do with the way his crooked grin made her want to bite his lips. Was that even 'normal'? Meh, she gave up trying to be that a million years ago.

"Gendry," she called his name but he seemed lost in thought about something before she interrupted him. What had that mussed head of his all twisted? Not her - that's for sure - unless he was dreaming up ways to get rid of her.

"Huh?" He jerked towards her with the strangest expression and ran a hand over his face. "Sorry, Arry, what?" No matter how much he protested, she could tell he liked hanging out with her. He obviously had some deep-seated 'girl issues' that Arya had every intention of overcoming. Sure, she might never get to kiss him - or bite him for that matter - but being his friend was entertaining. Every other aspect of Kings Landing is total shit compared to Winterfell.

"I also raided the liquor cabinet," she presented the bottle with a wide grin. Wolfhound Irish whiskey was cheap and delicious straight, both good reasons to filch it from her dad's office. He was just lucky she didn't touch the Uigeadail - not that a soft-gut like Gendry could handle taking a bite out of Scotland.

"Uhh..." He appeared positively terrified as she walked towards him with a grocery bag of cold takeout and a bottle of whiskey.

"Don't be a wimp," she shoved the bag into his hand and plopped down on the log next to him. "What's a night under the stars without a nip of the good stuff?" Arya held up the bottle as he frowned at it.

"What are you... seven years too young for that?" Gendry attempted to snatch the bottle but she jerked it away. He held out his hand and gave her one of those looks, like he was somehow in charge of her. "Give it here." Tough luck, blue-eyes - nobody gets to tell her what to do.

"Those laws are fascist," she scowled, staring him down. "It's not like it would be my first drink." Gendry turned to his other side to rummage through a small cooler and produced a metal camping coffee cup.

"Pour," he ordered - now that's more like it! Gendry thrust the cup into her hand and snatched the bottle in one quick movement. She tried to grab it back but did not want to risk spilling her double shot. "That's all you're getting and don't argue."
"Thank you, master." Arya beamed at Gendry as she took an appreciative sip of the smooth brown liquor.

"You don't have to call me that," he mumbled, staring at the bottle as if contemplating a life decision.

"I like the way it makes you blush," she teased, taking another long sip of the warming liquid.

"I don't blush," he protested, pulling out another cup and dropping a few splashes for himself. Good for him - he needs to lighten up something fierce - she never met anyone so damn tense before.

"Fine," she smiled over the rim of her cup. "Whatever you say... master." He sniffed the cup and made a surprised but appreciative expression before taking a gulp. His face scrunch up as he swallowed and wheezed a cough away from her, pounding on his chest.

"Bloody hells," he sputtered a bit and wiped his mouth, "this is strong." Gendry took a more hesitant sip and smacked his lips as if trying to decide if he liked it. If she didn't stop thinking about his lips, she might need more than a double shot. "You're parents aren't going to miss this?" Arya did not want to talk about her parents and the way they forced her away from her home, brothers, and everything she loved. They said she 'needed a change' - more like they didn't know how to deal with her. Why couldn't they just appreciate the wild spirit she was instead of always trying to break her?

"They don't notice much of anything these days." Arya tried not to sulk, taking a nice mouthful of the Wolfhound and rolling it over her tongue. "Let's not talk about that - pick something else."

"I'm a fairly boring fellow, milady." He swirled the remaining whiskey in his cup, shrugging his shoulders. "I forge, I play D&D, and that's about it."

"How did you start blacksmithing?" The whiskey warmed her up so she shrugged off the flannel she stole from Robb and basked in the cool night air. When she glanced up to see why Gendry wasn't answering her question, she caught him staring at her. Arya looked down at her cropped top to make sure there was no giant bug or something.

"My mom," he coughed and took another sip of his drink, "is a real history buff, loves making costumes and whatnot." When Gendry spoke of his mother, his eyes lit up and a smile tugged at his lips. "We go to the Renaissance Fair every year since I can remember: I always was fascinated with blacksmithing."

"I've never been to one of those fairs," she admitted, envious of everyone who had cooler parents than her. All mother ever wanted to do was go to the sept to pray and dad worked all the time. "It seems like it would be fun."

"It's the best," he assured her, "I'll take you if you want."

"Cool." Arya needed something to look forward to - everything after the first day at Kings High had been a major disappointment. "It's a date."

"No," he narrowed his brows at her. "Not a date: a 'friend outing'." Arya grinned at his objection to her casual use of a common expression.

"Methinks milord doth protest too much," she teased as he stared into his cup. "Admit it - you like me, don't you?" She poked him in the shoulder, noticing how firm and solid it felt, and he shrugged her off to scoot away. "Com'on!" Arya scooted closer, still poking him in the arm. "You think I'm charming and whimsical and lovely, don't you - don't you?!" He suddenly stood up, causing her to roll forward onto the ground, luckily after she finished her drink.
"I think you've had enough," he stared down at her with his hands on his hips and a genuine expression of concern.

"I've only just begun to drink." Arya pumped her fist straight up into the air and grinned at Gendry. "You just have to catch up." He reached down to curl his strong fingers around her wrist and hauled her to her feet. Woozy from the sudden motion, her feet stumbled and he caught her around the waist before she could pitch over the log and into the fire. They stood frozen, his hot calloused hand wrapped around her waist and her leaning back against his pounding chest. The moment seemed to last forever - then abruptly ended when he yanked his hand and moved away.

"Be more careful," he cleared his throat and went to poke the perfectly good fire.

"You're the one who pulled me up too quick," she accused, sitting astride on the log and leaning forward on her hands.

"You're so tiny," he retorted, "not my fault you weight nothing." And they were back - banter and barbs were how they communicated. It was comfortable hanging out with Gendry, like spending time with her brothers - but not exactly the same.

"Nobody likes a braggart, Gendry!" She grabbed the grocery bag full of refrigerator loot and dug to the bottom for the Chinese boxes. How did they fit so many noodles into such a compact space - some kind of ancient restaurateur secret?

"That's rich," he retorted, "coming from you." Arya opened a box, grabbed a pair of chopsticks, and shoved in a mouthful of noodles - too hungry to keep bantering. She watched as he tended the fire, obviously keeping his distance and trying to avoid her. Damn, Gendry was really cute - and fit too from the look of his arms - far too good-looking for the likes of her. Besides, he already made it perfectly clear that he had no interest in her, which was fine. Just fine and dandy, nothing she wasn't used to.

If a guy wanted to go camping, hiking, backyard wrestling, they called Arya. Nobody ever asked her out on a date or even for a kiss. Never once had she even been kissed by anyone! She knew her weirdness made her undateable but there wasn't a thing she could do about her personality or looks. Why bother painting the barn after it's on fire? Hanging out with Gendry was fun and she got to admire at how nice he looked as he did all sorts of interesting things. Two whole days, she grinned to herself, she'd get to watch him blacksmithing and might even get to swing the hammer herself!

"Get over here before I eat all of this," she grew tired of his behaving like she had cooties or something. Gendry practically jumped every time she touched him, which was funny at first but after a while, it started to sting her pride. "We've got pretty much any kind of takeout you can imagine."

"Italian?" He perked up and took an interest in the bag of grub.

"Does pizza count?" She lifted a freezer bag full of sausage and peppers pizza.

"Pizza always counts," he grinned and rose from the ground, dusting his hands on his jeans. Gendry sat as far away from Arya as he could but she ignored his distance and leaned forward to hand him the food. "Arry, about earlier-"

"Chill, dude," she gulped a mouthful of noodles, "a guy touching my stomach is not a big deal." Arya scuffed the heel of her boot against the ground. "Look - whatever it is you have against girls - I don't care. Just think of me as 'one of the guys'... if that helps." Gendry didn't say anything for a long time, just munched on some pizza and stared off into the forest.
"Why did you come here?" He wiped his hand on his knee and peeked at her sideways.

"I like hanging out with you," she shrugged, "and I don't have anything else to do."

"You're not just 'one of the guys'," he started, "you're my apprentice." Gendry gave her a decisive nod before grabbing the bag of leftovers and depositing it inside the cooler. "And I'm not letting you off easy tomorrow, so you better get to sleep."

"Yes, master!" Arya saluted Gendry and tossed her empty takeout box into the styrofoam container they used for trash. Food left out might attract shadowcats while they slept unprotected under the stars. Real camping - no fancy polyurethane 'tent'. She unrolled her sleeping bag next to his and starting unzipping her jeans.

"Whoa!" Gendry's panicked voice sounded from behind as she toed off her boots to step inside the sleeping bag and let her pants fall from her hips. "What are you doing?!

"I can't sleep with jeans on, stupid." Arya collapsed, snuggled into the soft bedding, and zipped herself inside with a relaxed sigh. "Don't worry, I won't peep on you," she lied. He snorted and stalked off behind the forge, which completely obscured anything worth watching. "Stupid," she grumbled. Why'd he have to be so selfish - would a little peek kill him? Gendry walked back, dressed in an even looser shirt and some gym shorts, and still managed to make it look good.

After putting out the fire, he sat on his sleeping bag, pulled off his boots, and spun around to tuck himself in. Arya squeezed her eyes shut, waiting a safe amount of time before opening them to find him looking at her. Neither said anything for a moment and somehow it didn't feel awkward at all.

"Goodnight, Arya," he whispered.

"Goodnight, Gendry." She watched his eyelashes flutter closed and took the moment to stare at him as much as she wanted. Cute guys - even if they were oddballs themselves - never go for the weird girl. Arya wished she knew who made that rule up so she could hunt them down and kill them. Unrequited crushes weren't really her 'style' so she made up her mind to stop drooling over Gendry and take her own advice. Be 'just one of the guys', even if it really sucked sometimes.

Chapter End Notes

I refused to capitalize 'styrofoam' dammit! I won't do it! I'll Capitalize whatever I want - When I Want - and the spellchecker can Just Shut Up About It!

Ahem. So that's what I'm dealing with. I'll be okay.

The next chapter is going to be a multi-POV: Sandor and somebody completely new... I wonder who? Stay tuned!
After a week away, he was actually glad to be back in Kings Landing: something he never thought would happen when he first moved to the city. He was always a country boy, loved to hunt and ride horses with Uncle Ned and his cousins. Little Arya always begged to tag along and showed up her brothers and him with her skills. When he found out she moved close by and would even be attending the same school he kept an eye out for her all day. As a freshman, she wouldn't be in his classes but every dark-haired girl in the hall looked like her.

Short of going to the administration office to have her called in, he looked everywhere and asked everyone he knew if they heard of her. He made a mental note to call Uncle Ned after school to get her number so they could catch up. Jon rushed to the empty room to meet the guys, shocked to discover the one person he hunted for. Arya sat in his spot next to Gendry, their heads tilted together as he explained something out of a D&D book.

"Arya?!" Even from behind, he recognized her immediately and she whipped around with a grin.

"Jon?!" She leapt up from her seat, knocking the chair back onto the ground.

"What are you-" Jon's words cut off as she barreled into him and smashed him against the door. "Ugh!" He chuckled through the pain and ruffled her short hair. "Good to see you too, Arya." They hadn't seen each other in over a year since he moved to King's Landing but they were always close growing up.

"This is why we can't let girls into the group," Gendry grumbled, setting the chair to rights.

"What girls?" Jon made a show of peering around the room and Arya released her hold to double-tap his arm. "Hey!" He rubbed the tender injured area, disbelieving she got somehow stronger in their time apart.

"I can't believe," she retook the seat next to Gendry, "you're jealous of me hugging my cousin."

"Who's jealous?" Gendry scowled down at her before the expression completely melted. "Cousin?" His eyes flicked between Arya and Jon, a small smile stretched his lips as he nodded his head. "Oh..." Jon eyed them with disbelief: wondering when the most girl-phobic guy he knew got possessive about his cousin.

"Did you have a good trip, Jon?" Sam was always ready with a friendly smile.

"I'm happy to be back," he answered, "what did I miss while away?" Arya heaved a frustrated sigh and scowled at everyone around the table.

"They're going off to save Hot Pie," she whined, "and leaving me at the mercy of that 'braless' dude."

"Brawlis: 'brah-liss!'" Gendry scolded her with that half-smile still curling the corners his mouth.
"He's a warlock and our sworn enemy, show some respect."

"Yes, master." Arya bowed her head in a show of deference.

"Stop calling me that," Gendry moaned as his face flushed red.

"Never," she vowed. Jon watched the scene with a growing suspicion in his gut that something was going on between them.

"It is good you come back, Snow." Drogo actually spoke more than three words: an honor coming from him. "Our group is weak without you."

"Thanks, Drogo." Jon settled in his seat, clearing his mind of his misgivings about Gendry and Arya. "Sam?"

"You awaken in a cabin on a ship after a fragmented nightmare you do not remember," his soft voice set the scene. "The vessel has just pulled into the dock in the early morning hours..." Snow pulled on his grey cloak and rubbed the sleep from his eyes: he never felt rested after a voyage. He packed light, knowing the dock was a hike away from where he agreed to meet his comrades after he settled his business overseas. Unseen by passing sailors, he slipped out of the cabin and onto the deck. Though he had no reason to sneak, practicing his skills could only improve them.

The weather warmed as the sun rose high in the sky so he removed his cloak and stuffed it inside his sack. Snow knew he was getting close when a splash drew his attention to the shoreline, just in time to see a large fin disappear under the surface. He followed the rocky shoreline, making sure to keep a safe distance from the water in case the merfolk were restless. Half a day passed, he only rested once for a meager meal of bread and cheese before he spotted his group's camp.

"Snow," Gendry clapped him on the back as he approached the group, "you're a sight for sore eyes!"

"I can't let a bunch of mermaids kidnap my comrade and get away with it," Snow grinned at his friends. "Pod, did we get it?"

"Right here," he held up the staff, "you should've seen the action that day: she was amazing."

"She?" Snow glanced to Gendry's flushed face for an explanation.

"A Halfling Rouge," he fiddled with his bull helmet as he spoke. "She was tricked into releasing Brawlis from that chest you trapped him in, and then helped us get the staff to make up for it."

"But then," Pod continued, "she was taken prisoner by that warlock fiend."

"Then, it seems we have two people to rescue." Snow held out his hand to take the staff, ready to face the pain and go negotiate with the merfolk.

"No," Drogo approached and took the staff out of Pod's hand. "I will go."

"Drogo," Snow protested, "I have a better chance of convincing them-"

"I will go," he reiterated, already stepping towards the water. As soon as one foot stepped into the water, the giant warrior grunted in pain and shook from head to toe. Snow had witnessed Drogo stabbed, burned, and even run over by a runaway turnip cart but never saw him even flinch in pain. "FOR HOT PIE!" He gave a powerful battle cry as he dove into the water, not resurfacing for some time.
"Don't worry," Grey Worm sat on the shore, calmly meditating. "He has prepared himself for this."

"I wish we could go with him," Pod sulked. And they waited for what seemed like hours before a head surface, gulping in air. "Drogo!" They raced into the water, heedless of any danger that might be on the half-Orc's heels. Instead of danger, they found Hot Pie! His curly hair was matted against his smiling face and he appeared completely unharmed.

"Wulp," he let Snow help him onto the shore while Pod dragged a shivering Drogo. Grey Worm tended to their leader while the rest of them caught up on what Hot Pie got up to with all those merfolk. "It weren't so bad," he told them, "they told me lots of stories and sang songs all the time. But they sure can eat a lot!"

"I'm sorry, Hot Pie," Snow hung his head, "it was my fault you got taken. If I hadn't offered to trade your spider haunch soup for that ballad-"

"Not at'all," he interrupted, "we needed that song to find the secret to locking up Brawlis. At least that bastard is where he should be..." Hot Pie looked between their gloomy faces with growing puzzlement. "What?"

"We'll explain on the way," Gendry told him. "Grey Worm," he called, "can he travel?"

"Yes," Drogo answered for himself, pushing off the sandy soil to stand on shaky feet. "We go now," he set his determined eyes in the direction of the Lightstone Stronghold. Not waiting for an answer, he trudged away from the shore with single-minded determination. Just like their leader: when one of their group needed help, he was ready to bring down the world to save them. Looks like this interesting Halfling made quite an impression on everyone while he was away. Snow couldn't wait to meet her... The bell rung.

"Ugh!" Arya pounded a fist on the table and glared at everyone but Drogo. "All of you better get moving to save me or I'll just join up with Braless. At least he gets shit done!"

"You're welcome to him, milady." Gendry talking to a girl without stuttering, under any other circumstances would be a welcome miracle. But it was Arya he was grinning at, his little baby cousin and that didn't sit right with Jon at all.

"Arya," he interrupted them, "let me walk you to your next class so you can tell me about your character." She beamed at him and nodded in agreement before turning back to Gendry.

"Should I meet you at your car, after school?" She was already going places with him in his car?!

Jon let his backpack fall heavily onto the desk and glared at the guy he used to consider one of his best friends.

"Nah," Gendry gathered his things together, "I have to work today."

"Aww," she whined, "you work every day."

"And that's why I have a car," he pointed out. They bantered: like an old married couple! Was something actually going on between them? Isn't she way too young to even be dating at all? She should at least wait until she got out of high school to even start dating. Jon couldn't watch them grinning at each other and glancing away, it made him literally ill.

"Let's go, underfoot!" Jon headed to the door without even a polite goodbye to his friends.

"Wait!" Arya chased after him, throwing her goodbyes over her shoulder. "Bye, guys - same time next week! You better come save me!" She spun around and grabbed onto the doorway, "or I'll hunt
you all down one-by-one and slit your throats in your sleep." Jon grabbed the strap of her bag and pulled her along, away from Gendry. "What's the rush, buddy?" Her arm wound around his as they walked and she put her head on his shoulder like she used to.

"I just wanted to catch up," he answered in half-truth. "How has the move been so far?"

"At first it was shit," she answered, "then some more shit."

"I hear that: I was miserable when I first came here." Jon remembered those days like it was last week: alone, friendless, and ignored by everyone...

"Until I met the guys," she finished his thought. "They are so cool - it makes perfect sense you chill with them." Arya continued excitedly. "My character is Arry Wolfborn, Halfling Ranger and all-around badass."

"Until you got captured," he teased and she stuck her tongue out. "I'm a little surprised they accepted you so quickly without being introduced."

"Why? Because I'm a girl?" Arya's question was hard to answer: the group never decreed 'no girls' but there had to be a reason there weren't any. "Gendry tried that bullshit, but I set him straight."

"So... you and Gendry?" Jon glanced down to her puzzled expression. "Is there something between you?"

"What?" She wrinkled up her nose and rolled her eyes. "You and Hot Pie - is there something between you?" Arya snorted and bobbed her head from side to side. "Yeah - friendship."

"Good," Jon sighed in relief before catching her annoyed expression. "I mean: Gendry is a good friend to have." His baby cousin was nowhere near ready to start dating and especially not a guy about to turn eighteen. That kind of relationship is illegal for a reason...

"All right," she stopped in front of a classroom door and waved at it, "this is me." Arya gave him one more, much gentler, hug before releasing him and giving him a beaming smile. "It was good seeing you, Snow."

"And I'm looking forward to meeting you, Arry." Jon tweaked her nose before spinning away to head to his class before the second bell rung. As he hustled, he considered warning Gendry off in no uncertain terms. He shook his head, wondering if he was reading too much into their interaction. Arya wasn't just any ordinary girl so maybe Gendry just didn't see her in that way. Either way, he intended to keep a close eye on them both.

SANDOR

Against better judgment, he joined most of the basketball team to watch the cheer tryouts. Though it no longer held the same appeal. The boys arranged themselves on the bleachers with Joff in the middle, flanked by Viserys and Ramsay. Lancel and Theon gossiped about which girls were the hottest while Loras played with his phone. Sandor stretched out on the top bleacher, arms hooked on the metal bars behind him, taking slow sips from his flask.

"Show's about to start," Theon announced."Whooooooop!" Sandor rolled his eyes as a gaggle of hopeful girls giggled and waved - fucking idiots. The cheer squad formed a procession behind coach Tarth in their little red uniforms. Yeah, they looked good, but none of them... Mmm... Sparkled? Yeah, that worked - the little bird sparkled like some magical fairy creature. Unattainable, unequaled, and completely and totally untouchable.
"Ow, looking good Margaery!" Viserys catcalled before turning to the girl's brother with a mocking sneer. "I hope you don't mind my saying so, Loras." Margaery performed a well-practiced wave to her adoring public before taking a seat next to her coach to start the tryouts.

"Margaery knows she looks good," Loras never looked up from his phone, "nothing you say can affect that."

"This is the life," Joff tilted his head back and twisted around to face Sandor, "eh, hound?" Just then, a flash of flame-colored hair caught his attention. No fucking way! It was her - the little bird - trying out for the cheer-leading squad! She said she wasn't going to do it! That was a week ago and girls were such fickle creatures. He'd avoided Spanish class for the rest of that week, fighting the urge to go look for Sansa every time he set foot on campus. Of course, the princess was picked up in a car worth more than his father's house! He should've known...

"Huh?" Sandor realized he never answered Joff, who sat scowling at him. "Sure, whatever."

"Oh!" Lancel stood up and covered his eyes to stare onto the field and there was no doubt who he spotted. "Fresh meat! A redhead!" Sandor clenched the flask in his hands and gritted his teeth together as he tried to contain his rage. Count to ten - take a breath - exhale.

"I like me some ginger minge!" Theon leapt to his feet to get a better look and Sandor had to fight the urge to throw his flask at the dipshit's head. "Damn she is fine."

"That right there is a classic, my friends." The tone in Joff's voice sent a chill straight through Sandor's heart, even with the drink in his flask making him too warm. "Hands off, I'm calling dibs." He never should have mentioned joining the squad to Sansa... Joffrey Baratheon - King of Shits - was bound to notice her.

"Aww, man," Theon slumped back down on the bench, "Joff, you always call dibs on the fresh ones!" The boy sulked like he just had something taken away from him when he really never had a chance with a girl like Sansa Stark. "You had Margaery and then you up and dumped her for no reason."

"Do I have to explain myself to you?" There was no mistaking the edge in Joff’s voice - everybody knew he could not be crossed because of who his father was. "Didn't think so. Beside, she's much hotter than Margaery. What say you hound?" Why was that kid so obsessed with his opinion? "Care to wager how long it will take me to get between those long legs?"

"I don't have enough money to go around pissing it away," he sneered the reply before draining the rest of the flask. Sandor slammed the emptied flask on the metal bench, causing a thundering boom that made everyone jump. They all pretended they didn't shit themselves, resuming their conversation without him.

"Come on, boys!" Joff continued undeterred by Sandor's disinterest. "Any takers? I got a hundred that says I can get her at the party."

"Easy money," Theon laughed, "you got yourself a deal." Ignoring them all, Sandor closed his eyes and leaned his head back on the metal bar to cool his thoughts. Meditation for anger control helped most of the time but the little bird made every emotion grow tenfold. On the upside, just seeing her shy smile make him happier than he could ever remember being. Downside - that she existed in a world just out of his reach made him want to break everything in sight.

They all moved to the front row to get a good view of the tryouts but Sandor kept to the back and pretended not to give a fuck. His drink gone, he stuffed the flask into his pocket and gave into his
impatience to watch the tryouts. Most of the girls were freshmen and pitiful - he had no idea how people could get up in front of a group and humiliate themselves. Did they not know they sucked? See - this is why the world needs honest assholes like him. At least he would tell them to their face before they got booed and jeered by the basketball team.

Sansa looked nervous and gorgeous as usual as she performed a short cheer routine that rang loud and clear. Then she skipped into a starting run, performed a perfect graceful cartwheel, and landed on her feet. He sat too far away to see clearly but Sandor felt sure she beamed like a happy little kid as she did it. All of the spectators - girls and boys - clapped and cheered for her. Must be nice, he sulked like a fucking child, to have a rich daddy and be loved and adored by everyone.

The Little Princess probably never failed at anything in her whole life and by all seven bloody hells, he wanted to hate her for it. But he couldn't - could he? Good and beautiful people deserve happy lives and ugly hated people deserve to be shit on. And never the twain shall meet, that's just the way it is. She belongs in her world, full of castles and unicorns, and he needed another fucking drink.

Chapter End Notes

Boys, boys! Drink some green tea and chiiiiiiiiilllll, buddy. Ok! Don't hate the over-protective brother routine too much - I think it fits Jon's character because he's so damn serious. And I assume he would see Arya as a little sister since they grew up together. Big, BIG things are going down at Joff's party so stick with me through these moments of teenage doubt and we will get to the kissy stuff soon enough! Love you all for supporting my recuperation from my other series, I will be getting back to it soon: promise.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Invited to a Par-tay!

SANSA

The decision to attend cheer tryouts was not made lightly, Sansa knew that it would be difficult to fit chorus into her schedule. Her goal to gain an sports scholarship would benefit from another athletic extracurricular activity. Also, her heart seemed to be pining away for the person who first suggested the idea. The hound disappeared from Spanish class and never darkened any hallways waiting for her. It stung, and with most things concerning Mr. I-couldn't-care-less Clegane... it disappointed her too.

He almost seemed a hallucination, she neither could find him on campus nor online. Only a single search result came from his surname and the arrest record she found belonged to someone several years older. Not deterred in the least, Sansa scoured the last three years of yearbooks. Ultimately realizing he was not the type of guy to show up on picture day. Spanish class turned into the worst part of her day, fresh disappointment rose daily from seeing his empty desk. Tryouts seemed to be the last resort to seeing him again...

"You must be Sansa," a petite and pretty girl cocked her head to the side, interrupting Sansa's brooding. "I'm Myrcella Baratheon," her wide smile revealed a mouthful of perfect even teeth.

"Oh!" Sansa returned the girl's smile and nodded her head with enthusiasm. "I think you were the best one at the tryout, you'll definitely make the team." Sansa immediately liked the sweet girl, musing the radical difference between Myrcella and Arya. Both were petite freshman and that is where all comparison stopped. It made her wonder what it would be like to have a sister more like herself. Often she felt 'left out' because she never shared her siblings' interests.

"Sansa, Myrcella," the captain of the cheer squad called to them with a wave of her manicured fingers. "Please see me for a moment." Margaery already introduced herself before the tryouts started, shining with majestic confidence. She stood flanked by two of the most beautiful girls Sansa had ever seen. "I want to be the first to say," she murmured as the girls approached, "congratulations to you both."

"That's so nice of you to say," her cheeks pinked prettily against her golden curls. "I would like it if we both made the team together." Sansa immediately liked the sweet girl, musing the radical difference between Myrcella and Arya. Both were petite freshman and that is where all comparison stopped. It made her wonder what it would be like to have a sister more like herself. Often she felt 'left out' because she never shared her siblings' interests.

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"Oh!" Sansa covered her mouth in surprise and looked to Myrcella's equally shocked expression. "Did I make the squad?"

"You both did," she confirmed with a beaming smile, "unofficially." The good news floored Sansa, she could scarcely believe it!

"Really?" Myrcella squeaked with happiness and looked almost ready to cry. "Oh, thank you, I won't let you down."

"Introductions are in order," a fair beauty with violet eyes placed a hand over her chest, "I am Dany,
"I already know Missandei from class," Sansa aimed a shy smile at the beautiful girl with dark skin and serious golden eyes. "I'm sure you remember my first day," she groaned at the memory.

"Mr. Davos is so old-fashioned," Missandei sympathized with Sansa. "He made her stand in front of the class and introduce herself."

"Oh, gods," Myrcella shook her headful of blond curls as her green eyes widened with horror. "He didn't! I would just die!"

"I think he's kind of hot," Margaery commented with a shrug, "in an old-timey pirate kind of way."

"Hey," Margaery pursed her lips into a pretty pout. "I dare anyone to say counselor Melisandre isn't totally hot."

"Hot, yes," Missandei agreed, "creepy: definitely." They all shared a laugh on the joke Sansa was not in on, as she never met the apparently 'hot but creepy' counselor.

"Anyway," the team captain frowned, "I don't think Mr. Lannister is hot at all."

"Here it comes," Myrcella muttered under her breath. Sansa wondered how anyone could say Mr. Jaime Lannister wasn't incredibly gorgeous. She had only seen him in passing yet thought he might be the most handsome man she had ever seen in real life. He looked like a movie star!

"He looks like," Margaery sniffed and made a face like she smelled something foul, "an old version of Joff-

"Ah-ah-ah!" Dany swatted her friend on the shoulder and scowled. "No Marge, you've already used your complaining quota for he-who-will-not-be-named yesterday. We all agreed it has to stop for your own good."

"I know," Margaery sighed before clenching a fist in determination. "I won't think, or talk about a certain someone anymore!" She suddenly stopped in her tracks as her hand fell limply to her side. "Oh gods... speak of the devil." Sansa looked up to see a group of boys ambling in their direction; most conspicuous was the hound trailing in the back. Her heart started thundering in her chest as the sudden urge to run away overwhelmed her. "Oh, there's Loras! Yoo-hoo, I'm over here my darling handsome brother!"

"My lovely sister!" An attractive curly-haired young man jogged up to Margaery to kiss her on the cheek. "How do you grow even more beautiful every time I see you?" Sansa found herself a bit dazed by the boy's open smile and unabashed affection for his sister. Her brothers behaved so guarded with their affection in public, even Rickon picked up the bad habit! He used to be the most affectionate baby and toddler, and then one day decided to be a 'big boy' and broke her heart. No more tickle fights or wildflowers pinched between tiny chubby fingers...

"I've been blessed with fabulous genetics." The captain looped her arm through her brother's and they continued on their original path. Sansa's heart still pounded in her chest as she neared the one person she both desperately wanted to see and dreaded seeing again. The outfit she packed for tryouts looked girlish next to the sophisticated beauties in their uniforms.
"Ugh, I'm revolted," Dany commented dryly with a wry smile curling on her full lips.

"I'm jealous," Missandei sighed, "I wish I had a brother." Sansa thought Missa could borrow one of hers anytime but changed her mind, realizing how much missed the boys and home. Even if they all had more in common with each other, they made an effort to be good to her in their own ways. Robb always brought her back some interesting rock or other small souvenir from hunting with dad. Bran always knew how to distract Arya when their sister fights blew up into all-out war. And Arya... well at least she never stole clothes and makeup from her like other little sisters.

"I'm jealous too," Myrcella giggled and whispered conspiratorially, "but for completely different reasons." Sansa smiled down at the girl and nodded her agreement, also wishing a sweet boy like Loras would kiss her on the cheek.

"Loras," Margaery waved a hand in Sansa's direction. "These are our newest squad members, Sansa and Myrcella."

"Enchanté, mademoiselles," he awarded a breathtaking smile with his greeting and Sansa blushed furiously.

"It's very nice to meet you," she politely replied, concentrating on not stammering like an idiot. Poor Myrcella just made a squeaking noise and nodded her head so Sansa put an arm around the girl for support.

"I'm sure you'll both make excellent additions to the team," Loras seemed like such a nice and polite person. Completely different from a certain someone who did not even bother to say a proper hello or goodbye! Sansa peeked at Clegane as his group neared theirs and he looked everywhere but at her. The cold treatment prickled the corners of her eyes just a little bit. Fine! If he did not want to acknowledge her in front of all his friends then she would just ignore him as well!

"Aren't you going to introduce us, Marge?" A handsome boy with straight golden hair let his eyes roam Sansa's height and she blushed under his scrutiny. "No?" He scoffed at Magarey's scowl and held out his hand. "I'm Joffrey Baratheon - my friends call me Joff." How ironic, she had been dying to meet this boy but could no longer care less about him.

"Nice to meet you, Joff." Her eyes darted past the attractive boy's haughty smile to the hound starring daggers into the back of Joffrey's head. They never even went on one date, she never even learned his name... but she felt 'dumped'. Clegane amused himself flirting with her, then he realized she wasn't more of a 'free spirit'; like Ygritte. Players like him only want one thing and Sansa wanted true love and happily ever after.

Events like prom were important to her and she wanted a boyfriend who would be proud to be her date. Regular outings, holding hands, and being a public couple were all dreams she had since she first started to like boys. Sansa did not intend to settle for anything less! As much as it pained her to admit, she concocted a fantasy relationship between herself and the hound in her own head. Meanwhile, he never once expressed anything more than casual interest in her.

"I'm having a party this weekend," Joff informed her, "everyone will be there. Be sure to come." His 'request' sounded like an order but at least he cared enough to ask her someplace...

"That sounds like fun," she agreed, "thank you for inviting me." Sansa immediately wondered if the hound would attend the party. 'Everyone' must include the basketball team's star player, she concluded.

"Enough chit-chat," Margaery interrupted, "Loras, can we squeeze Sansa in for a ride home?"
"I don't want to be a bother," Sansa waved her hands at the generous offer.

"No trouble at all," Loras granted her another winning smile, "it's the least we can do to welcome the newest squad mate." A sweet boy, that was the kind of guy she wanted to date, someone who would say nice things to her to make her feel good. As much as Sansa enjoyed the hound's teasing, part of her always wondered if he really looked down on her, and not just literally. Did he really find her vapid and shallow... an empty-headed 'little bird'?

"Th-thank you," she stammered, "I accept." The delight over being accepted and making new friends sharply declined at the sound of the hound's scornful snort. Sansa glanced up to see him turning to walk away, a familiar sight, only this time he did not even grant his signature apathetic wave... Once again, she felt massively disappointed and conceded that maybe Clegane was not the guy for her. He had one more chance; that was all she could give, before she gave up on him.

DANY

Dany, Missa, and Marge went out for retail therapy to unwind after tryouts, looking for new outfits for the party. Somehow, the topic of conversation turned from what they should wear to their newest squad members. They sat in the mall's food court, sipping on their drinks, and discussing their thoughts about the new girls. Mostly, they gossiped about the one new member in particular, Sansa Stark.

"She is beautiful," Dany commented as she swirled her purple berry smoothie with the straw. "Not just her sweet face or graceful ballerina's body, she looks like a virgin saint." Ah, she remembered being that young and naive. Had it really been two years since she first attended Kings High? Time really flies when one has the time of their life. The two girls beside her made those years the best and her gratitude could never truly be expressed in words.

"I bet she is a virgin," Marge smirked, "I wonder if Joff will attempt to remedy her condition." Dany gave her friend a warning look to cut the ex-boyfriend talk. Margaery pretended she was not still hung up on Joffrey Baratheon but it was painfully obvious how much she still cared. The guy was a grade-A asshole, everyone knew it, yet that did nothing to dampen Margery's fixation.

"She does not seem quite that stupid." Missandei's barb was clearly directed at Marge, who held her hands up in defeat under the double-teamed glares. "Seriously though, I've seen her in a couple of my advanced classes and she's a grade below me." Missa's brains were no joke: if Sansa could be in the same class then she had to be smart. Good, the world needs more women who are not afraid to be smart.

"Intelligence and sense are two different things." Margaery sighed before loudly sucking up the rest of her bright red smoothie. "That girl doesn't have a bad bone in her body." Sansa Stark seemed genuine and sweet but certainly could use some guidance. Especially in regard to Joffrey and his cronies, they were all a bunch of puffed up pre-frat boys. Honestly, if the dipshit didn't throw the best parties, she would rather never see his leering smirk again.

"Innocent as a newborn babe," Dany agreed. She finished her own beverage more slowly to avoid brain-freeze. Being protective of those weaker than herself had always been her particular weakness. She never could stand to see anyone taken advantage of or bullied.

"I like her," Missandei declared over the cap of her hot mocha, not a lover of iced treats.

"I like her too," Dany pumped her fist against the table for emphasis and looked to their leader to make the final call.
"That makes three of us," Margaery grinned. "Shall we take little Sansa under our protective wings and help her learn to spread her own?"

"Oh, Marge," Dany scoffed, "you do have a flair for the dramatic."

"So says The Mother of Dragons," Missandei teased. The title unintentionally brought up a swelling depression that Dany had been fighting for weeks.

"Oh, don't even remind me," she groaned, "my D&D group broke up." The fallout was inevitable after the DM found out she was pregnant, she had been the glue holding them all together. That's life, she mused, priorities and people change all the time. At least their time together was fun while it lasted and that's all anyone can really ask.

"Oh gods," Margaery deadpanned, "no, how terribly tragic." There had never really been much support from Marge for Dany's unusual hobby but it never fazed her, what other people said. Even her best friends could never convince her that role-playing was a waste of time. It provided the very confidence that other's admired. Playing a fantastic version of herself made her a better person in real life! She knew non-players had a hard time understanding that so she let her friend's dismissal pass.

"Stop, Marge," Missandei scolded, "you know how much she loves playing. It's no different than your obsession with fashion." Dany wrinkled her nose at the comparison and insulation that both hobbies were frivolous.

"Fashion is a life skill, Missa," Margaery protested. Dany agreed but still felt the need to bemoan the loss of her group and amazing character.

"Please you two, I'm in mourning here," Dany whimpered, "my dragon!"

"I'm sure you can find another group," Missandei patted her hand for reassurance. Although her friend was often far too serious for her own good she remained the kindest person Dany knew. Unfortunately, finding a mature, gender-equal tabletop gaming group was nothing short of miraculous.

"You know how hard it is," Dany griped, "to maintain a reputation at Kings if it comes out I am a D&D geek."

"Your secret double life is safe with us." Margaery stuck her raspberry red tongue out and Dany had to smile with such good friends by her side.

"We best get a move on," Missa checked her watch, "if we want to get new shoes for the party." Dany rolled her eyes at her friend's predicable punctuality and gathered up everyone's trash to throw it away. She might be the 'mother of dragons' but she always felt the need to mother everyone around her. Maybe that's why she never had much luck with guys, because she always smothered them with too much... mothering. All she ever wanted to do was keep everyone around her safe and healthy. What was that such a bad thing?

Maybe college will be better if she met someone who could appreciate her helpfulness rather than accusing her of being. What was that word her last boyfriend used? Ah, 'clingy'. Dany had no time for games, if she likes someone she goes for it without holding back and hides nothing of herself. Attractiveness has its drawbacks, every guy she liked readily agreed to date her. None of them actually liked her for more than her looks. Every time she talked about playing D&D or being passionate about animal rights, their eyes glazed over.

What was the phrase her second to last boyfriend used? Ah 'that's just crazy, babe'. Over and over
she would fall for some dashing guy and it would be beautiful for a few months until they just got
tired of her. Dany never let it show that every single one of them broke her heart, she shrugged it off
and let out her aggression whole role-playing. This year she decided to not even bother with 'boys'
and planned to hold out until she found a 'real man'. Did such a thing actually exist?

Chapter End Notes

The party... it cometh. But not yet... I think I need up the creep factor by about 1000%. More 'forceful' flirtations to come: Sandor's POV is up next!
Out of desperate impatience, he went on the hunt for the one person who might be able to help him work out his aggression. Khal was the only guy in school that could properly spot him in the gym and he needed to lift heavy-heavy on the heavy. They weren't 'friends' but the guy was someone he respected - also he didn't talk much which suited Sandor just fine. He always forgot where that back storage room was until he found it and booted the door open. Skipping school to play a godsdamned board game - he'd never understand Khal for it.

"Sup, nerds?" Sandor greeted the two kids sitting with Khal, discussing something in a book, and did a double take at the new addition. A girl? That's a new one, he'd never seen any of these dorks with even a single female - teachers don't count. How about that? One of the geeks finally realized a whole other half of the human population existed. And what'd he do? Sat her down to play their stupid fucking game. Somebody needed to give that girl a dress and that boy some balls.

"Whoa," her high-pitched voice confirmed her gender. "Where do all these giant dudes keep coming from? Isn't this a fucking high school?" Sandor grinned and decided he liked the runt and her foul little mouth.

"It's not that I'm so huge," he scoffed, "you're just tiny." Sandor jerked his chin at the quiet guy in the back. "Khal, I need to lift heavy today, can you spot me?"

"Yes." Drogo was a man of few words, which made him the perfect workout partner since Sandor didn't like talkers. "In one half-hour."

"Alright," he turned to leave, "see ya."

"Bye, giant guy!" The pipsqueak called after him, apparently unbothered by his rude attitude. "Try not to run into any doorways!"

"Bye, tiny girl," he waved as he left, "try not to get swept into a storm drain."

"No, please," a voice protested politely, "no thank you." It was her, quiet but strained coming from Shit, Littlefucker's room, Mr. Baelish was infamous for getting touchy with the female students. Nobody ever did anything to stop the little pervert - till now. Sandor burst open the door with a kick of his booted foot, hands still in his pockets, and took in the sight. Sansa sat trapped in a desk and Littlefucker loomed over her. She could have easily pushed him out of the way and walked out of the room, but of course, she didn't do that. Too fucking polite for her own good.

"Mr. Baelish," he whined loudly, "I have a question about literature." Littlefucker turned his beady
eyes on Sandor and scowled. Fuck you buddy - the little bird was his alone to harass!

"Well, I'm a history teacher," the arrogant man balked, "and not your history teacher." Sandor snorted at the man's lack of pride as an educator - to turn down a student actually seeking knowledge. A real winner, Littlefucker was, probably became a teacher just to hit on pretty girls under his thumb.

"It's about 'historical' literature." Sandor grinned at the man who attempted not to seem intimidated but clearly wanted to shit himself. Baelish rose to his stunted full height and crossed his arms, trying to look like the authority in the room. "Oh yeah, Sansa, there's some girl out in the hall complaining loudly on the phone about waiting forever for you." Her eyes widened, probably thinking he was telling the truth, and nodded her head vigorously.

"I better get going then," she collected her bag and scampered away, "thank you, Mr. Baelish." She was actually thanking that pervert? The girl really was an idiot, how did she manage all these honors classes? Sansa practically ran out of the room and he followed her as she looked up and down the hallway.

"Nobody was looking for you," he strode past her as he walked, "I just said that." Sansa hurried to keep up with his long strides and he considered just sprinting away from her. She looked like a total knock-out - dressed up like she was going on a date or something... He'd kill him - whoever he was - he was dead! D-E-A-D! Breathe, count, stop being a fucking asshole.

"Thank you for saving me!" The little bird's chirping annoyed him after seeing her so small and frightened by someone as weak as Baelish. She might not weigh much at all but she was tall and played sports - she should be able to defend herself!

"I'm not some fucking hero," he sneered, "I just don't like Littlefucker or any bully." He slowed his stride just a bit because she started panting from the effort since she toted all of her classes' books - like an idiot. Sandor fought the urge to take the heavy backpack from her, unwilling to keep letting himself get sucked into her problems.

"I really am thankful for your help." She actually managed to sound annoyed while expressing her gratitude and he turned his head away to hide a grin. "I don't know what I would have done if you had not shown up."

"Next time help yourself," he frowned down at her, "and don't wait around to be rescued." Sansa suddenly stopped and for some reason his feet stopped moving too. Her hair was all done up in a twisty pretty style, showing off her graceful neck. The skirt of her dress stopped higher over the knee and lower in the neck than he'd seen from her before. It really did seem like she was trying to impress some guy and he wanted to kick his own ass for wishing she dolled herself up for him.

"You're right," she whispered in a voice on the edge of crying. "I never dealt with a situation like that... I kept thinking I was misreading him until it was too late." Tears collected in Sansa's eyes, clearly horrified that a teacher would take advantage of his power. What a naive little bird, somebody needed to keep an eye out for her. And what - that'd be him? Sandor shook his head at that stupid fucking idea.

"If you feel even slightly scared of a man, or woman, you should leave." Sandor crossed his arms and tried to act like he wasn't giving her well-meaning advice. The last thing he needed was for the little princess to get a hero-complex about him. "Fuck being polite, your instincts are there for a reason and some people get off on hurting others... I know that well."

"Thank you," she murmured, turning her bright blue eyes up at him with something akin to hope
shining in them. Girls never looked at him like that - if they bothered to look period. Sandor knew whatever fondness she had for him couldn't last. Eventually, Sansa would hear all about what a 'bad boy' he'd been and being 'good girl', she would lose interest. Besides, they wanted different things - she wanted a 'boyfriend' - he wanted to take all of her clothes off. It would save them both some pain to avoid all of that and end things before they began.

"Stop thanking me," he snarled. Sandor cursed himself for being so harsh, why did she have to be so damned - everything? Why'd her welfare mean so much to him when he barely knew her? He didn't even really like her personality and thought she was naive and senseless and... Perfect in every possible way from her flawless looks to her childlike cheerfulness. Maybe he was just so sick of being a sullen asshole he wanted a bit of sunshine to peek through his storm clouds... Man that sounded so fucking stupid.

"Sorry," her voice lowered to an almost inaudible whisper. Sansa's lashes blocked her teary gaze, sending searing guilt through his gut. It wasn't her fault that she was so godsdamned beautiful and perfect and came from money. His horrendous face and bad attitude existed long before he ever met the little bird. Gods - he really was a fucking asshole, wasn't he?

"Stop apologizing too," he softened his voice to a dull growl, tucking a finger under her chin and raise her pretty eyes back to him. "Give me your phone." She cocked her head to the side and looked confused by his demand. Sansa rummaged through her bag and blushed as she produced a - of course it's sparkly pink - phone. "This is my number," he punched it in, "if anyone ever fucks with you, call me and I'll come save you with some more bad-ass hero shit."

"Thank-" She looked down at the phone with a puzzled expression before turning it off with a click and looking back up at Sandor. "What's your name?" Sansa blushed and looked away, lifting a hand to twirl a loose lock of fiery hair that hung over her collarbone. "It's absurd that I don't know it yet." Her innocent virgin routine seemed genuine but she had to know how hard those twirling fingers made him.

"Sandor," he replied gruffly, shrugging his shoulders and stuffing his hands in his pockets. He stalked off without warning and half-hoped she wouldn't follow and keep making him feel so fucking awkward. Sansa hurried to catch up with him, taking long strides with her - very long - legs. Fuck, didn't this random boner thing stop in middle school? Mmm, he peeked out of the corner of his eye... Yeah, nothing random about it - she's been the beginning and end of every hard-on he'd had in two weeks.

"Is that a name?" Sansa grinned like a little kid as she teased him - far too pleased with herself for learning his name. How in the fucking seven hells did being cute come off so damn sexy? Only the little bird could make it work.

"Not much of one but the only one I got," he shrugged and slowed his pace, realizing she was not going to give up so easily. "Just call me the hound like everyone else." He tugged on her backpack's handle and she gave up the bag with a pleased smile and slight blush. Of course, she liked that kind of shit - he just couldn't bear to see her so burdened when the weight was nothing to him.

"Sandor," she held up one finger as she sounded out his name. "Clegane," she held up a second and then third finger, "the hound." Sansa cocked an eyebrow at him and held up her index finger. "I think, of all three options, I like 'Sandor' the best."

"Damn," he snapped his fingers, "I should've recorded that to make it my ringtone. 'I like Sandor the best'." She rolled his eyes and groaned at his poor imitation of her falsetto voice.

"Sandor," she sweetly called his name with a smile that made him bunch his fist in his pockets. "Do
you really mind if I call you by your first name?"

"Not if I can still call you 'little bird'," he countered and cleared his throat to clear the huskiness.

"I do prefer my name," she laughed, "I think 'little bird' kind of makes me sound like an idiot."

"You said it," he chuckled, "not me." The pouty face she made his throat go dry and he swallowed hard.

"You said you hate bullies but you're always teasing me." Sansa's playful scowl combined with those fingers playing with her hair made him sweat like he was on the court. They made it to the front of the school and stood in the shade of the weirwood tree.

"Teasing you is really fun," he shrugged and tried to play it cool. "Now I can understand all those bullies I put down over the years."

"Aw fuck, that reminded him he had to warn her about Joff. She was too trusting and would buy into his bullshit hook, line, and sinker. "Speaking of bullies-"

"Sansa!" Sansa put a hand on his arm and he completely forgot what he planned to say. "Oh, sorry I did not mean to interrupt you but are you going to Joffrey's party?"

"That's not what I meant," she pulled her hand back and fiddled with the loose strand of hair again. "Um, I wanted to know, um, if I might see you there?"

"Um," her voice lowered quiet as a whisper and her blue eyes flashed up to meet his. "Because I want to see you." Her father's car beeped at them and he honestly couldn't care less if that old man waited forever. Sansa continued to keep eye contact with him, never wavering for an instant as she waited for his answer.

"Fuck," he looked away from her mesmerizing gaze, "I'll go if you're going." He'd been rude and rough and openly lustful but she still wanted to see him anyway. Sandor knew her crush on him couldn't last and he'd never likely get to do anything more than... She possibly would let him kiss her - that... might be... a small chance. He'd be the biggest fucking fool at Kings High if he passed up that opportunity. He shrugged off her bag and held it out for her to put it over her narrow shoulders.

"Alright," she flushed as she beamed a smile at him, "I'll see you then." Sansa laid her fingers on his arms, as if to stop him from leaving, unaware he stood frozen to the ground. "Goodbye, Sandor." The way she said his name almost had him melting into a puddle around her feet.

"See ya, little bird." His rasped farewell seemed enough to satisfy her and she walked away into the other direction. Well fuck - did he just get a date with a Disney Princess? Something ain't right in the universe. Or maybe he was having one of those 'lucky days' he kept hearing about. Luck never came easy to Sandor - he made his own luck. He was lucky to be born tall but it was pure driven determination that made him a warrior on the court. He ate, breathed, and slept basketball. Before Sansa, nothing ever distracted him.
Still, even knowing that he should stay away from Sansa Stark... he had a smile on his face all the way to the gym. Grinning, Sandor broke into a run, too pumped to walk. It was fitting - today would be the last day he ever rode the public bus - because he was getting - a fucking car! And about goddamned time! Maybe - if this luck kept up - he could give the little bird a ride to the party...

SANSA

She did not even try to hide her happy grin as practically skipped to daddy's car and hoped Sandor was not watching her. Sandor was a nice boy after all; a real honest hero and rescuer of damsels! She knew Sandor would turn out the be the perfect guy for her. Sandor-Sandor-Sandor! It had to be fate that their names were so similar and complementary. Hers sounded soft and pretty while his carried a strong masculine sound. Sansa could not wait to get home and doodle their names all over the hidden insides of her school folders! She slid into the car feeling like she walked on air.

"Did you have a good day, honey?" Daddy's eyes darted from her face to Sandor's retreating form with increasing worry. Sansa tilted her head into his vision and gave him her happiest smile, which he could not help but return.

"The b-e-s-t ever!" She did the arm wiggling part of her point victory dance and he chuckled at her childish antics. Even if Sandor was a tough nut to crack, she knew the way into daddy's heart like the back of her hand.

"Is that the same boy from before?" He seemed more relaxed but still followed through with his fatherly duties.

"It is," she answered with a confident nod, "his name is Sandor." Sansa resisted the urge to keep saying his name three times, smiling at the thought of him appearing like a genie. Who else besides magical fairy tale characters hid their names? Now that she knew his name, she had power over him! Like Rumpelstiltskin... no that was not a romantic story. Like Doctor Who and River song! Oh... that's not a fairy tale... It came to her like an epiphany! They are like Cupid and Psyche! Perhaps that comparison was a bit dramatic, yet she liked the idea the more she pondered it.

"I know your birthday is coming up," daddy broke the silence as they waited for slow-poke underfoot Arya. "However, my rule has to stand for all of you equally."

"Oh, daddy, I know." Sansa rolled her eyes and tried not to look guilty over her white lie. "I have not been asked on any dates." Yet, she amended in her mind but planned to accept if he ever did manage to ask her somewhere. She could not let a few silly months stand in the way of what could be the beginning to the greatest romance of her lifetime! A dark thought cut through her happy fantasies. "Even if he is a senior, it will be alright once I turn sixteen?"

"I trust you, lemoncake." Daddy patted her arm, leaving unnamed the daughter he could not trust. "Unlike Robb, I know you are the type to want to date one person. Liking someone is a good thing, Sansa, but I don't want to see your heart broken. Just take it slow and listen to your own conscious. You're my good girl: I know you will act with respect for yourself and your parents."

"I will," she promised while holding up three fingers, "scout's honor." The back door wrenched open and Arya jumped into the car with a wide grin on her face and dressed in different clothes than this morning. Sansa puzzled at the wardrobe change but daddy did not seem to notice as he pulled the car around the parking lot.

"San-sa!" Arya called her name in a sing-song voice, bouncing in her seat. Sansa felt amused rather than annoyed with her sister's playfulness. "We should go get Italian today - I had a great day." This truly was turning into a day of miracles, even her irritating sister was in a generous mood!
"I also had a great day," she likewise felt generous towards her unusually behaved sister. "We can go get Thai if you want."

"Steak it is!" Daddy laughed in victory and turned the car towards the Steakhouse.

"DAD!!!" They both shouted their protest, sick of his rule that either they had to agree immediately or he got to choose where they ate. "No fair!"

"Rules are rules!" He grinned and turned up the oldies radio station to drown the sound of their complaints.

"Noooooooo," Arya wailed from the backseat, covering her ears. "Stranger, take me now!"

Chapter End Notes

There's a spider in my bathroom: The Bathroom Spider. It lives in the corner between the trash and the wall and is the closest thing to a pet I can handle. I almost killed it accidentally with the toilet paper springy thing. This is a public apology to The Bathroom Spider, please keep eating the little flies that annoy me. That is all.

Next Up: Arya's POV (Title: "Party Plans")
**Party Plans**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**Whoa! I mean... 'Hi'.**

**ARYA**

The last day of the school week turned out to be one of the best days of her life, spending all morning with Gendry at the forge. When it got too hot, he told her they might as well skip the whole day and offered to give her a D&D crash course with Drogo. Arya never asked him to do any of it, did not even have to beg once, he offered all of it himself. A complete change came over him since the camping trip - he behaved more comfortable around her. They still bickered and sniped at each other but more often it was with wide grins on their faces.

"Bye, daddy," Sansa followed dad to the door and handed a small bag to him. "Have fun on your business retreat and don't work the whole time!" He pulled a luggage bag behind him and searched his pockets for his keys and pulled them out. Robert Baratheon organized company retreats more often than board meetings. Arya knew her father hated every minute.

"I'll be the only one," he sighed before kissing Sansa on the forehead and walking over to Arya to kiss her too. "Listen to your sister and don't set anything on fire." The keys jangled as he emphasized his words with them in his fist.

"I will try," she offered and he patted her on the head before rushing out the door. As soon as the door closed behind dad, Sansa broke into a run straight to their room. "What's got you moving so fast?" Arya called after her sister, not really caring but sort of bored and wondering what to do with herself.

"Joffrey Baratheon is having a party," she called down the hall, "and I was invited!" Arya rolled her eyes but then an idea struck her. There would probably be tons of booze and food at the party and so many kids that a couple extra wouldn't be noticed... She jumped up from her seat and jogged to the living room where her phone was plugged in next to her bag.

'Hey', she texted Gendry, 'be on standby to come pick me up'. Arya dove onto the couch chest first and kicked her feet in the air behind her as she waited... and waited... 'HEY'! That asshole better not be ignoring her or else he was going to get it at school next week.

'For what? So he wasn't exactly jumping at the chance to hang out, she hoped he was looking for a little excitement to fill his boredom as well.

'We're crashing a party', she asserted - not really asking. Gendry took his sweet time to reply and she rolled over onto her back, groaning in aggravation. The minutes ticked by like hours, filled with visions of him doing something more interesting. And not inviting her.

'Hot Pie and Drogo are with me', his eventual text confirmed that he was in fact hanging out without her. Arya hoped they could spend some time together, just the two of them... She shrugged, not really minding if a few more people tagged along, the more the merrier!

'Bring them', she replied, 'I'll text you when I'm ready'. Arya crawled over the arm of the couch and stretched her neck to peer down the hall at their bedroom. The door remained firmly closed and she
wondered what the hell could be taking her sister so long to get ready. To pass the time, she read the entire Wikipedia on blacksmithing and found it truly fascinating. Finally, after about one million years, the door opened.

The vision that appeared into the hallway really shouldn't be a teenager. Arya played it casual as Sansa glided into the room, dressed to the nine. The sting of being the ugly one burned out long ago as beauty was nothing if it meant being as shallow and silly as her older sister.

"Sis," she scoffed, "are you going to a party or a ball?" Sansa really did look like she was going to a wedding - scratch that, she looked like she was the bride! Arya snorted a laugh at her overdone look and lifted her phone to take a picture of her pretty sister's ugly anger face.

"That's rude, Arya." Sansa scowled and shook her headful of red curls - snap. "How shocking that you were not invited."

"Like I want to go to some shitty party with a bunch of jocks and cheerleaders." Arya inwardly gloated - that was exactly what she planned to do. "What do you people even talk about?" She zoomed in on the new picture and snickered at Sansa's mouth open in mid-rant.

"Mostly how glad we are not to be friendless losers," Sansa put her hands on her hips and narrowed her mascaraed eyelashes. Snap!

"I have friends!" Arya felt stupid for rising to her sister's piss poor comebacks.

"Invisible ones don't count!" Sansa countered with her nostrils flared - snap, oh that's a beauty right there.

"I hope you get your period!" Arya used the worst curse she could think of, smirking at her older sister's horrified expression. Snap-snap-snap!

"Arya!" Sansa put a hand over her mouth and hissed her reply - snap. "Don't risk Mother Nature's wrath, take it back!" They both knew their periods were next week and no amount of razzing from Arya could make it happen any faster. Gods, her sister was such a dumbass sometimes.

"I hope it starts just as you walk out onto the dance floor - with everyone watching you." Arya watched with growing satisfaction as her sister's hand fell limp to her side, revealing her top lip curled in fury. Snap - aw, just barely missed the perfect shot.

"This is why you will never get a boyfriend," she scorned and stormed away to grab her bag and headed to the door to wait for her ride outside. Oh shit, Arya should've gotten a shot of her sister stopping away like a bridezilla. Sansa was just so damn photogenic and had no clue that there were thousands of photos of her looking like a complete idiot. Someday the collection would serve as the ultimate blackmail tool. Only to be used for cases of extreme emergencies or ultimate revenge.

"Who needs one?!" Arya called after her, just before Sansa slammed the door behind her. She sprung into action, running to their room to tear through her still unpacked suitcases. In desperation, she turned to the pile of clean-ish clothes. Everything she owned looked ridiculous when compared to what her sister wore and she would be too conspicuous. Ah! She raced to her sister's side of the room and rifled through the neatly hung dresses in her closet. One deep in the back was not completely offensive. She stripped what she wore and pulled the dress on and went to check her reflection.

Wow, she actually looked like a girl - not the prettiest but still not a boy. Arya definitely didn't wonder what Gendry would think. She added on a few 'accessories' from her own collection so she
still looked like herself and put on her cleanest shoes. For a half a second she considered trying to wear a pair of heels but decided she didn't want to die just to attend a party. Anyway, no way would any of Sansa's boat-sized shoes fit her tiny feet, so she made do with her nicest sandals. As ready as she'd ever be, she grabbed her phone to touch base with her ride to the party.

'It's on', she texted impatiently waiting a half a second for a response. 'And step on it', she added after another minute of no reply. 'Be here in 20 - or else'. Arya grew more nervous with every second that went by - he might decide he'd rather not hang out with her tonight...

'On my way, milady', Gendry's reply had her biting her tongue and grinning like an idiot. Arya ran to the window to catch Sansa getting into a flashy SUV and a handsome, well-dressed young man holding the door for her. She snorted at how predictable her sister's date was, exactly the type of fussy guy she fawned all over.

**GENDRY**

He knew he was driving too fast but he started to get nervous when Arya gave him her address in the city. For one thing, it was on the nicer side: not the richest part of Kings Landing but certainly nowhere near Flea Bottom. She did say her dad worked a lot, which explained why they lived in an executive apartment building in the heart of the city. Gendry refused to be intimidated by her family's higher class or feel ashamed. It made him proud to be the son of a single mother who worked harder than anyone did.

'I'm here', he texted her and pocketed the phone without waiting for the reply he knew wouldn't come. In the short time they knew each other: they really got to know each other - finishing each other's sentences even. Once he stopped trying to run away from her, Arya somehow became his best friend and he never got to spend enough time with her. Gendry knew he was pushing it with how many classes he missed lately but was worth it. He stayed up late to get all his work done and crammed for make-up tests.

Gendry didn't even notice her until she was walking straight at his car with quick little strides. Well, he noticed 'the pretty girl in the black dress' but overlooked her to keep staring at the entrance for Arya. It was her though, she hauled the front door open and jerked her thumb at Hot Pie.

"Scram," she told him, and he scurried to get the hells out of her way. This was the girl he planned to marry: Gendry knew, without a doubt, they were meant to be.

"Whoa!" Hot Pie took the words right out of Gendry's mouth and hurried to get into the backseat with the usually silent Drogo. His palms started sweating on the wheel and he quickly wiped them on his jeans. Arya slid into the car, not paying any attention to her skirt riding up as she closed the door with a sigh.

"Hey," she greeted him with a distracted wave as she handed him her phone. "Here hold this for me, the fashion corporations conspire to sell purses," she informed him. "By refusing to put pockets in women's clothing." He nodded along as he had plenty of pocket space for her phone. Her face scrunched up into an expression of pure fury that scared the shit out of him. "I'm not carrying a fucking purse." Gendry slowly nodded, assuring her he would never ask her to do such an apparently burdensome thing.

"It's fine," he coughed to clear his croaked words, "I'll carry whatever you want, Arry." She nodded like he gave the right answer to a pop quiz. "You look..." Gendry's brain deflated as he looked her over from head to toe, "different." Arya frowned down at her little black dress and roughly pulled the skirt down with an annoyed sigh.
"I needed a disguise," she waved a hand over her outfit, "so I stole some clothes from my sister's closet." Arya grimaced and held up a hand, putting up fingers like she was counting in her head. "I think she only wore this once - to a funeral - two years ago." Her wide grey eyes turned up at him with an almost shy expression that caught his breath. "Why - is it too weird?"

"No," he managed at least one syllable and shook his head for far too long. "It's not weird at all, just... different." Arya shrugged like she didn't care either way about this opinion and put her feet up on the dash, never bothered to put on her seat-belt. Gendry knew lecturing her was a waste of time and hoped he didn't have to watch her body sail through his windshield. Time to drive like he was in driving class with an instructor in the passenger seat.

"So, where's the party, Arry?!" He pulled out his phone and opened the GPS app then handed it to her. She punched in the address and returned the phone and he couldn't believe what party she planned to crash.

"Damn," Gendry let out a low whistle as he put the car into drive, "we're going to the fancy part of town, boys." He studied Arya out of the corner of his eye with growing concern for his ever-stylish tee shirt and jeans combo. "Maybe we should've dressed up too." Somehow, he didn't think putting a button-up over his shirt counted but it was more than Hot Pie or Drogo had done.

"Nobody gives a fuck what guys wear, stupid." Arya pointed her finger forward, as per tradition, and gave the order to drive. His Lincoln coasted out of the city and in the opposite direction of Flea Bottom to the Red Keep, the richest district in Kings Landing. The houses had gates, the streets had gates, hells: the bloody doghouses had gates.

"I assume you have a plan to get into this ritzy party?" It almost scared him how much he'd changed since he met Arya... but it was damn fun too. She had him doing things he never dreamed of and taking chances he would've rather avoided. Gendry was the type to keep his head down and not concern himself much with the world outside his small group.

"I thought you'd never ask," she quirked her brows and waved her hands like a stage magician. "Get ready for a real adventure, boys." Hot Pie giggled from the back seat and the grunt Drogo gave sounded mostly positive. "I looked up breaches in the fence perimeter on Google maps." Arya explained her plan with all the seriousness of a top-secret mission leader. "Most of them don't even go all around, half are purely for show."

"And the other half?" Gendry admitted to himself her cloak and dagger skills were impressive but couldn't let Arry get a bit head over it.

"Oh that's the best part," she quirked her brows and waved her hands like a stage magician. "We'll have to climb those." Arya rolled her eyes at his doubtful grimace. "Where's your sense of adventure? Besides, don't tell me it doesn't feel good to get one over on these assholes?"

"It feels good," he agreed and accelerated a little faster. Arya directed him to the backstreets that led to the forest behind the Baratheon Manor. Her route completely avoided the security checks. All four of them crept through the woods until the ten-foot metal fence came into view. "Arry! We can't climb that."

"You don't have to, stupid," she grabbed onto his wrist and pulled him towards the fence. "Just give me a boost and I'll walk around to the gate on the side." Arya placed him in the position she wanted and put her hands on his shoulders. Gendry's heart pounded at their closeness but she totally focused on the fence. He laced his fingers together and prayed that he wouldn't drop her and she placed one sandaled foot into his hands. She weighed nothing at all and was plenty strong enough to
pull herself up and swing her leg over the top.

Gendry told himself the reason he couldn't tear his eyes away was because he worried about her safety. Then he noticed Hot Pie gaping at Arya and he covered the boy's eyes. She nimbly crawled over the fence and slid down the other side to land safely on the ground.

"See, I told you," she clapped her hands together and straightened her dress. Hot Pit burst into applause but awkwardly trailed off when no one else joined in. "Come on," she waved a hand and jogged toward the manor until she found the section of fence she sought. They caught up to her just in time to have the gate swing open. "Welcome to the party, boys." Arya grinned like a Cheshire cat and skipped ahead toward the manner. Nobody noted their approach or really paid any attention at all, it was almost too easy to get into the party.

Hundreds of kids were scattered around the manor, in various states of inebriation and undress. Gendry recognized faces that had already graduated and realized this was not just a high school party. They made their way past the pool, narrowly missing being beamed by a beach ball and then cut off by a gaggle of topless girls. Hot Pit wandered off in the direction after the girls and Drogo had somehow already disappeared. Arya grabbed his arm and led him into the manor but suddenly stopped as they entered the main room.

"What are you staring at?" He followed her line of sight to a person that couldn't be missed. "Oh, the hound?"

"He's eye-fucking my sister," she grumbled.

"Your sister is here? Hey!" Gendry grabbed onto her wrist after her hand slipped from his arm to start walking in the hound's direction. "Don't go near him, he's a dangerous guy."

"I'm not afraid of him," she scoffed.

"I am, so just do me a favor and steer clear." Gendry let his hand slide down to hold hers tightly. "I don't want to have to worry about you so stick by my side." Arya glanced at their hands before turning a raised eyebrow up at him. He held his breath as he waited for her to pull her hand away and yell at him for telling her what to do.

"Ok," she smiled and tugged him towards the conspicuous giant keg, "let's get some drinks!"

"I'm driving!" Gendry always got sleepy after he drank and he couldn't keep an eye on Arya if he fell asleep.

"Then I'll drink," she compromised, "and you make sure I don't fall over."

Chapter End Notes

The party has just begun! Arya will get another POV before she leaves the manor but first...
Sandor is up next in: "Thirsty Dog"
He never worked up the nerve to ask the little bird if he could drive her to the party, it was a stupid idea anyway. Sandor never regretted his cowardice more than when she made her appearance. His eyes were drawn to her the moment she arrived, materializing like a dream come true in her long white gown. She stood out like a lighthouse in a sea of asinine self-absorbed teenagers. Sansa looked like she should be on the red carpet, not at some stupid party.

His stomach clenched with anger when he saw who walked in with her, Loras Tyrell, and his entourage of cheerleaders. Her eyes shined with excitement as her hand clung tightly to Tyrell's arm. Like a king and queen, they led the procession of well-dressed beautiful people. The crowd parted for their group as they moved to the center of the room to sit with Joff and his clique. There was no reason to be jealous of Loras but then she smiled at his handsome face and the hound saw red. Redder than the pile of curls atop her pretty head - damn the gods, he was already pissed drunk.

The beautiful people sat in the center of the party, laughing and congratulating each other for being perfect. Fuck them all - he pulled out the small bottle of scotch from his jacket pocket and drained a few gulps. Sansa leaned across Loras to whisper something in his sister's ear and Margery burst into laughter. The little bird covered her mouth, hiding her own giggling behind her hand. Sandor toasted himself on being right, as usual, about her fitting in with that crowd. Just fucking awesome, he drained the rest of the bottle.

It wasn't long before Joff chatted up Sansa with a false smile and offered her a drink, which she tried to refuse politely. Come on, little bird, show some backbone! His eyes darted to Tyrell, who was yucking it up with his sister, not paying any attention to Joff's suspicious behavior. The shit shook his head in denial, clearly refuting the drink's alcoholic content. Sandor quickly crossed the room, snatched the cup out of her hand, and downed the damned drink in one long shot.

It was sweet but burned his throat, confirming the concoction consisted of nearly straight booze. Gin and fruit punch, if he had to guess, damn tasty way to get wasted. Oh yeah... room was spinning mighty fierce - like that ride, that carnival ride... the one that spins a fuck-load. Gonna throw up! Nope, it's all good. Sandor was already feeling perfectly drunk from the bottle of scotch he'd swiped for himself earlier. Nobody ever argued with the scary bad-tempered hound - except for Joffrey Baratheon.

"What the fuck's the matter with you, hound?" The whiney little shit sneered up at Sandor like he could actually do something about it. Want it back, motherfucker? Give me a bucket - I'll give your back your drink! His stomach turned at the thought and he started - fucking giggling - about his own asshole inner monologue.

"I was thirsty," he slurried almost incoherently. Damn, was he that drunk? Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiit... He rubbed his hand over face to try an sober up and focused on not swaying - it's a long fall to the floor from his height. Sansa suddenly burst out laughing, at him or the situation he didn't know. Joffrey scoffed and stalked off, sulking that his plan didn't work. Sandor's head was swimming - like full of fishes and other sea life - and he shook it. The motion did nothing to clear his thoughts, just made a weird
buzzing sound in his ears. "Joff sure knows how to make a drink," he joked, trying to focus his blurred vision on the little bird. A halo of red glowed around her pretty face, which was drawn with concern - possibly, it was hard to tell. She did look hot as all hells though up close, the dress fit her like a second skin, nearly the same shade as her fair complexion. "I need to get some air," he stumbled back, "it's too hot in here." Sansa stood up and moved towards him, freezing his feet in place.

"I'll go with you," she wrapped her arm around his and held it with both her small hands. Fuck his dumbass decision to wear a jacket, and not only because he couldn't feel how soft her palms were. He must look like a train-hopping hobo standing next to a porcelain bride from atop a wedding cake. Sandor never bothered to change out of his t-shirt and gym shorts after working out. Then just covered the outfit with the rumpled coat from his backseat. It made no fucking sense to try and impress anybody with his 'fashion sense' when his face looked like ground beef.

"Sansa, dear, where are you going?" Loras Tyrell finally decided to pull his head out of his ass and pay attention to the girl he came with. The prick looked at both of them like he couldn't believe his eyes. The whole group stared at Sansa with growing concern - probably for her mental health.

"I'll just be outside with Sandor," she pulled Sandor toward the door, "don't worry." He craned his neck back to look back to see Margaery and her brother's shocked expressions and gave them a twisted smile. Sansa ignored them all, leading him to the front door and as they walked outside... her hand slipped into his. It was so soft and warm - he used every bit of his remaining focus to hold onto her gently. She led the way down some steps, around the side of the mansion to a small paved area with a vine-covered pergola over it.

"I noticed this earlier and thought it was pretty." She sat on the bench and reached out to stroke a small purple flower growing on the vine. Sandor sat down next to her, trying not to flop down like a drunk. "You've been watching me since I came in, why didn't you come talk to me?" Busted - so now he's the creepy guy who just stares across the room at her... great.

"You saw me, huh?" Sandor shrugged out of his jacket and draped it around her bare shoulders. Girls expect that kind of shit, right? "It looked like you were having a good time," he braced his forearms on his knees and linked his fingers together. "I didn't want to interrupt." She stayed quiet so he tilted his head - on his good side - toward her. The little bird pulled her arms through his huge jacked and struggled to roll up the sleeves. He turned towards her and grabbed one sleeve to do it himself but she curled her fingers around his hand.

"Sansa," Sansa bit her lip and glanced away when he looked up at her. "I shouldn't say anything but I'm pretty sure Loras is gay." She shook her head, refocusing on Sandor. "I mean, I did not come here to see him..." Even in the dim, he could see the rosy blush rising on her cheeks. "He's not the one who saved me, twice now." There could be no mistaking the stars in her eyes, he gave the girl the wrong idea about him because he treated her too nice.

"That's me," he scoffed, "a knight in shining armor." Sarcasm and mockery - that's how the hound wins his fair ladies. Already filling with regret, he turned his head away to look up at the pergola. "I was thirsty," he mumbled, knowing it was a fucking lie. Sandor gripped his twitching fingers on the stone bench and leaned away from Sansa. For some fool reason his hands wanted to reach out and stroke the soft curls of hair fluttering in the light breeze. She leaned in close into his vision with a knowing smirk.

"Sure, I believe you," she did not sound like she believed him at all. Sandor turned his full face towards her, no longer trying to hide his bad side, and scowled at the girl.
"Calling me a liar, girl?" He growled at her, tilting his head so close to hers that their noses almost touched. Sansa only gasped in response and did not pull away, mouth falling slightly open before she licked her lips temptingly.

"No," she murmured in a low voice, "I'm calling you sweet." Sansa's bright eyes darkened as she peeked up at him through her lowered eyelashes. The thundering in his chest was so loud he was sure she could hear it.

"Sweet?" The word rasped out of his tight, dry throat. "Me?" This was it - now or never - after tonight there would be no way her friends wouldn't tell her all the nasty details.

"Yes, Sandor, you," her voice hitched on his name, making his cock jump to attention. Sansa was looking down at his lips as little puffed breaths came through hers. Blue eyes flashing up towards his, she tilted her head back invitingly. "Are you going to kiss me now?"

"Damn straight," his hands were faster than his mouth, already reaching for her. His fingers crushed the fragile fiery curls as he pulled her face close to his. Her eyes squeezed shut and her lips were slightly pursed in an inexperienced way that made him smirk. He ran the pad of his thumb under her lower lip, causing just the response he hoped for - a gasp. Sandor curled his fingers around her head to tilt her face up and descended on her mouth.

His hand found her waist - hidden in his damnable jacket - and pulled her closer. Sansa tasted tangy and sweet, like lemonade, which must've been what she drank while he got wasted. Good miss little perfect, not even a bit drunk at a party, and letting the hound paw all over her. This proves it - nice guys do finish last. She found the nerve to release the jacket and place her hands on his shoulders. That was enough encouragement for Sandor to haul her into his lap.

"Ah!" Her cry was muffled by his tongue so he broke the kiss, panting heavily. He braced himself for the inevitable cheek-slap and storm-off. Instead, she smiled sheepishly and tugged the jacket's front. "I'm... not cold... anymore." The grin that broke over his face must have been wolfish and damned lustful, but she flushed like he was prince fucking charming. Sandor loosened his hold on her as she let the jacket fall from her pale shoulders and he tossed it the fuck out of his way. Just admiring her ivory skin in the moonlight should be enough for a lowly dog like him.

Sansa ran her hands along his arms to curl them behind his neck and tilted her head to one side, waiting for him to kiss her. She could wait forever for all he cared - he needed to memorize everything about this impossible moment. Before it slipped away. The girl of his dreams literally sat in his lap, waiting for him to kiss her. Sandor could probably fall off a cliff and still die happy after this. Her bright eyes popped open and a concerned expression crossed her pretty face, spurring him into action.

He slid his hands along the soft lace of her dress, over her warm shoulders, one locked behind her neck and the other cupped her delicate jaw. Those pretty eyes fluttered shut again, waiting like a good girl to be kissed. Happy to oblige, Sandor captured her sweet mouth again. When she pressed one small hand against his hammering heart he damn near passed out. Too fucking drunk to care, he plundered her lemony sweetness while Sansa mostly sat still and accepted it. His hands roamed of their own volition, pulling the little bird even closer.

Sansa came alive when his mouth left hers to explore the graceful length of her neck - writhing and arching against him. Her hands grasped, first his shirt then his shoulders, panting and whimpering unladylike sounds. His cock was rock hard beneath her as she squirmed in his lap but she didn't seem to notice. Some rational part of him brain kept reminding him to stay out of the danger zone. Good girls don't appreciate hands up their dress or on their chest... but his mouth was trailing nearer and she didn't seem to mind.
"Sandor..." She whispered his name and he felt like she punched him in the gut. Here it comes - she's going to tell him they have to stop and he should probably not mention this little make-out session to anyone. "What if someone sees us?" Sansa sounded so nervous at the prospect of being seen sitting on the hound's lap that he nearly shoved her off. Sandor followed her sight to a group of boys smoking on the side of the mansion. "Should we go somewhere... more private?" That had his eyes snapping back to her blushing face.

"Little bird," he sighed as he gently set her down on the bench next to her. "You don't want to be seen going upstairs with the likes of me." Sandor grinned down at her innocent expression and rolled his eyes at her naivety. "They'll think we went up to fuck... unless that's what you're getting at? In which case-" He started to get up but she grabbed onto his shirt, her face a mask of pure panic. "I didn't mean that!" Sansa hissed, looking around like somebody around could hear his 'scandalous' talk. She narrowed her eyes on his smirking face and her flustered expression broke into a knowing smile. "Oh," she lightly tapped his arm, "you're teasing me again!" She grasped his wrist and pulled his arm around her shoulders and leaned against his chest with a sigh. "This is the best party I've ever been to." He wrapped his other hand around her waist and tilted his good cheek to feel the tickling curls on her head that smelled like flowers.

"Same here," he tried to keep his growling to a minimum and tamped down his regret for not taking her up on her offer to go upstairs. Her naivety wasn't his problem - he'd probably have her on her back tonight if he played his cards right. Nah, Sandor had to admit, the little bird playing with his fingers and snuggled up to his side was better than a monstrous asshole like him should expect. How could he ever think a single kiss from Sansa could ever be enough? After one, he wanted a thousand more... for starters.

LORAS

He got away from his sister, distracted by some argument with Joffrey over Sansa, and slipped down the hall he watch Renly walk down a few moments earlier. Loras had been waiting for Renly to get away from his college buddies playing some war game on the giant TV. The hall stood in shadow on the way to the butler's pantry. As he turned the corner, they both nearly collided and Loras saved the sleeve of Oreos that spilled from Renly's hands.

"You lost, Loras?" Renly chuckled as Loras handed back the cookies and tried to brush past.

"Nope," he braced a hand against the wall, blocking Renly's path. "I'm looking for you."

"Tyrell," he sighed and tried to move around Loras again. "This crush you have on me is sweet-" No, cookies are sweet, what Loras wanted was far from 'sweet'.

"Don't act like you consider me a kid," he blocked Renly's path again, pushing him against the wall. "I know you want me." Loras braced a hand on either side of his shoulders and Renly made no move to escape. "Why are you avoiding me?"

"I'm not interested in breaking someone's heart," Renly bowed his head and with a heavy sigh. "Especially not yours." He gripped Loras' wrist and ducked under to escape, turning back with a wistful half-smile. "I can't give you what you want."

"What I want," Loras licked his lips and raked his eyes over Renly, "is to suck the white off your dick."

"Loras," he chuckled, "I can't believe you are that same shy scrawny freshman who used to follow me around." But those days were long dead and gone and that scrawny kid no longer existed.
"It's hard not to get a little star-struck," he sauntered closer to Renly, pleased when he did not back away. "When the captain of the basketball team is your first serious crush."

"And that's why this is a bad idea, kid." Renly's mouth might protest, but his body stood still and taunt as Loras moved so close they were almost pressed up against each other.

"That's your mistake right there..." He slipped his fingers under the hem of Renly's shirt and traced the line above the waist of his briefs. "I was a scrawny love-struck kid," he laughed at himself as he let his hand slip higher. "I wrote poems about you and hoped every day you would talk to me." In one quick motion, Loras had Renly up against the wall. "Then I grew up," he whispered in his ear, "now I want to fuck you." Renly dropped his fucking cookies, grabbed Loras' hair, and reversed their positions across the hall. Their mouths met in a searing and too brief kiss.

"There's a back service elevator," Renly whispered the words over Loras' lips. "Meet me there in five." He tore his mouth away with a groan to stare at Loras with an unreadable expression before turning to walk away. Loras heaved a heavy sigh and tilted his head back against the wall and gazed up at the dim light sconces lighting the hall. A slow smile spread over his face as the true weight of his victory sunk in. Finally... after years of unrequested love and lust, tonight be would have Renly Baratheon.

Don't live for the memory, he reminded himself as he pushed off the wall in search of the service elevator. Live for the moment... after this night he would be free of the hold Renly had over him.

Chapter End Notes

Loras/Renly won't be one of the major pairings in this fic but their scene just came to me and could not resist just adding a pinch.

Next up is a Dany/Arya double POV and the party wraps up. I feel like super ridiculously bad about the cleaning crew who have to clean up after these spoiled brats. I mean, I don't even take the time to invent the characters and I still feel bad for them. I've got issues.

I'm thinking of slowing down and forcing my focus back on my other series... I told myself after this chapter I would do it... I think I might be completely full of shit. Just a few more chapters...
The bedroom door closed with a click before she locked it, resting her forehead on it for a moment before turning around. It was too dark to see but she was so tired she just wanted to pass out anyway. Obviously, a day of shopping and a night of hard partying make Dany a dull girl, the party was still going strong. Stumbling to the bed, she kicked off her shoes and crawled onto the soft mattress. She started to unzip her dress, to get more comfortable, when she heard a noise from the shadows.

"No," an impossibly deep voice rasped from the darkness. Dany gasped, rising to her knees on the bed and frantically looking around the room, seeing no one.

"Who's there?" Dany used her most authoritative voice. "Answer me." Fear prickled the small hairs on the base of her neck.

"No one," the voice in the dark was apparently shy and it made Dany smile with relief. She felt a kinship with whoever else would attend a party and then escape it at the first opportunity.

"Tell me your name," she coaxed gently. For a time the deep voice in the shadows remained silent and Dany wondered if she might have upset him by encroaching on his sanctuary. She could take only take so much socializing, even with her best friends around, before she just needed some time alone.

"Drogo." A large shape emerged from a chair shadowed under the window: the faint light behind him did nothing to reveal his identity. He turned and started to walk towards the door and Dany immediately felt guilty for chasing him out.

"Wait, I did not mean to kick you out," she reached out to hand in a gesture to stop him from leaving. "We're both trying to escape and you were here first." Diplomacy was one of her many skills. "You can stay in your corner and I'll use the bed. Agreed?" The giant nodded at her and resumed his place in the shadow under the window. "Hopefully I'll dream of dragons," she murmured, turning to collapse into the pillow.

"Dragons?" His low voice rumbled with the barest hint of interest. "Immune to magic sleep effects and paralysis effects." That got her attention: the guy had barely spoken a few words and was apparently a walking D&D guide. She launched to a sitting position to stare at her mysterious companion. Dany's eyes adjusted to the dark, she could make out Drogo's face, handsome and stoic but still not familiar.

"You play D&D?" She watched with growing excitement as Drogo nodded his head in answer to her question. Dany fought to contain her enthusiasm: she could ask to join his group! "What class is your character?"

"Level 4 Half-Orc Barbarian," his harsh accent almost made him sound like an Orc. That probably really lent some realism to his role-playing!

"So you have a group?" Dany could not contain her delight at the prospect of finding a new group,
anticipation overtook her drowsiness. "Mine just broke up," she explained. "Do you think your

"group would accept someone new?"

"Just added a new player," he answered and she held her breath for the verdict... "DM will say yes."

"Great!" She clapped her hands together and realized she never gave her own name after demanding
to know his. "I'm Dany, by the way." A sigh of relief escaped her throat, feeling as though a great
burden was lifted from her shoulders. "I can't wait to get started on a new character, though I did
love my old character and it took a long time to build her up."

"Level, Race, Class?" In the hint of emotional inflection in Drogo's voice, Dany sensed a simmering
passion beneath his stoicism. Intuition was another of her many, many talents.

"Level 13 Aasimar Paladin," she stated proudly, "with a Silver Dragon mount that I raised from a
wyrmeling." It was unbelievably hard work to raise a dragon. "I've raised three, the first two were
killed before they became adults but Silver was strong."

"You miss it." There might have been just a tiny hint of sympathy in his tone, or perhaps that was
just wishful thinking on Dany's part. Since her group broke up, the only people who could
understand her plight were other tabletop gamers.

"I do," she sighed and balled up the covers in her fist with determination. "But I'm willing to start
from the beginning again. It will be fun to finally start a new character." Dany preferred to have an
optimistic outlook on life.

"Level, Race, Class?" He asked the question like a broken record but Dany imagined: within the
broad chest of the shy giant likely beat a warrior's heart. The poor boy was born in the wrong era,
something else she felt they had in common.

"Come over here and help me think up a good one." She patted the other side of the bed, surprised
when he complied right away. "I was thinking of playing a wizard, with a focus on the school of
Conjuration." The mattress sunk under his heavy weight and Dany had to brace a hand to keep from
rolling towards him. "I'm still the Mother of Dragons," she smiled at his emotionless features. "As a
wizard I could summon a Dragon Strike, Ten adult red dragons would be mine to command." The
thought alone was enough to make her palms feel tingly with anticipation.

"Hard to cast arcane spells," he commented as he folded his massive arms across his chest. Dany
chided herself for ogling a stranger and focused on pulling the coverlet over her bare legs.

"You really know your D&D rules," she scooted up against the headboard, "do you like anything
else?"

"No." His monosyllabic answer to her 'get to know you' question had Dany groaning and shaking
her head.

"Oh, no, you're back to just saying 'no'." She tugged on his shoulder to get him to sit back so she
could look at him. "You must drive your group crazy: let me guess, you never hang out with them
without a table between you." Drogo kicked off his boots and still managed to look stiff when
relaxing against the headboard.

"I have one other friend," he answered.

"And do you talk to that friend?" Dany counted down to his expected answer: 3-2-1...

"No," he predictably replied before adding, "we lift."
"I can tell," at her appreciative tone, his intense black eyes snapped to hers and she raised an eyebrow in challenge. He remained silent, as per tradition, and Dany smiled as she lifted the covers to tuck in the overlarge teenager. All the while, he stared at her with no expression on his handsome face. Dany flopped back on her side and pulled the covers over her chest, clasping her hands together over the blanket.

"I always wanted to have a slumber party where I fell asleep talking about D&D, but my friends are a little more grounded in reality." She stifled a yawn as her exhaustion came back in full force. "How did you get started playing?"

"To learn the common tongue," his reply surprised her and she could think of at least a dozen better ways to learn a language.

"No wonder you're so talkative," she teased.

"Most people fear me, think I'm stupid, they avoid me." For a man of few words, when he did speak, Drogo expressed himself with a certain eloquence. "My D&D group do not care how I talk."

"I can understand," she could relate to his need for acceptance. "I like the way your voice sounds, perhaps you could teach me Dothraki. I have a talent for language and I already know High Valyrian, 'as every good Targaryen should'."

"Dothraki is not like High Valyrian," the deep rumbling sound coming from his chest might have been chuckling. "Your Westerosi tongue is too soft for Dothraki."

"And what do you know about my tongue?" Dany propped up on her elbow to meet his fathomless gaze once more. "Quiet again?" She sighed as she sank back down into the fluffy pillow, still facing towards him. "I'm fading fast..." Another yawn interrupted her words so she decided to stop fighting her fatigue and aimed a bleary-eyed smile at her new friend. "Goodnight, Drogo."

"Me layafat anna jin tihat meyer zheana eme."

ARYA

It proved effortless to avoid Sansa, she disappeared early in the night and probably got sleepy past her bedtime. Arya rolled her eyes at what a dork her sister was and crept around the eerily silent house to wake Gendry and Hot Pie. Despite her master's protests, after some razzing from her, he got completely wasted. The boys eventually passed out on the sectional in one of the many living rooms. She stepped over unconscious teenage bodies on the floor on her way to the couch.

She found Gendry and Hot Pie, each taking up a branch of the sectional couch and their heads tilted together. Sure that the flash and sound were off, Arya admired Gendry's cute sleeping face and took a quick picture. As the party is wound down, everyone paired up and disappeared. It gave her the idea to sneak around to all the closed bedroom doors - to gather evidence of which couples hooked up! One never knows when they might need blackmail material, and being sneaky was her favorite thing to do.

Arya crept upstairs and into the first bedroom, and snapped a picture of Drogo cuddled with... OMG Dany Targaryen, cheerleader and all-around beauty queen of the school! Way to go, Drogo! She slipped out of the room and tiptoed down the hall to the next bedroom. Inside she found Joffrey Lannister and his apparently not-so-ex Margaery Tyrell. They were sprawled naked on an obnoxious Cali-king bed with golden satin sheets. It took some work to angle the phone just right to avoid any nudity in the shot and still showed both of their faces. Snap - got it!
The next room was the best yet - Arya had to restrain herself from shouting for everyone to 'come look'! There on the bed was Ramsay Bolton, Myranda Snow... and Theon Greyjoy, in that order - snap. She covered her mouth to stifle her laughter as she got a few more shots. Snap-snap-snap. Someday she hoped to become a private detective and studying - spying on - her classmates was great practice. This was way more fun than school and learning a bunch of useless junk that would never help her catch bad guys and cheating spouses.

The room at the end of the hall was the only other door unlocked. She snapped a quick picture of Loras Tyrell snuggling some guy with a smile on his face. Arya's work finally done - she descended the stairs and decided they best make an exit before people starting waking up. She leaned over Gendry and momentarily wondered how he would react if she woke him up with a kiss. His breathing was steady as she leaned in close... and blew on his face until he sputtered awake. Gendry's eyes went wide to see her hovering above him as he focused on her pursed lips.

"Wake up, sunshine," she grinned at him and stood up to offer her hand. "We best make our move now while everyone is sleeping." Gendry nodded and rubbed his eyes with one hand and took hers with his other. Arya hauled him to his feet, causing him to stumble into her and he had to put his arms around her for balance.

"Bloody hells," he quickly disentangled his limbs and stumbled back but almost tripped over his own feet. Arya grabbed his other arm and held him steady as he stared at her like a frightened cow.

"Sorry," she mocked, "it's not my fault you weigh nothing." She pushed him out of her way to slap Hot Pie awake before turning back to Gendry. "Let's leave Drogo to his own devices since he hooked up with someone last night and is still in bed with her." They both stared at her in shock and she grinned as she held back the best part. "I have pics," she held up her phone while biting her tongue at their twin gaping expressions.

Leaving the party proved much easier than entering, they still used the back way, but at least there were no fences to climb. Arya did enjoy being hoisted up by Gendry the first time, remembering how firm and strong his shoulders felt... Holy shit - was she blushing?! She raced ahead to the gate while the two boys lagged behind, still worn out from the party. Sleep is for the dead, that's always been her mentality about life.

"Wulp!" Hot Pie grinned at her as he passed through the gate. "That was the best party ever!" Gendry reached out to ruffle her hair and she swatted his hand away even though she liked it. When he was disgusted by touching her, at least it was because he saw her as a girl. It seemed as though he really had accepted her as 'just one of the guys'. Even in a dress - he didn't see her as a girl at all. Arya shrugged at her thoughts as she closed the gate behind her. This is what she wanted after all, to be accepted as his friend.

"I have to hand it to you, Arry," Gendry slung his arm over her shoulders as she approached and granted her a lazy grin. "You really pulled this one off. I don't think I've eaten so much expensive food in my life. Did you notice there were chunks of fucking lobster in the mac and cheese?!" He shook his head in wonder and a low chuckle rumbled in his chest. "I'll never understand rich people." Arya thought about informing him that she would end up a neighbor to the Baratheons once the rest of her family moved to Kings Landing.

"People are people," she answered quietly, "most are assholes, and a few are worth knowing." Gendry looked down at her unusual lack of energy with a puzzled expression. "Hey," she picked at her fingernails as she spoke. "Buy me some breakfast... just us." Arya's eyes darted to Hot Pie ambling happily ahead and then met Gendry's worried gaze. "Please?"

"Sure," he bobbed his head with his brows knitted together in concern. "We'll drop Hot Pie off and
go to my favorite place. You like Eggs Benedict?" She agreed vigorously and he laughed at her enthusiasm. "Oh, then you're in for a treat." Once they were in the car, the motion lulled her to sleep and Arya did not wake until they dropped off Hot Pie. "Still hungry, sleepy-head?" Her loudly growling stomach answered for her. "Yeah, me too," he chuckled and launched into an explanation of the menu options at the restaurant he was taking her to.

Arya mostly listened but her mind felt fuzzy from all the doubts bouncing around inside her head. Once she felt confident in Gendry's friendship, her worries turned from gaining his trust to losing it. In truth, she never told him anything personal about herself or her family because she... To put it bluntly - she was afraid. The less he knew about 'Arya Stark', the more freedom she had to just be 'Arry' - blacksmith's apprentice and 'just one of the guys'. They walked into the diner in the early morning hours to see only a few patrons drinking coffee.

The restaurant appeared unpretentious with mismatched chairs and coffee cups. She appreciated the casual sense of comfortable hominess. The wait staff all greeted Gendry with waves and smiles as he led her to a booth in the back. A middle aged waitress with frizzy blonde hair piled on top of her head approached the table with a genuinely happy smile.

"Our boy is all grown up and bringing along a girl." The woman gushed over Gendry and even bent over to pinch his cheeks. "I never thought I'd see the day! How's your mum?"

"She's fine." He blushed over the attention and lowered his bright blue eyes to the tabletop to fiddle with his silverware wrapped in a napkin.

"You take care of her - you're a good son - not like my good-for-nothing boys." The waitress complained good-naturedly with an indulgent smile on her face. "Ah! Listen to me, jabbering on! What'll ya have?" She whipped out a pad and pen from her apron and looked at Arya with expectation.

"What you described on the ride over sounded good." Arya looked up to Gendry with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Arry," he scoffed and held up the laminated menu, "I described everything they serve."

"It all sounded good," she grinned at him before turning to the waitress. "Just..." she waved her fingers over the table top, "make food appear on the table and I'll eat it."

"We'll have two of my usual," Gendry told the woman as he handed the menus back to her. The waitress beamed down at him first and then at Arya.

"I like a little girl who can eat a lot." The woman ran and appraising look up and down Arya's petite form and clicked her tongue. "We'll put some meat on those bones, sweetie." Then she turned to go put in their orders with the short cook.

"It doesn't matter how much I eat," she grumbled, "I always stay this skinny."

"Most girls would kill for that," he laughed.

"Haven't we established," she raised an eyebrow, "that I'm not like most girls?"

"You got that right." The easy smile fell from his face as his expression turned serious. "So...?" His words trailed off but Arya knew what he was getting at.

"Right, I didn't just ask you to take me here for the hash browns." Arya inhaled deeply and folded her hands on the table to look Gendry straight in the eye. "I think I have to be honest with you.
Before I moved here... I got into some trouble, big trouble, which is why my parents decided I should move with my dad to Kings Landing."

"What'd you do?" He appeared to have no trouble whatsoever believing that she got in enough trouble to be sent halfway across the continent.

"I broke into a power plant." She held up her hand, refusing to answer any questions about the situation. "I had my reasons. Anyway, I got caught and that was right around the time my father got an offer from Robert Baratheon." She fiddled with her fingers, more nervous than she could ever remember feeling. "But... you see... my father did not come here for a job exactly. He came to negotiate a merger with his company. Have you ever heard of Stark North Corp.?

"The tech company?" His eyes widened in recognition and something akin to horror. "Arya... 'Stark'?"

"You got it," she snapped her finger into a gun and fired at Gendry but let her hand fall to the table at his dumbfounded expression. "I didn't mean to keep it from you, I just wanted... I wanted you to meet me first, without my family name getting in the way." Arya floundered, struggling to find the words to explain without sounding like she was making excuses. "I don't want to wonder if my friends like me because I'm - my family is rich."

"Wow," he blew out a long breath as he absorbed the information. The waitress came back with their coffees but apparently picked up on the tension between them and left without a word. "That's some shit, Arry." He poured a drop of milk from a saucer into his coffee as Arya dumped three sugars into hers. "I guess I can understand..."

"I'm still the same person I was when we walked into this diner." She hoped he could not detect the note of desperation in her voice.

"So..." a hint of a smile tugged at his lips, "I was right?"

"What?" Arya narrowed her brows at him in confusion.

"You are 'milady': you're a highborn!" A wide grin broke over his face - Gendry was far too pleased with his stupid joke.

"Stop!" She wadded up her napkin and threw in in his face. "Ya ass!"

"Yep," he tossed the napkin aside, "still Arry Wolfborn, I see." He ran his hand through his tussled black hair and gave her a lopsided grin that made her heart skip a beat. "I don't care who your father is: I like you for who you are... As a friend."

"Me too," she blew out a long breath in relief. "For just a little while, let's keep this between us."

"As you command, milady." He gave her a mock bow with a waving flourish of his hand.

"And stop calling me that!" Arya complained but she secretly didn't mind his teasing at all - no way she was ever going to let him know that.

"Never," he threatened, slouching in the booth and crossing his arms. His clothes were rumpled from sleeping in them and his short hair stuck out in every direction. Somehow, his untidiness only highlighted the way his eyes shimmered with happiness. The thump-thump in her chest was so loud she felt worried that he could hear it...

"Here it is, kids!" The waitress stopped by the table, balancing a giant tray full of food on one hand.
"Dig in, and just holler if you need some more coffee." She breezed away to take care of the
customers coming in for the start of the morning rush. The feast before them had Arya's mouth
watering as she pulled up the sleeves on her dress.

"How is it?" His fork hovered above his plate as Arya took her first bite.

"Oh my gods," she closed her eyes as she savored the explosion of deliciousness in her mouth. "I'm
having a foodgasm right now." He choked on his own food and gulped half his glass of ice water
before refocusing on her. "It's really fucking good, thanks for bringing me here."

"Let's make this a regular thing," he used his fork to cut up his egg and let the yolk run over the hash
browns. "We'll need a hearty breakfast to keep up our energy at the forge."

"You'll get no arguments here," she happily chewed a giant mouthful of food. She tried to remember
the last time she felt so... hopeful. Arya peeked at Gendry over her fork to catch him watching her as
well. They both just smiled at each other and continued feasting in companionable silence.

Chapter End Notes

So... I had lots of fluffy feels all through writing this chapter. I hope it's not *too*
cheesy!

Sansa's POV is next... She will make an attempt to: 'dun-dun-dun!'... DTR. I wonder
how Sandor will react? ^_^

Also, more of Gendry being freaking adorkable...

I'm having too much fun, ya'll! Somebody stop me before this fic takes over my life!
Oh, wait.
The Ride Home

SANSA

She knew she should feel embarrassed for sleeping on Sandor's shoulder all night but it was so romantic! He stayed up all night and watched her sleep; like the lyrics from every great love song ever! Sansa walked on air, after he gently woke her and offered her a ride home, wishing the party had never ended... It was all so magical! As he maneuvered his car around the other kids' terrible parking jobs, he stifled a loud yawn behind his hand. Guilt prickled her conscious over his lack of rest.

"You must be tired..." She pulled the pins out of her hair and let the tightly coiled tresses loose with a sigh. It felt good to let her hair down after having it pinned up all night, even though she must look like a gorgon. "Sorry-"

"It's better to not sleep after getting that fucked up." His voice sounded harsh but she assumed excessive drinking and over-exhaustion were the cause. Despite his growling tone, Sansa felt glad he did not mind staying up while she snoozed in his arms. "Besides," his voice softened and she noticed him peeking at her, "I was comfortable." Her stomach fluttered with fuzzy warm feelings that made her want to do her victory dance.

"Me too," she turned to look out the window to smile to herself, biting her lip to try to control her beaming. "Um... Sandor?" She inhaled deeply to gather her courage, bunching the lace of her dress in her fist. "I would like it very much," she peeked shyly at him, "if I could call you my boyfriend." After everything that happened between them, the question was merely a formality. He snorted and shook his head, aiming a nasty sneer at her that jerked Sansa out of her rosy thoughts.

"You don't want me for your boyfriend." He said it like it was a well-known fact and she was stupid for even thinking otherwise. His dismissiveness stunned Sansa into silence, though her mind screamed for a justification. "Whatever reputation you've already built will be destroyed - you'll be ridiculed." That was the most unreasonable excuse she ever heard in her life. Even 'it's not you, it's me' would be better! Sandor took it upon himself to worry about her reputation when he cared nothing for his own and that made him a hypocrite.

"You're exaggerating," she snapped in indignation, pulling her seat-belt to turn towards him. "If you don't want to date me then you should just be honest." He barked a disrespectful laugh and eyed her sideways with a twisted scowl. The car suddenly felt stifling but opening the windows would tousle her already mangled hair. Sansa could not bear to make her appearance even more ridiculous.

"I'm being honest and realistic," his implication that she was not rang loud and clear. "Trust me - the hound is not boyfriend material." Sandor scratched the scruff growing on his cheek and snorted an exasperated huff. "Just show up at school tomorrow and open your fucking ears, girl!" He gripped the steering wheel so hard she could see his knuckles turning white. "See if you still want me at the end of the day."

"Believe me, Sandor," she hated herself for sounding so pitiful, "I do want you as my boyfriend." His hand ran over the scarred bald patch on his head as he grumbled something to himself. Sansa
was not sure but it sounded like a denial punctured with expletives. "Of course I do! I don't..." She felt her face burning with embarrassment. "I'm not the type of person who just kisses anybody." To compare her few chaste kissing experiences with the night before was laughable and pitiful.

"Yeah, I could tell," he mocked without mercy. She turned her head slowly towards him, jaw hanging with disbelief that he would deride her kissing ability. To tease her about such a sensitive thing went much further than his usual jokes. Sansa could not believe this was the same boy who flattered her, rescued her twice, and even held her all night while she slept!

"What is that supposed to mean?" The high pitch of her voice was grating into her own ears but the anger rising in her overtook any embarrassment. She might not have ever kissed the way the Sandor did it but she didn't think she was that awful!

"Nothing!" He slapped his open palm against the wheel, his face flushed with anger. "Gods-fuck-it, quit your chirping," he growled and rubbed his fingers over his forehead and down the side of his face. "I've got a bloody headache."

"Because you drank too much," she lectured, knowing full well that it would only exacerbate the situation. "You know, as an athlete you should treat your body better-

"Enough!" He roared, cutting off her words. "Who are you, my mother?" Sandor inhaled deeply through his nose and out through his mouth before lowering his voice to a low growl. "Lay off it... Just, shut it, would you?" His hand held onto his forehead, blocking her view of his face.

"Why are you ruining everything?" Tears collected on her eyelids and threatened to spill over but she used every bit of her willpower to fight them. "I don't understand!"

"That's what I do, little bird," his soft gruff words were almost sad, "I ruin shit."

"I don't believe that..." Sansa swallowed down the bile rising in her throat as her mind scrambled to fix whatever caused their argument. "I'm sor-"

"Believe what you want," annoyance crept back into his voice as he returned his hand to the wheel. They rode in silence for the rest of the trip and Sandor remained mute even as he pulled up in front of her building. So, they were back to not even saying goodbye? What an utterly and tragically disappointing end to her fairytale night.

"Thank you for the ride, Sandor." Even if they were on the outs, it was still right to be polite. Sansa opened the car door and turned back, trying and failing to meet his eyes. "I had a nice time... for most of the time." Just a few hours earlier, she had never been happier. With demanding lips and gentle hands, Sandor fashioned her wings to fly. Then used his foul temper to gust a storm into her blue morning skies. Was she so easy to toss aside?

"Yeah," he muttered, "see ya around." Sandor would not even look at her and that was the worst part of the whole awful situation. He rubbed the burned side of his face again and turned away to look out the driver side window in dismissal. Sansa lingered a moment longer, knowing if he apologized she would accept without hesitation. No longer willing to throw away her pride, she exited the car with as much grace as she could muster.

"Bye," she murmured and shut the car door to watch him drive away, feeling lower than she ever had. Sansa turned, pulled her shoulders back, and held her head up as she strode into the entrance of the apartment building. What had she done to make him so upset? The mystery plagued her mind as she shuffled inside the elevator to ride up to her floor. Arya left the door unlocked but Sansa was too tired to care, yet not too tired to turn a stupid lock!
She unzipped her dress to let it fall to the floor in the hallway and stepped into the bathroom to finish undressing. Before the water even got hot she stepped inside, hissing as the cold pellets hit her skin. Part of her wanted to cry, releasing all of her pent-up frustration and disappointment, in the sanctuary of the shower. No one would see her shameful weakness or hear her self-pity... But Sansa was not sad, at least not nearly as much as she felt angry. Pure fiery rage coiled in her stomach and continued to grow with every passing moment.

He thought he could just lead her on and then dump her of like yesterday's trash?! She deserved an apology first, followed quickly by a very good explanation! She would not keep being the meek little bird he compared her to! But first, Sansa needed some trusted advice and wished there was anybody else she could ask...

**GENDRY**

He pulled the Lincoln into the parking lot in front of her apartment building. The engine idled as she looked up at the structure with reluctance. Gendry hoped she felt reluctant to leave because she wanted to stay with him: he certainly wanted her to stay. Just when he thought he couldn't be any more enamored of Arya, she went and did something else amazing and brilliant. Every time she opened her tempting smart mouth, he fell just a little bit more for her. Even when she was quiet, a much rarer event, she looked so... loveable.

Like the tuft of hair that sticks up in the center of her head like an antenna, it made her resemble a cute little alien. Or the way her dimples kinda looked like quotations so, everything she says 'reads' as sarcastic. Also, she has this subtle derisive way of praising people so he can't take offense without seeming sensitive. Actually, that last one was kinda annoying... but still adorable in a quirky way.

"So..." He searched for the words to prolong their time together for just a few more minutes. "Did you like the food?" The trip to the diner wasn't exactly a 'test' but she passed with flying colors, as expected. She fit right in with the place he felt most comfortable, the restaurant his mother used to waitress in. He grew up in those booths while mom tirelessly smiled at everyone who walked in, even when she was tired and sore. Even after finding out Arry was a gods-honest 'heiress', she was still more down to earth than anyone he knew.

"It was awesome!" Her lips turned up, crinkling the corners of her lively gray eyes. She leaned towards him ever so slightly and for the span of a breath, Gendry thought 'this is it: we're going to have our first kiss now'. The first kiss of one-hundred-thousand kisses to come... But all she did was remove her seat-belt and he almost died from disappointment.

"And you," she slanted her head with a raised knowing eyebrow, "did you have fun at the party?" Gendry stared at her unintentionally sexy expression, afraid he'd start babbling if he answered.

"Yeah," he nodded, "I did." It might have been the best day of his life, with two exceptions: one being the night Arry showed up to intrude on his camping trip. That night he found out she talked nonsense in her sleep and snored if her head tilted to far back. Every discovery he made about her proved more interesting than the last.

"I told ya!" She grinned and bobbed her head back-and-forth with a haughty expression. "Stick with me, kid," she jerked a thumb at her chest, "we'll have all kinds of adventures." He believed her too, life would never be dull with her around. And he planned to keep Arya around him till death parted them and then forever in the afterlife, if one existed. Before all that happened... he had to find some way to get her to fall in love with him. For once in his life, searching something on the internet turned up not a pinch of useful information.

"Can I see you tomorrow?" The too-desperate question rushed out of his mouth and Gendry quickly
corrected himself. "I mean: do you want to come to the forge with me?" The distance between them was less than an arm's length and they leaned towards each other over the center console. All he had to do was lean forward and press his lips against hers but he just couldn't draw up enough courage.

"Of course!" She perked up, fresh excitement over her face. "I'm always down for a bit of smithing." Arya searched herself and glanced around his car to be sure she had everything before aiming another grin at him. "Alrighty, see ya then!" He grabbed her wrist to stop her from leaving and held his breath as she turned back with a curious expression. "What?"

"Arya... I..." he swallowed hard as his eye flickered to her parted lips and then back up to meet her gaze. Her eyes were wide and unblinking, shining in the morning sun and looking at him with some kind of expectation. Now or never! And then Gendry chickened out: story of his life. "I still have your phone," he released her to dig around in his pocket for her cell.

"Oh!" Arya smacked her forehead for being so forgetful and held out her hand to accept the phone. "Thanks, Gendry," she sang. "Call me when you wake up and I'll sleep with my phone." He never felt so jealous of a bloody cell phone in his entire life. Of course she had to leave him wondering what she slept in, maybe some adorable pajamas, or maybe just a big shirt and nothing else. Maybe just nothing...

"Okay, bye..." She left with a wave and he watched her walk to the entrance. That might've been his chance to kiss her and he completely missed it, or she might've punched him in the face for trying. Better to err on the side of caution: if Arry wanted him to kiss her, she would just do it herself. She wasn't the type of girl to sit back and wait to be kissed. Patience: all good things come to those who wait. Someday Arya would see their love was written in the stars and they were fated to be together. Until then, he would wait for her... always.

Chapter End Notes

You're mad too, aren't you?! I'm flippin' mad and I wrote the damn chapter! Not at Gendry or Arya, they are progressing just fine... *Sigh* It's that damned Sandor Clegane! What's his deal?! Well... you'll get to know tomorrow. I really slugged through this chapter because every other sentence of Sansa's POV I kept jumping ahead to the next Sandor POV!

Who do you think Sansa is going to for advice? :P
Next chapter is going to be a long one.
The Hound Doesn't 'Date'

JON

The next Monday morning Jon discovered Sansa waiting at his locker.

"Hey," she greeted him with a shy smile. They never really got along so he wondered why she would seek him out.

"Hey," he nodded a greeting and unloaded his backpack into the locker. "What's up?"

"I know it's weird, my coming to you like this..." She sighed and leaned against the locker. "I need some advice and you are pretty much the only teenaged guy I know. I need a fresh perspective from an unbiased male source."

"Still," he hesitated as he searched for the right words, "we're not exactly 'close'."

"That's my fault," the sad expression on her face almost made him argue, though she spoke the truth. "I think it might be good to 'clear the air' between us."

"Walk with me," the empty room should be vacant and it was the perfect spot to have a heart-to-heart. Somehow, it seemed people always came to him with their problems and he never minded though often doubted he deserved the role. "Tell me what's troubling you," he used his serious voice as he shut the door behind them and noticed one corner of her mouth to lift.

"I have a confession to make." Sansa walked around the room looking around and avoiding his eyes. "There was this one time..." she sat at the table and held her face in one hand, "I feel so guilty about this. You are going to hate me when I tell you, it's so stupid."

"Sansa, if I won't judge you," he assured, joining her at the table. She nodded and inhaled a heartening breath, holding it for a few seconds before slowly blowing out.

"Years ago, daddy came home excited about tickets he bought to a basketball game." Sansa smiled at the memory but it did not quite reach her eyes. "He told me about the team and where the game would take place and then... he invited you to use the other ticket." Jon remembered that day: he was twelve and totally pumped to go to his first professional sporting event. "I know I should have expected it and I never expressed a big interest in sports at that point..." She paused, her voice breaking with restrained emotion.

"I wanted to go with him," she whispered, studying the fake wood grain on the table. "I wanted him to want me there." Sansa inhaled and wiped her eyes before turning them on him. "From that day, I went out of my way to ignore you, even though I knew it was wrong to be envious. Daddy loves me, I know that, but sometimes it seems like he doesn't know me or even care to. He has his sons, and Arya, and you... You aren't even his kid, so I guess I picked you to vent my jealousy." She dashed away a few more tears. "I'm sorry, Jon, more than I can say."

"I never would have imagined you were jealous of me." The idea was so absurd he laughed, though he didn't feel particularly happy. "I was jealous of you." Jon expected his confession came as much
less of a surprise than hers. "All of you, for being Uncle Ned's kids. I wished he was my dad more times than I could count."

"That's normal, I think..." Sansa nodded in understanding before glancing away with shame. "How I behaved towards you was awful and you did not deserve it."

"I feel lucky that your father allowed us to live with your family while I grew up." He put a hand on her drooped shoulder and she gave him a watery smile. "I'm an only child but I got to grow up with four siblings."

"You count me as one of your siblings?" She raised a thin red eyebrow in disbelief and he gave her a reassuring smile.

"We might not be the closest but I would do anything for you, Sansa." He bumped his fist against her shoulder. "I mean that." "Me too, Jon." She returned his smile and breathed a sigh of relief. "Let's try to be closer from now on."

"Deal," he agreed. "Let's start with the advice you seek from my 'unbiased male' insight." He slipped back into his deep somber voice and she giggled in response. "I'm honored you would come to me, but if this is a dating question. I am literally the last person you should ask."

"It's more general than that," she assured him. "There's this guy," Sansa's smile turned shy as a blush glowed in her cheeks. "He flirts with me, he kissed me, and he even saved me from Mr. Baelish."

"Creepy Pete?" Jon shuddered at the thought of his cousin, or any girl, being harassed by that pervert. "I hate that guy. Sorry, go on."

"This boy..." she frowned with a wrinkled brow, "I think he likes me but when I asked him to be my boyfriend he rejected me. I can't figure out what I did wrong. I hoped you would be happy to tell me exactly what my 'problem' is."

"Did he say why?" With himself being the most notable exception, Sansa was nice to everyone and one of the prettiest girls he knew. Jon could hardly guess why any guy would turn her down.

"He said my reputation would be tarnished." She groaned and rolled her eyes, clearly displeased with the guy's reason. "But I don't care about that; my friends are not judgmental people. Everyone else can just mind their own business."

"Sounds like he's intimidated by you," Jon spoke from experience.

"Me?" She blinked in surprise. "That's highly unlikely."

"You're beautiful," he reminded her, "also a model student, you play volleyball, and made the cheer squad. If you weren't my cousin, I would probably pass out if you tried to talk to me."

"He's not the sort of boy to be intimidated by anyone." She fidgeted with her fingers and looked away, probably having no idea how truly unapproachable she really was. All girls are intimidating to guys to some extent, and the prettier they were only intensified the problem.

"Maybe you're putting a lot of pressure on him," he suggested, "thinking he's above you. That's a mighty high pedestal."

"Wow," she nodded with understanding. "I'm coming to you will all of my life's problems from now
"Hey, now!" He held up his hands in protest. "I could be completely wrong. If I am, this guy sounds like a dumbass and you should move on."

"I think it might already be too late for that," she sighed but didn't really sound too upset, "I really like him."

"You should tell him that," he advised and then lowered his tone seriously in imitation of Uncle Ned. "Liking someone is a good thing: if they don't like you back, it shouldn't ruin your feelings."

"How did you," she struggled to control her giggling at his solemn voice, "get so wise?"

"Mom is like you, she gives her whole heart away," he sighed at the memories, "and it's led to a few bad breakups. I have extensive experience comforting the heartbroken. Just promise me you won't let some guy become the center of your universe."

"Um..." Sansa hung her head forward and twirled a strand of hair. "That is particularly good advice."

"I know," he rolled his eyes at her sheepish expression. "You were born to be lovesick: the most hopeless romantic I know." Every movie he could remember seeing with Sansa as kids, she cried happy tears whenever two characters fell in love. "I hope this guy is worth it."

"I hope so too," she murmured before shrugging and waving goodbye. "Thanks, Jon."

"Bye, Sansa." The bell rings and they head to class, Jon started to wish he were brave enough to confess his own crush. He spotted her wild mane of bright red tendrils as soon as he entered the class. She usually tied it back but for the moment, it was free and untamed as the girl to which they belonged. Ygritte was the prettiest girl in the school, as far as Jon could tell. For the millionth time, he wondered if she was freckled everywhere or if some parts were white as snow. A girl without freckles was like the night sky without stars.

She looked up and caught him staring, returning his gaze with a lusty quirk of her brows, which was the problem. It's not that Ygritte did not have any interest in him: she was too interested. Jon was a junior, seventeen and still a virgin. That might be fine for a girl, but it was unheard of amongst his peers. It was probably the reason why he did not have many friends, some thought he was closeted gay and others just thought he was unhinged.

They didn't understand what it was like to be raised by a teenaged single mother. All seven hells would freeze over before he would ever risk getting a girl pregnant. No matter how many pills and condoms were used, there was always a risk that he couldn't afford to take. Jon knew he might make an exception for Ygritte... if she wasn't so damn intimidating.

SANDOR

He knew he was in trouble by the confident way she strode towards him. The little bird made the hallway into her own personal runway. His eyes slowly trailed up her long legs, over her perfect body... all the way to the pretty scowl on her face. Damn, she looked so hot when angry. Whatever reason he had for avoiding her slipped his mind, replaced by the memory of soft lemonade flavored lips.

"Sandor Clegane, come with me." He never had a dominatrix fantasy until just that moment. The little bird would look good in shiny black latex... "Right now, mister!"

"Lead the way," he motioned for her to march ahead. He surveyed her swaying hips while she
strutted ahead, paying no attention to their destination. From his position, he could let his eyes wander as much as he liked and thought he just might follow the little bird anywhere. Sandor regretted the way he left things between them but didn't know shit about getting a girl's forgiveness. His real talent was driving people away - never had a need to do the opposite before. She whirled around, hands on her hips, with an inpatient unflinching scowl.

"You owe me an apology," she demanded, "and an explanation." Sandor noticed they stood on the side of the administration building. An apology was flat out of the question, she should've known better than to annoy someone hung over. Although, she didn't deserve to have his temper unleashed on her. He flew too high that night - started to think he might give 'dating' his little bird a chance. His offer to drive her home spilled from his lips without thought. Or else he would've remembered why he didn't ask to drive her to the party in the first place.

"I don't apologize or explain shit to anybody," he crossed his arms and stared down at her. "You're not stupid, little bird, I'm sure that comes as no fucking surprise." How could he explain his chicken-shit behavior to someone who had no concept of what it's like...? When they walked beside each other, he could keep her on his good side and almost forget the other side existed. But in the car, there was no escaping her eyes on him. That morning he felt like the sun was beaming straight on his face and the only thing worse than her looking was the way she kept glancing away.

His scars felt nothing unless someone stared at them - or avoided them - and then they pricked and tingled. 'She's just shy because she had a crush on him', that's what he tried to tell himself. No amount of rationalization relaxed the irritation at feeling exposed and put on display. That's why they could never work between them - Sansa couldn't live on his good side. And her sitting there, looking like a goddess first thing in the morning didn't help. Neither did the pounding headache from drinking too much, also partially her fault.

"I demand it!" She stamped her little foot on the ground like an angry child. "You've been horrible to me and I don't deserve to have my feelings so completely disregarded." Sansa stepped forward and jabbed her finger in the air at him. "I like you and I will keep on liking you even if you don't like me back, that is not my problem."

"What do you really want from me?" He ran his hand over his face in frustration, too fucking drained to keep having this pointless conversation. There was no way he would 'talk about his feelings' with her, though an apology sounded less and less like a terrible idea.

"Hand holding, kissing, terms of endearment, and dates." She held up a finger with each item she listed and then crossed her arms with her haughty chin tilted up towards him. "It's rather standard, I believe."

"The hound - doesn't - date." Did he have to sky-write it for her to understand? Sandor could not believe she still wanted to date him after the shitty way he treated her.

"Oh! 'The hound doesn't date'!??" Her voice lowered into a growling imitation of him before she huffed in indignation. "Well that explains a lot," she threw her hands up with an exasperating laugh. "Apparently being together at Joffrey Baratheon's party wasn't a date."

"That wasn't a date - that was me saving your ass - again." He rolled his eyes and snorted while smirking at her. "You fell asleep on my shoulder - a drunk guy on the bus did that last week, am I dating him too?!"

"Sandor Clegane," her voice screeched and unpleasant way, "you are a hateful and mean boy! You claim to dislike bullies but if you didn't like me, you could let me down gently!"
"Oh course I like you!" He didn't mean to roar his confession, not stopping even as her jaw dropped open. "What fool wouldn't like you?!" Sandor waved his hand at her from head to toe. "Beautiful, smart, and funny 'good girls' don't like the hound - they can't even look at me."

"I'm looking at you, right now," she whispered, "I like you." Sansa turned her blue eyes up at him with such an expression of hopefulness he almost promised her anything she asked. "So, will you be my boyfriend now?" He didn't deserve her and she definitely didn't deserve a grouch like him. Who else, then, if not him? At least, he'd never let her waste her life on him and he'd kill any asshole who thought to turn her into a trophy. She was no prize to be won, nor a little bird to be kept in a cage.

Would it be so bad if they had a bit of fun and found some happiness with each other? Didn't he deserve at least one happy memory from high school? For whatever fool reason, she liked him and somehow managed to mostly ignore his face. No other girl even came close to accepting him so completely... And how'd he thank her? By biting her head off like he was kicking off shark week. He was done being the shark and the dog and all the other animals they labeled him. Sandor wanted to be just a normal guy who liked a girl - couldn't he do that just once?

"Don't ignore me," she scowled, "it's rude!"

"I was just thinking..." At his words, she released an unladylike snort and he raised an eyebrow in response. "Now who's being rude?" The little bird blushed and had the grace to look away ashamed. "No, you're not wrong - I'm not much of a thinker. Not much of a talker either..." Sandor took in a deep breath and slowly exhaled out of his nose. "I'm sorry." The words were unfamiliar on his tongue and she looked stunned. "I'm an asshole, that's not going to change..." He shoved his twitchy hands in his pockets and stared down at the toe of his boot. "But I'll try, for you."

"Really?" Her eyes widened in disbelief as she clasped her hands together to her chest. "You want to try to..." Sansa furrowed her brow as she paused, "be 'with' me?"

"I just said I would, didn't I?" He sniffed and shrugged his shoulders. "The hound is nobody's 'boyfriend' but, yeah, I'm yours."

"And I am yours," she stepped closer and tipped her head back to look up at him. "So... not 'boyfriend'?" Sansa put one slim finger to her chin and glanced at the ceiling. "Then... Beau? Paramour? Suitor? Gentleman caller? Lover?" Her eyes flashed to his with a mischievous grin, clearly pleased with herself for nabbing the hound. Whatever the fuck they called it, she had him twisted around her little finger.

"I like that last one," he moved even closer, keeping his voice low and their eyes locked together. "Say it again."

"No!" She covered her blushing face with her hands and shook her head. "Now I'm all embarrassed!" He tugged on her wrist to uncover her face and cupped her chin to tilt her eyes up towards him.

"Why should you be shy," he dipped his face closer to hers and smiled as her breath caught, "in front of your man?" Sansa was as sexier than Aphrodite and more innocent than the little mermaid. Wait... Didn't she die for the human she loved? Good thing fairy tales are bullshit. The Disney one was even worse, the mermaid becomes a boring human and gets married. At least the original had some fucking guts. Good thing Disney movies were bullshit.

"My man?" Her eyelashes lowered and she glanced away a soft blush blooming in her cheeks and a smile curling on her perfect lips. "I like that, that's what I'll call you to others, unless we're alone..." Sansa peeked back up at him and licked her lips. "Lover," the way she murmured that word had his
cock straining against his jeans.

"You can call me whatever you like," he groaned and closed his eyes, "if you say it like that."

"Like what?" She tugged at the front of his shirt to regain his attention and peered up through her lashes at him.

"I'm so fucked," he hadn't mean to admit it out loud but that didn't make it any less true. Sandor Clegane was totally and completely fucked.

"From you," she pouted, "I'll take that as an expression of affection."

"Take it how you like, little bird." He shrugged as if he couldn't care less though he hardly cared about anything more then what she thought about him.

"You're so mean to me," her lower lip stuck out even more. The temptation to taste her made him wrap a hand around her waist and draw her nearer.

"You're the genius who wants me for her boyfriend..." He tucked her hair behind her ear.

"Sometimes I worry about you."

"Don't you always worry about me?" She tilted her head to the side, exposing the length of her neck as she peeped up at him.

"I'm so fucked..." Sandor had nothing to complain about, fully aware life as he knew it would never be the same.

"I'm beginning to see that," she grinned. "Don't worry! I won't abuse the apparent power I have over you..." she narrowed her eyes in a mock scowl, "much." Sandor couldn't take her sparkling eyes and perfect lips any more - though he knew he should've asked first. She gasped against his mouth as it crashed onto hers, savoring her sweet taste until she slumped against him in surrender. He broke the kiss, resting his forehead against hers, leaving them both breathless.

"Sansa," he kept his eyes closed as he pleaded without shame, "let me give you a ride home." He knew that second chances were few and far between, this time he had to get it right.

"Okay, I'll just text daddy." She beamed happily and turned away to find her phone and text her father. "Ready!" Sansa clung to his arm, on his good side, and chirped about date nonsense all the way to the parking lot. A feeling of impending doom crushed down on him at the prospect of having her stuck on his bad side.

"On second thought - you drive." He fished his keys out of his pocket and tossed them to her,

"Me?!" Sansa stared at him in wide-eyed confusion with more than just a hint of fear.

"You have your permit, right? I'm eighteen." He pointed out the obvious and waited for understanding to dawn over her features.

"Oh, I don't know..." she eyed his prime-condition 1972 Buick Skylark warily. "Your car is sort of intimidating."

"A car is a car, little bird." Sandor walked over to the driver side door and opened it for her. "Come on," he coaxed, "don't tell me you've already mastered driving."
"No," she made no move to get in, "I signed up for driving class."

"Fuck that, drop that shitty class." Sandor moved around the door to pull her backpack off and toss it in the backseat. "I'll teach you everything you need to know." Though he hadn't meant any lustful intent behind his words, a fresh pink blush rose on her cheeks. So, the little bird had her mind in the gutter? That's suited him just fine.

"Okay..." She relented and climbed into the car and he jogged around to get into the passenger side. "How do I adjust-" Sandor reached between her knees and pulled on the bar to fix the seat to her height. "Oh!" Her wide blue eyes gazed at him as her pink lips parted in surprise, panting quick little gasps that had him grinning. "Thanks," she breathed before turning her attention back to driving. "Buckle up! Adjust mirrors, turn over the engine, put in reverse..." She smiled as she carefully made her way to the exit of the lot. "It feels like this car has life inside it, I know that sounds stupid."

"No, you're right." He braced a hand behind her headrest and relaxed. "The Skylark wants to fly..." Sandor eyed her sideways, "we can go on the highway if you want."

"Oh!" Pure panic overtook her pretty face. "I don't know..."

"The first time is scary but exciting - but I'll let you go as fast as you want." His words dripped with innuendo and she turned beet red from her hairline to her neck in response.

"Alright!" She nodded her head with excited determination as she switched into the lane towards the highway. "I'm going to see what this baby can do!" Sandor chuckled at her eagerness, wondering if she'd be so enthusiastic when he kissed her goodbye. He knew the clock was already ticking down to the next time he fucked everything up. In the meantime, he'd try his best not to be his usual asshole self. 'Try' - being the key word.

Chapter End Notes

*_ _* Whenever I love my chapter titles I hate the entire chapter... Eventually I was just like: 'good enough!' Apologies.

Thanks to mygiantoflannister I started writing Sandor's first year of college. I'm not a 'time gap' kinda writer... This is going to be a long one, folks.
Gathered Round the Table

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

GATHERED ROUND THE TABLE

GENDRY

He arrived at the room before anyone else: at least that's what he thought. When Arry said she was 'going to get changed', for some stupid reason he thought she must mean in the girl's room. Nope, she meant the empty room and Gendry walked in to see her naked from the waist up... But, of course, facing away from the door. Worst possible way for the situation could go down, totally awkward and not worth the embarrassment. She shrugged on her shirt and stuffed her clothes inside her bag before turning around.

"Hey," she greeted casually, as he tried to stop obsessing over the fact that she wasn't wearing a bra. It wasn't a big deal she probably did it all the time and he never even noticed, but it was all he could think about. "Dude?" Arya waved a hand at him to get his attention.

"Next time lock the door," the words tumbled out without his permission, "what if I was Hot Pie?" He knew lecturing her was a complete waste of his time, only earned him a scowl and a roll of her pretty eyes. Gendry threw his bag on the table and took a seat, avoiding her annoyed stare.

"What's the difference?" She plopped down in her seat and kicked her feet up on the table, her shoulders curving back over the top of the chair... Gendry turned his focus towards rifling through his bag and swallowed his excessive salivation.

"I guess there isn't any," even to his own ears, it sounded like grumbling. There was no taunting in her tone, but her comment pierced straight through his heart like a thin blade. Arya swung her legs down and leaned forward to grab onto his arm and Gendry froze. She tilted her head into his vision, scowling with her lips pursed and so... close. If he just leaned forward little bit, they'd be kissing, and the only reason he didn't was the fear she might not kiss him back.

"Come on," she whined, "don't be mad. You didn't see anything... yet." Gendry stared in shock at her gleeful expression as she launched into an excited explanation. "Someday I'm going to have a sick back-piece - a wolf howling." She tugged his arm in and the soft fabric of her tee shirt grazed his arm. "It's gonna be so totally bad-ass!" Gendry rocketed to his feet and took a step away from her.

"Arry," he wheezed, "just cut it out." His heart thundered in his chest as he tried to get ahold of himself.

"We're back to this?!" She groaned and kicked his chair over. "Gendry, fucking grow up man! You can't 'catch' estrogen, bro."

"What?" Her words confused the bloody hells out of him so he turned around to face her. She was angrier then he'd ever seen her before and part of him was terrified that he'd blown it before 'it' had ever begun. He opened his mouth to start making as many apologies as we needed to calm her temper but she spoke first.

"I get that you don't like me touching you because I'm a girl," she huffed, "sorry, I'm not sorry." Arya stood up and stalked the few steps between them. "I have a shit-ton of brothers and I touch
them all the time, I'm not used to being careful about that." She sniffed and looked away with her arms crossed, pulling the thin shirt down tight over her chest. "So get over your shit because it's unnatural and unhealthy. I'm only saying it as your friend and it needs to be said."

"Arya..." Gendry had no idea how to respond to her accusations. "I don't..." He could lie and apologize for what she thought he was doing or he could actually 'grow up' and tell her how he felt! "It's not because I think you're 'gross'. It is because you're a girl, but..." The words were stuck in his swelling throat and he coughed once. "It's because-" The door opened and Rick walked in with a friendly wave. "Hey, Pod, how's it going?" He ran away from her like a coward to greet his friend. "It's been a while."

"I saw you on Friday," Pod gave him a curious look as he set his bag down.

"Days ago," Gendry sat next to Rick, his back facing away from Arry. "We should catch up. How's life?"

"You really want to know?" Pod seemed surprised by his sudden interest. He didn't really, Gendry liked Rick a lot, but the guy was sort of boring in the best kind of way. "Because I did get a new car..."

"Great," Gendry forced a smile, "let's talk about cars." The one topic that completely bored him to death. He had no idea how the Lincoln would keep moving if mom didn't constantly remind him to keep up with the... Fluids and other... mechanical stuff. Whatever, that's what mechanics are for.

"What'd ya get?!" Arry raced to Pod's side and hung around his shoulders. "Let's hear details!" Gendry clenched his fist and swallowed the bile rising in his throat that the sight of her hanging all over some other guy. The worst part: she made no differentiation between them. Gendry was just one of her friends... Bloody hells, she compared touching him to touching her brothers! He was worse off than he'd thought, before he hoped she liked him better than the rest of the group. More like, she liked the forge and he just happened to take her there.

Even if the conversation about cars bored him, at least he wouldn't be thinking about the way her chest touched his arm. Or really just any thoughts about her chest at all would be best left un-thought, unless he enjoyed torturing himself. He thought he learned how to control his reaction to her touch, clearly not the case concerning certain parts of her body. How is he ever going to stop pissing her off long enough to win her heart? The pair chatted about the car while he sulked as the ignorant third wheel until everyone showed up.

"In case the entire school doesn't already know," Arry stood to gain everyone's attention. "Our own resident giant scored with the hottest girl in school at Joffrey Baratheon's party." She paused for dramatic effect. "And I have pics," she smirked and held up her phone. Everyone besides Drogo exploded into demands for proof but Arry silenced them all by holding up her hand. "Honestly," she tortured them by delaying the big reveal. "What's the big deal about hooking up with a cheerleader?"

"You wouldn't get it, milady." Gendry waved a dismissive hand at her excessive showboating. "It's a guy thing." The chuckle that emitted from her throat might have been the most evil sound he'd ever heard in his entire life. A slow curling of her lips into a wicked smirk made all the blood in his body rush to his head.

"Oh...?" She walked over to his chair and braced a hand on the back to lean over him: lowering her voice so only he could hear. "So," she wagged her phone with a grin, "I guess you didn't want to see the pictures?" His pulse pounded in his ears so loud he could barely hear her over it. Keep it cool, don't freak out, this was his chance to prove he wasn't a spaz or a coward. Her devious smile turned into a more genuine one and she nodded approvingly when he didn't flinch away.
"Arry," he crossed his arms to falsely demonstrate her nearness didn't affect him at all, "don't be cruel."

"You know the rules," she insisted quietly. Aw, bloody hells, not this nonsense again. He was wrong just one time and she would never ever let him live it down. Why did he even bother arguing with her? It was always better to just let Arry be right, even when she wasn't. Gendry looked around as the entire group watched them with growing interest. Jon's expression was especially unfriendly: and unexpected and potentially serious problem.

"I was wrong," he quickly hissed, "you were right: you're always right." Gendry couldn't help but return her adorable grin of victory. "Now pay up," he held out his hand to receive the phone. "Oh my bloody gods!" He laughed, taking in the image of Drogo cuddled like a giant teddy bear with a tiny beautiful blonde. "I almost didn't believe it without the picture. Drogo, you look so cute when you sleep."

"Let me see," Drogo demanded, and Arry snatched the phone to hand it to him. He looked at it with the same stoic interest he showed everything that wasn't DnD related. But then Gendry noticed the corner of Drogo's mouth turn up ever so slightly. "Send me this."

"You got it, buddy!" She complied with Drogo's request and then passed the phone around the room to the rest of the group. "So, tell us all of the awesome details." Arry grabbed an extra chair and sat backwards in it, propping her clasped hands under her chin. "Leave nothing out!"

"She's coming here," Drogo commented unemotionally.

"Who?" Arry leaned forward with interest, tucking her boots around the legs of the chair. Gendry's love for her was just pure and true is any of the great loves that've ever gone down throughout history. But his thoughts... they weren't so pure and the way she was sitting in the chair was literally killing him.

"Dany," if possible, Drogo's voice rumbled even deeper as he said the girl's name.

"Oh, really?" Arry turned her wide eyes toward Gendry and mouthed 'oh my god' before continuing. "Did you all hear that, guys?"

"She's coming here?" Torgo looked just as confused as the rest of them. "To do what?"

"Join our group," Drogo replied.

"Oh," Sam suddenly looked up from the book he was studying, all eyes turned to him. "Did I forget to tell you all?" A soft knock on the door saved him from the group's wrath and a beautiful head poked through the door.

"Oh good," she smiled, "I was worried I wouldn't be able to find it." The co-captain of the cheer squad walked into the room with all the grace of a queen. "I am Dany Targaryen," she introduced herself, "and I would be honored to join your group."

**DANY**

She felt every eye in the room on her but she only had eyes for Drogo, he sat at the head of the table with a familiar serious expression on his face. It was lucky that he did not smile, she would probably faint dead away if he did. A petite girl with a fresh rebellious fashion sense skipped up to Dany with a welcoming grin.
"Finally," she huffed as she glared back at the group, "now this place won't be such a sausage fest." The girl jerked her head towards Drogo and walked over to pull out an empty chair. "I got a seat all ready for you, right here next to our fearless leader." As Dany took the seat, the girl stuck out her hand. "I'm Arya by the way, nice to meet you."

"Likewise," Dany replied, she liked the feisty girl very much. "Thank you all," she made eye-contact with each member of the group, "for allowing me to join." They took their turns to introduce themselves, obviously impatient to get the game started. She took a deep breath and folded her hands on the table. "Before we get started, I have to make a request. I know that it's vain but aside from my closest friends, everyone I know would look down on me for tabletop gaming. It is hard to maintain a position of popularity and I have worked hard to be looked up to."

"Why would you waste your time," Arya shrugged in perfect representation of a 'rebel without a cause'. "Who gives a fuck what other people think?"

"I agree with the sentiment," Dany smiled, "but that is not a practical way to live. My family is from a long line of politicians. I'm on the school council, as well as the cheer squad, the yearbook club, and the prom committee. I'm making an impression, building my reputation." She widened her smile, even though she could feel the stress building. "It is expected of me."

"Wow," a sweet-looking boy with a round face appeared amazed. "You seem so much older than you are, already talking like a diplomat." He smiled and pointed at himself. "I'm Sam, by the way."

"Thank you, Sam," she returned his smile. "I'm counting on your vote." Dany felt a more confident as everyone around the table chuckled at her joke... Even the ever-indifferent Drogo. "Honestly, that's why I started playing DnD... I could be Daenerys Stormborn, Mother of Dragons instead of Dany Targaryen." She tossed her hair back and sat up straighter in her chair. "Future Governor of Crownlands Province then Prime Minister of Westeros, then leader of the UN."

"Damn," Arya whistled low, "I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up."

"Did you have a new character in mind?" Sam directed their attention back to the game, taking his Dungeon Master duties seriously but with grace.

"Yes," she fished a the paper from her bag and passed it to him, "here is the character sheet. I have chosen the name 'Khaleesi the Unburnt', a Dragonborn Wizard."

"Let me see," he studied the sheet. "Aha!" He jotted down some words on another sheet and passed it to Dany. "What do you think?" She quickly read the scenario and nodded her head with an enthusiastic smile.

"I love it," she confirmed.

"You arrive in front of a great marble structure," Sam's hushed voice grabbed Dany's full attention. "The Lightstone Stronghold is home to Brawlis the Wrathful. You are waiting for the Half-Orc Drogo..." Khaleesi eyed the group approaching from the forest: they stopped to face her in the clearing in front of the mountain.

"I seek the one they call 'Drogo'," she called. The whole group stepped aside and pointed their fingers at the Half-Orc standing in the back.

"You stand in our way, Dragonborn." The Barbarian stepped out in front of his group protectively.

"The Scared Ordovician Staff of Boccob," she pointed to the staff he held, "was stolen from our clan by the evil warlock, Brawlis. The Elders sent me to retrieve it." Her clan had suffered much in the
absence of their sacred staff.

"You?" His hard eyes took in her appearance with a complete lack of confidence. "You are weak."

"Excuse me?" Khaleesi bristled at his matter-of-fact tone.

"Drogo," the Elf beside him put a hand on the Half-Orc's shoulder, "we do not need the staff any longer."

"We save her first," the Barbarian snarled.

"Her?" Khaleesi knew nothing of this group yet believed in the honorable intention of saving anyone.

"Our comrade was taken," the group's Cleric explained the situation. "When she retrieved the staff from Brawlis."

"G'a'ahm 'ovah m k'ykah pg'a g'a 'ahb," she bowed her head in deference to Drogo, hoping her pronunciation was right. 'Then I have no choice but to help' was what she said. More literally, 'you are holding a dirk to my jugular', however not considered a complaint.

"Zah zahknah ar ozzyzg'aomkah," he growled. 'We welcome your assistance' seemed the best interpretation of his words. Actually, though Khaleesi's Orcish was a bit rusty, she hoped he did not mean the literal translation of the phrase. 'Come on the hunt with us' sounded a bit ominous.

"BRAWLIS!!!" The Barbarian roared at the top of his lungs.

"What are you doing?!!" She approached the Half-Orc, pulling on his arm to stop his rash behavior but releasing it when he turned a murderous stare on her. "We need to formulate a plan."

"This is my plan," he shrugged her off, "BRAWLIS, YOU COWARD!!" Drogo raised the staff high over his head. "SHOW YOURSELF!!"

"You seek death, Half-Orc," a cold voice whispered inside of her head.

"I seek your death!" The Barbarian's fearsome threat only earned a breathy chuckle. "You want it?! Come take it from me!"

"Your leader is insane," she commented to be unusually serene High Elf.

"He's... exuberant," he answered.

"If you want to return my property so badly..." The cold voice slithered through her mind once more, making Khaleesi want to jump into a hot spring and scrub herself clean. "I invite you inside."

"Drogo, we shouldn't..." A rather angry looking Human in magnificent armor finally unclenched his jaw to speak. "It's clearly a trap."

"You want this?" The Half-Orc addressed her as he held up the sacred staff with irreverence. "Find our comrade. You are immune to sleep, no?" Confused, she turned to the friendlier Cleric for further explanation.

"Brawlis is like a cat," the man explained. "He likes to play with his prey before he kills. Arry has been his prisoner for some time." The Cleric's wry smile wavered as fear crossed over his eyes. "If we go in there, we're all going to sleep for a long time."
"He's expecting us, now that you've alerted him!" Khaleesi was only a low-level wizard: desperation drove her hermetic clan to send her on this mission. "I won't last, even if I am immune to his sleep spell."

"Grey Worm - take Hot Pie, go with the Dragonborn." The Orc completely ignored her objections, barking orders to his group. "If Brawlis comes to you, get me. Gendry, Snow, Pod - with me." Khaleesi tried to keep up with all the names being tossed around, noticing the High Elf and a stout cheerful Dwarf stayed with her.

"Wait!" She cried out to stop their march towards the glittering structure.

"Our leader is not fond of explaining himself," Grey Worm informed her. "Yet he has never steered us wrong."

"You have faith in him?" Khaleesi doubted the Half-Orc known as Drogo was little more than a mindless beast.

"I do," he answered, backed up by the Dwarf's cherry nod. "Come, I fear we might have already arrived too late... the air is wrong." The entrance to the castle was shone bright and glittering, yet felt cold in the absence of any people to fill the halls. Their footsteps echoed loudly, announcing their presence though it was already well known. "I sense something. No... it can't be."

"What is it?" Khaleesi's question went unanswered as Grey Worm led them further into the cavern. They continued down a path that opened into an enormous glittering white cavern. She could have spent her life examining the rock formations to discover their magical properties. However, her time to study was over, all that she knew and loved would end unless she could get the staff back to her people.

"I can sense the Halfling's fear," the High Elf whispered, "but that should not be possible..."

"You never were quite as stupid as your leader." A chill ran down Khaleesi's spine and she whipped around to find the source of the ghostly voice. A chanting spell swirled around them and caused Grey Worm's eyes to roll back as he collapsed to the ground.

"RELEASE HIM!" Suddenly the group came charging down the hall, led by none other than the fearless Orc.

"I think you will find..." The disembodied voice laughed evilly. "You are in no position to make demands."

"Told you - I am quiet as a cat." A small form materialized from the shadows behind Drogo. Her long thin knife was already well-placed at his back and aimed at his liver. One stab and his body would be too toxic to heal.

"Halfling," Drogo greeted the small female with a growl and Khaleesi realized this was whom they came to save.

"Brawlis makes a good deal - my freedom in exchange for helping catch you." She dug the tip of the knife into the Barbarian's back and a small rivet to blood trickled down the back of his leg and onto the white floor.

"Arry, you disloyal-" The human in the glittering armor glared at the Halfling.

"ME?!" She screeched in protest. "You know how long I was stuck in that chest, Gendry? I started to sympathize with my captor, after all - you put him in there first."
"Actually, I did." The quiet man, who looked to be a Rogue in his dark clothing and light armor, took a step forward to take responsibility. A swirling collection of fog seeped into the room and took shape into a tall bloodless man in a black robe. "You're out of tricks now, Brawlis: I will put you back in that chest this day."

"Can I gag him?" Arry glared at the Rogue, assumedly asking permission from the Warlock.

"Do as you like, my sweet." A sickening smile curled over the Brawlis' thin lips.

"My 'sweet'?" Gendry made a disgusted sound as the Halfling gagged the Rogue.

"Problem with that?" The Halfling sneered up at the Human, not intimidated by his larger size or impressive armory and weapon.

"Gag him as well," the warlock smugly suggested.

"Gladly." Arry pulled out another rag and stuffed it into the human's mouth before tying it tight around his head.

"Dearest," Arry turned towards Brawlis with a coy expression, "they are all yours, exactly as I planed." She moved to stand in front of the warlock, staring up at him with adoration. "Now, release me as promised."

"You will leave me," the Warlock reached out to stroke Arry's cheek and she leaned into his touch.

"Of course I won't," she placed a small hand over his chest and clung to the front of his robe. "Without the free will to leave, I can never prove my devotion to you by staying." The Halfling stood on her tiptoes to wrap her arms around the stooping Warlock's shoulders.

"I release you, Arry Wolfborn." All of a sudden, the warlock collapsed as his robe began to evaporate into a black mist. "Ah-" The same small knife she held on Drogo now stuck out the crown of Brawlis' skull.

"Oh darling..." Arry crooned, holding Brawlis' face as his body melted into nothingness. "Shh... you really should've kept the pillow talk lighter." The Halfling laughed maliciously as the warlock whimpered in pain, reduced to little more than a skeleton. "Seriously, who tells their lover exactly how to kill them?" A skull covered with runes fell to the ground with a clatter and the Halfling smashed it with a stomp of her boot. "Well," she shrugged her shoulders and moved to untie Drogo first, "let's get the fuck out of here."

"Well done, Arry." The Cleric grinned at the Halfling as she brushed past a sheepish-looking Gendry.

"I thought you weren't coming back," she grumbled, "I had to do what I had to do." A slow rumbling sounded in the back of the cave and Arry hurried. "Oh, shit, we got to get out of here." A stalagmite crashed down from the ceiling, directly onto the spot when Brawlis' skull lay in pieces. They all made a run for it as Drogo grabbed the still-unconscious Grey Worm. Cracks in the cavern chased them as they escaped into the stronghold. The marble structure crumbled as the foundation shifted beneath their feet.

None of them stopped as they reached the exit, a deafening explosion urging them to run past the clearing. They made it to the forest's edge before turning around, each of them bent and panting from the effort. They all gaped in wonder at the erupting volcano, shimmering white lava exploded from the top and poured down the sides.
"You have beaten our strongest foe," Drogo praised Arry.

"Him?" She scoffed and jerked her chin at the erupting volcano. "Honestly, I've had worse breakups," she grinned at the Barbarian and he almost appeared amused. "Let's go find us a real adversary."

"If you are looking for a worthy enemy..." Khaleesi stepped in front of the group, her head hung with the weight of her fervent hope. "My entire clan is in peril from a danger unlike any we've ever known."

"Sounds like fun," the Halfling grinned, earning her a smack on the head from Gendry.

"Zah oyd ar kom mz oz rog'ayg'adah vr ar 'ahb," Drogo spoke for the group. 'We aid your clan now as gratitude for your help'. Technically, 'gratitude' in Orcish roughly translates to 'you deserve the juiciest boneless innards'. What a truly beautiful language. Khaleesi truly appreciated his offer, although she did very little to help regain their comrade, Arry did it all on her own.

"You have my gratitude," she answered, feeling a renewed sense of optimism that her people could be saved. The bell rang. The group grumbled at the end of the game, curious about this new fearsome opponent they will battle.

"Drogo," She looked up at his usual stoic expression and clenched her hidden fist in determination. "Would you walk with me to my next class?"

"Yes," he resumed his tradition of giving one-word answers.

"Alright," she beamed at him, refusing to let herself be deterred. They gathered their belongings, said their goodbyes, and started walking towards her next class. "I had fun today with the group."

"Good," he answered.

"They seem like a really nice bunch," Dany hoped he would open up after they played a game together: he seemed to have no problem talking while playing DnD.

"They are," he graciously offered two words instead of just one.

"Sam is excellent as a Dungeon Master," she tried to hold up a light-hearted conversation by herself. "I felt completely gripped by the story."

"Yes," he agreed.

"I suppose that is better than 'no',' she teased. He raised one dark eyebrow at him, almost an emotional outburst from him. "Fine, I will consider you a challenge. I have yet to meet a challenge I cannot overcome. Teach me Dothraki," she commanded.

"Your tongue is still too soft," he argued. Ah, at least she had his attention!

"I assure you, Khal Drogo," she rounded on him and stood in his path. "Nothing about me is 'too soft.'" Dany stared defiantly up at the giant teenager with indomitable resolution. "Teach me."

"Meet me at the tree after school." There was only one tree he could mean, the massive weirwood out in front of the school.

"I'll be there," she grinned in victory until the second bell rang. "Until later," she nodded at him, "Khal Drogo."
"Dany," he returned her nod in farewell. The way he said her name sent shivers down her spine, in a
good way. Dany waved a quick goodbye and turned to dash towards her classroom, beaming with
happiness. Though she had no practical reason to learn Dothraki, Drogo's relentless silence made her
want to talk to him. She wanted to learn his hopes and dreams and share her own... Was she getting
too ahead of herself?

Typical Dany, always falling for perfect strangers, only to wind up disappointed by them in the end.
Yet, Drogo was not a complete stranger: at least she knew one thing about him. Khal loved DnD as
much as she did. That had to count for something! This time, she would not make all the same
mistakes she did before. No more mothering or smothering and she flat-out refused to be the first one
to make a move. Above all, she wanted a normal high-school relationship. No silly dreaming of love,
marrriage, and a future together.

A casual non-dramatic romance would be the perfect way to wrap up her high school experience.

Chapter End Notes

:) I don't know what the hell I'm doing. Enjoy.
Next up is going to be my favorite chapter I've ever written.
I think I might have to up my rating to the big E.
I can't help it. No, I don't want to help it. It's gonna get real smutty real soon. Be ready.
"I'm bored," she complained, bracing her leg against the tree as they lay beneath its shade. Gendry watched a single drop of sweat roll down the back of her leg into the frayed hem of her shorts. He couldn't even curse her lack of clothing since it was hotter than all seven hells, unseasonably so. The last heat wave of the year, he guessed, after the weather should cool off for a nice temperate winter. Another bead dripped down the side of her face and he could not take it anymore!

"It's too bloody hot," he groaned and sat up in frustration, not just commenting on the weather.

"Whoever said 'winter is coming' obviously never heard of global warming," she joked half-heartedly.

"What should we do?" Gendry leaned against the trunk of the tree to try to find a more comfortable position.

"We need to cool off," she stated the obvious. "A pool would work." Arya bolted up with her eyes wide and excited. "There's a huge indoor pool on campus!"

"And the school is locked down for the weekend," he reminded her.

"Then we'll have to unlock it," she quipped as she got to her feet and held out a hand to him. "Come on, don't be a wimp."

"As you command, milady." Gendry learned within the first five minutes of meeting Arya that arguing with her was pointless. Also, most times, her ideas turned out to be the best.

"None of that," she jerked on his hand too roughly, "or I'll knock your teeth out!"

"That's not very ladylike of you," he laughed until he stepped out into the harsh sun. "Ugh, we'd have to go back to our houses to get our suits." There goes that plan, no way he was driving all over Kings Landing in weekend traffic for their swimsuits. Just so they could try to break into the school.

"Psh," she rolled her eyes at him, "don't be such a baby." Arry walked ahead to where the Lincoln was parked. "It's not like I haven't seen plenty of naked boys before." She tossed a smile over her shoulder at his likely horrified expression. "I have all those brothers," she reminded him

"Fine," he tried to play it cool, "I don't care if you don't."

"Race ya!" Arry took off running and he chased her, even though it would only make him feel even hotter. The thought of diving into a pool full of cold water had him plenty eager... The thought of seeing Arya stripped to her undies might've also had something to do with it. The whole drive over she talked endlessly about how good the water would feel and Gendry drove just a bit faster than he should. They walked onto the emptied campus easily enough and made it to the gym to find it locked up tight.
"It's locked," he sighed in disappointment, "as I knew it would be."

"Oh ye of little faith," she grabbed onto his arm and led him around the side of the building. "Come on - let's walk around to check the side door." Arya stopped and looked up excitedly. "Look, a window is open! Can you give me a boost?"

"I'm starting to think you see me as a ladder," he complained with a grin.

"You can be useful at times," she acknowledged, grinning back. He lifted her up to the window easily, resisting the urge to warn her to be careful. Gendry jogged back to the front of the gym, a few seconds went by before he heard the lock turn over. The door swung open to reveal a smug look on Arya's face. "Admit it, you're impressed."

"You are stubborn and crazy as all seven hells." Gendry pushed past her to walk inside the dark, cool gym and sighed. "And yes," he rubbed a hand over her head, "it impresses me." Arya didn't push his hand away like she usually did, just turned to race down the hall towards the pool. The water looked inviting and glorious as she stood in front of it, turning around with a daring expression. She knelt on the ground to remove her shoes and kicked them to the side. Now or never, he told himself, and followed her example by removing his own boots and retuning his eyes on her.

ARYA

Happy he decided to play her game, she raised an eyebrow in challenge and whipped her shirt over her head to throw it behind her. He narrowed his eyebrows and mirrored her motion by stripping off his undershirt. Arya's mouth went dry when she finally saw the body she knew was hiding under those stupid undershirts. Godsdamn! Gendry was cut-up like he got in a fight with a boxful of knives. Basically - they boy was ripped, built, muscular, and very nicely put together. Why would he selfishly hide such a ripped bodacious bod?!

Keep it cool, she reminded herself - probably a good idea to avoid attacking her best friend even if she really, really wanted to. When her eyes finally snapped back to his, Gendry was smirking at her likely lust-filled expression. Not willing to be outdone, she unsnapped the button on her shorts and yanked them down to step out of them. Then he took his turn to stare slack-jawed like an idiot but Arya had no idea what he was looking at, she wasn't the type of girl guys looked at. She cleared her throat impatiently and waved her forefinger up and down.

He gave a frantic nod and unclasped his pants button and zipper in one motion, the baggy jeans fell off his hips. Underneath he wore loose cotton boxers, tenting around one impressive bulge. Not that Arya had much - or any experience - it certainly seemed adequate. They both stood there, staring at each other for a long time, the pool forgotten. From head to toe, Gendry was the most beautiful man she had ever seen and she never even knew men could be 'beautiful'. She felt plenty brave enough to strip down all the way but what would happen after?

Gendry took a step towards her, then another, walking slowly in her direction as she held her breath. His muscled shoulders pulled taunt with every swing of his loose arms by his sides until he stood before her. He reached out both hands to grab her shoulders, lifting her body - and threw her into the pool. The cold water rushed around her as she spun and kicked, screaming soundlessly when he cannon-balled right next to her. Kicking her feet, she surfaced and looked around but she could not see him anywhere.

A tug on her ankle pulled her under the water and she kicked as hard as she could, missing his face only because the water slowed her down. Rising to the surface, Arya gasped and sputtered as
Gendry cackled a safe distance away. She did the only logical thing she could think to do - she whipped off her bra. It seemed like a good idea and it certainly worked at shutting his mouth. His laughter died in his throat and she grinned at his shocked expression, twirling the bra around her finger.

Arya tossed the soaked undergarment onto the side of the pool and copied his trick of walking all sexy and slow. Cutting through the water, she kept her gaze locked on his unblinking eyes that darted up and down. Gendry was shaking - the water definitely wasn't that cold - and seemed to be trying to say something. His tempting mouth flapped open and closed, but she did not care to wait for him to get it out. She wasn't playing any trick, she wanted to kiss him - and so she did.

His chest felt hot against hers when she curled her arms around his neck and slanted her lips over his. He stood still as a statue, it took a moment for Gendry to get with the program, but then he returned her kiss with surprising enthusiasm. Arya had no clue what she was doing, but he responded anyway, his mouth was wet and tasted faintly like chlorine. The cool water lapped around her overheated skin, set afire by his hands as they reached for her.

Strong hands gripped around her waist and she eagerly allowed him to lift her off the pool floor to his height. They both nipped and sucked at each other's lips, careless, sloppy, and hot. His calloused fingers trailed down over her hip to circle under one thigh. With no trace of fear, her pulse raced from the anticipation and rightness of it all. Her entire body experienced a sort of intense animalistic response, controlling her movements.

Arya had no willpower to stop her legs from wrapping around his waist or her tongue thrusting into his mouth. His lips parted in surrender to her ravenous and inexperienced invasion. She was barely aware of them turning around in the water since the whole room was spinning, until her back felt cold tile behind it. Their kiss briefly stopped as he braced her against the side of the pool, pinning her in place. Locked against the wall, he pressed the hard length of his body along hers and propped his thigh between hers.

Immediately she resumed her attack on his mouth, coaxing his shy tongue into battle with hers. Gendry barely kept up with her domination of their kiss, his fingers digging into her waist as hers clutched his shoulders. Her hands couldn't stay still, roaming over every inch of hot slick skin she could touch, trailing down to grip his arms. Arya's mind maintained just enough consciousness to be thankful that he chose not to deny her for whatever reason. The water sloshed around their frantic motion as her fingers tangled in his thick hair.

He started to give back as good as she gave, and soon they were more than kissing - they were fucking each other's mouths. And it still wasn't nearly enough for her and she could practically taste the desperation in his kiss. Any doubt lingering faded to the back of her mind as she arched against the tile to press herself against his hard chest. When he moved away, she moaned in protest and tried to pull him back to her. Their broken kiss left her unsatisfied as fierce longing coursed through her shivering body.

His blazing eyes left her face, leaving a trail of fire as they lowered down her chest to stare hungrily. Arya whimpered as his gaze darted back up. Gendry kept their eyes locked as he pressed one slow kiss to her mouth. Soft lips trailed down her neck and past her collarbone and she melted in his grasp. His hands were the only thing keeping her from drowning. She slapped a hand over her mouth to catch her scream as he bowed his head and closed his lips around the tip of her breast. The pleasure shot through her so strong it almost felt like pain, her whole body trembled in response.

Arya gave up watching Gendry as he sucked and laved her chest, the visual left her panting and breathless. He suckled the tip between his teeth, swirling his tongue around it and sending waves of
incredible desire though her. Her head lolled back onto the side of the pool and she bit her lip to keep from crying out. She heard her voice begging 'yes' repetitively, part of her felt terrified he would realize who he was with and stop.

Her arms clung tight around his shoulders and she whimpered at the loss of his lips on hers. She curled her body around his and kissed along his neck, her hands clutching him with what little strength she had left. His calloused hand cupped the underside of the breast his mouth teased, and she sobbed in pleasure against his neck. Intoxicated by the taste and texture of his skin, she bit and sucked his neck, her hands still clutching his head.

His other hand caressed over the front of her body from hip to shoulder. The overwhelming sensation of his fingers brushing over her other breast tore a scream from her throat. Gendry immediately wrenched away from her but she dug her fingers into his shoulders. All along, she'd been aware of his erection wedged between their bodies but he drew back his hips and looked to her with hesitation. Arya tightened her limbs around him, drawing his hardness against her hip.

All the while she kept her eyes on his, moaning aloud as she rocked her hips against him. He resumed pressing his warm body against her, slower and gentler, pushing her into the wall. Before long her breath panted ragged against his chest. The friction made lights dance in front of her vision as one word sounded over in her head - 'more'. Because she was greedy for him, and everything he gave, she would always want more. She didn't want to speak to ask for anything, in case this was all just another dream.

Her mouth met his once more, suddenly so familiar as if they'd been kissing each other all their lives. Arya locked one arm around his neck as her other hand inched down his stomach until she reached the band of his boxers. Gendry stilled as she pulled at the waistline of his shorts, a low hum released from his throat as she tentatively stroked the tip of him. Too determined to be nervous, she ventured inside his shorts to stroke her palm along the length of him. She circled her fingers around the shaft, causing him to whisper something like her name in her ear.

With a growl, he grabbed her wrist away and held onto it as he fought to catch his breath, his other hand tugged at the hem of her panties. She wasted no time on thinking or considering anything past that moment and yanked loose from his hold. Arya stripped her last shred of clothing, then shoved his shorts down past his hips to free his hardness. His expression seemed somewhere caught between confusion and fear but she could not let him back out now. Not when they were so close!

One arm braced around his shoulders as she slid her legs high up on his hips until the very tip of him poked her... 'there'. Their eyes locked as her mind consumed with the gravity of what they were about to do - there was no going back to 'just friends' after this. If she asked herself before this - she'd say 'either way would be fine' with her. For her, nothing would ever be the same, no matter what they did. Arya needed Gendry like the earth needs the sun to rotate around. She needed to be his and for him to be hers... in every way.

"Arya..." The way he called her name could have meant a thousand different things - she only cared about denial or acceptance. She bit her tongue, to stem the overwhelming urge to beg, and waited for him to decide their fate. Their fate was canceled when the gym door opened with a bang and both of them turned. A huffing and red-faced Principal Varys was staring at them in shock. "Oh... fuck," Gendry muttered, and then hurriedly let her go and pulled up his shorts.

"For the love of the gods!" The principal turned away in embarrassment to look at the wall. "Congratulations kids, I've been an educator for fifteen years and this is a new low point. Well, I'm giving you both five minutes to walk through these doors." Varys stalked out of the gym, letting the door slam behind him as he left. She dove down to find her underpants and by the time she surfaced...
Gendry was already dressed and heading out.

Arya scrambled into her clothes and rung out her wet underthings to shove them into her pocket, bursting through the door. Both Gendry and the principal were busy avoiding eye-contact as they waited for her and hurried ahead. They all walked single-file in silence to the office where they spent more time silently waiting. Varys called their parents from another room. Several times, she opened her mouth to crack some joke but the look on his face made her hold her tongue. She used the quiet to wonder if she knew this would happen, would she still have done it all the same?

Principal Varys walked in a short time later, followed by her father and a beautiful blonde. The woman's worried eyes went straight to Gendry.

"I demand an explanation," her father approached the desk as Varys took a seat.

"And I don't need one," the beauty interrupted. "I can deal with my son without the school's interference."

"Mom..." Gendry sounded as embarrassed as Arya felt.

"You're his mother?" Her father's question was uncharacteristically rude but Arya was thinking the exact same thing. She looked more like his older sister than his mother. "I see."

"What exactly do you 'see'?" Gendry's mom bristled and Arya couldn't really blame her.

"Dad..." Arya pulled on his arm to try and redirect his attention on her.

"Please, have a seat." Varys looked even less thrilled than everyone else to be there as he waved a hand at the two empty seats between herself and Gendry. "Your children took it upon themselves to beat the heat by breaking into the school's pool." The Principal sighed and folded his hands on the desk. "Obviously, this kind of behavior is unacceptable and the rules would call for suspension." Arya knew he was going easy on them by omitting the whole 'naked' part.

"Please!" Gendry's mom leaned forward with panic on her pretty face. "That's a bit hasty, don't you think? My son is an excellent student."

"We're here to talk this through," Varys conceded. "I haven't made any decisions yet. Arya," his eyes turned to her, "you're new here, but I've seen you more in this office than Gendry in the last three years." She nodded her head in acknowledgement of the statement but her father sat up straight and stiff in his seat.

"Aw, Principal Varys..." Arya smirked at the frowning round-faced man. "You don't like hanging out with me? I like hanging out with you." The tiniest of smiles pulled at the man's lips as he shook his head at her lovable rascal ways.

"How old are you?" Her father turned his head towards Gendry and Arya leaned forward to look past dad's shoulder.

"Dad," she tried to interrupt but Gendry beat her to it.

"Seventeen, sir." His bright blue eyes wavered to her face for just an instant before snapping back to her father.

"Seventeen?" His displeasure with the answer couldn't have been clearer if he reached out and smacked Gendry in the face.
"Mr. Stark-" Principal Varys tried to diffuse the situation.

"I'm just trying to understand the exactly what happened." Dad turned back to eye Varys with mistrust. "You say they were swimming... In what? Their hair is wet: but their clothes are not."

"I think," the principal explained carefully. "These conversations are best left between parent and child."

"As you can see," dad nodded at her, "my child cannot be trusted. I need to know," he grimaced as if he really did not want to know, "were they just swimming?"

"I only walked in for a brief moment," Varys started to sweat under her father's steely gaze.

"Dad," she hissed, "you're making a big deal of nothing."

"And what exactly is 'nothing'?" He turned those dark eyes onto her and she felt herself shrink back in her chair.

"We never planned to come here today," Gendry drew his attention, "it just happened..."

"I planned it," she leaned forward, pointing at herself.

"What?" Gendry's brow furrowed in confusion and his jaw unhinged.

"Yesterday," she explained, "I got one of those weather alerts on my phone. It said it was going to be ridiculous hot so I hit you up to meet at the forge." Arya shrugged as if she didn't feel the weight of every eye in the room on her. "I waited for you to complain about the heat and brought up going to the school's pool," she scoffed a laugh. "Whom do you think left the window open? It was I - of course - I'm the guilty party!" She turned towards Varys and held out her hands, as if to be cuffed. "Lock me up officer, I'm a bad kid."

"That's enough," her father's patience was reaching its breaking point but at least his anger was focused on her.

"Sorry," she grinned at Gendry even though she wanted to die.

"It's never a dull moment, Arry." He rubbed his hand over his face and slumped in his chair.

"Arya," Varys gave her a sympathetic smile. "And Gendry are both bright students with unlimited potential. It's up to your parents to see if your actions warrant punishment but all I ask is for you to follow school rules."

"Sorry, Mr. Varys." Gendry bowed his head in shame that made Arya feel even worse. "I swear it won't happen again.

"No," her father echoed, "it won't."

"Come on honey," Gendry's mom patted her son on the shoulder, "let's get you home." Arya would kill for a parent to love her that much - instead she gets Mr. and Mrs. Self-Righteous-Judgment-Pants.

"I really am sorry," she murmured as he passed, unable to meet his eyes. Gendry pretended she didn’t even exist and walked out with his mother. "Well, I guess we can go now that my life is officially ruined." Arya pushed herself out of the chair and trudged to the door to hold it open for dad. When she saw Gendry waiting in the hall, it almost made her happy until he approached her...
"Arry's bag is in my car," he handed over the keys, shoved his hands in his pockets, and stepped lightly to catch up with his mother. Gendry never once even glanced at her and she briefly considered the merit of just lying down on the floor. To wait to die of embarrassment.

"Why do you do this to me, Arya?" Dad passed her the keys and she started walking in the direction of the Lincoln. "Is this some kind of rebellion for forcing you to move here with me?" How could her own father think she would do anything purposefully to annoy him? Especially considering what he believed of her and Gendry's actions - and he'd be right - his suspicion hurt.

"Just stop, dad." Arya cleared the high teary pitch out of her voice. "Everything I say is going to sound ridiculous to you and everything you say is going to sound stupid to me." He started to argue but she could not take any more this day. "Let's just let it go." They used to be able to talk about everything and anything. But in the last few years her adorable 'tomboy' ways suddenly became a problem once she grew tits. Dad didn't look at her the same way anymore and now she doubted he would ever look at her again.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, I'm not trying to make excuses for any grammatical or spelling problems but it is damn hard to proof-read smut. I get the vapors and develop a Georgian accent (the state, not the country). *Oh my! Why, I do declare!* If I read this chapter one more time trying to find grammar errors, I might start powdering my nose and awaiting my gentlemen callers. I know it's not logical, I worry about myself, I really do.
In the week that Sandor had been her 'boyfriend', nothing at all changed. They flirted in Spanish class and that about summed up the whole of their relationship. He never waited for her outside of class or after practice and he never invited her to go anywhere or do anything. All in all, Sansa began to get used to the feeling of being disappointed but the more she thought about it... She had to take at least part of the blame, for neither had she asked him out on a date. In her mind, that would be breaking her parents' rule too far.

Even she knew that distinction was splitting hairs, either way she was disobeying her parents. Sansa was new to this whole 'rebellion' thing. Before she met Sandor, she never had a reason to disobey her mother or father. Still, it was unreasonable for them to let a measly five weeks stand in the way of her blossoming romance! It seemed her boyfriend was plenty capable of doing that all on his own, she had to take his snide comments and sudden temper in stride. Even so, those moments of sweetness were always worth it.

The eerie quiet of the house had her nerves on edge, made even worse by the fact that she had no idea what Arya and daddy were fighting about. Those two were usually like two peas in a pod; suddenly they could not even look at each other! Sansa cast aside her hesitation and picked up her phone to push the number one and then hit the call button. As the phone rang, she grew more and more nervous, not really sure what she planned to say to Sandor once he answered. And then he did.

"Little bird," the radio played in the background of his voice, some rock song she didn't know. Sansa stepped out of the apartment and into the empty hall. She used to believe the perfect boyfriend would constantly beg to spend time with her. It would take time to get used to the idea that Sandor would never be the 'perfect boyfriend'.

"Hey," she greeted him and scrambled to think of a good reason for him to come get her.

"Sup?" Sandor never claimed to be patient.

"I know this is..." Sansa cut off her words, aware her habit of apologizing annoyed him. "I just need..." She held the phone down away from her mouth and heaved a sigh at her pitiable dating skills.

"Spit it out, girl," his growling voice came from the phone and she quickly put it up by her ear again.

"I need to get out of here," the words rushed out before she could stop them. "My sister and dad are acting all bizarre and nobody is talking. It's like the house of the dead around here. I need out."

"I can be there in ten," his unhesitant answer had her grinning like a ninny. Sansa pulled open the apartment door to let daddy know she was leaving.

"Perfect," she heaved a sigh of relief and leaned against the wall. "Thanks, Sandor." He hung up without saying goodbye and Sansa wished she could be surprised. She realized Sandor's dismissiveness was not intended personally... On the bright side, she was developing a thicker skin
thanks to his callous attitude and general rudeness. The hope that she was having an equal effect on him, perhaps softening him a bit, made its home within her heart.

Daddy gave permission for her to 'go out', thankfully not asking any details, and she rode the elevator down to wait out front. Sansa briefly considered changing but decided her casual clothes were more practical. First of all, she forgot to ask where they would go in her eagerness to leave. Also, picking out the perfect outfit and changing in less than ten minutes should be an Olympic sport. A short time later, Sandor's car pulled into the lot and up in front of her. He stretched one long arm to open the door for her, his own way of being a gentleman.

"Hi," she slipped in with a smile and closed to door, buckling up first thing. "Sorry to..." Sansa shook her head and peek at him from the corner of her eye. "Actually, I'm not sorry," she confessed, "I wanted to see you."

"Where do you want to go?" Sandor always got straight to the point, for better or worse, but she saw a smile tugging at his lips.

"Anywhere," she sighed and relaxed into the seat. Her house was stifling, the air thick with tension, and the worst part was not knowing why.

"Careful what you wish for," he teased, "mi pajarito." The way his voice deepened made her hands feel all tingly from wanting to hold onto his strong shoulders. That thought alone was enough to get her blushing already and she cursed her pale skin again for the millionth time. It wasn't fair that her emotions got written all over her face while she could never tell what he was thinking.

"I only wish for you," she turned her head towards him, "lover." Sansa smiled at the low rumbling sound he made, she was beginning to understand what all of his little growls meant. That particular noise meant her teasing was working exactly as she intended it to.

"I'm going to take you to my backseat if you don't shut it," he warned. Sansa knew she should not play with him but flirting with Sandor was like flirting with danger itself. Also, he was threatening with her with their exact scenario she hoped for when he said he was coming to pick her up.

"Sounds good to me," a thrill ran through her as she wondered if he would follow through on his amorous threat.

"Don't test the hound, girl." Sandor's voice was quiet and almost dangerous somehow. It filled her stomach with butterflies and set her pulse racing. "I already have a place in mind to take you and you're going to fuck it all up if you don't cut it out."

"So, you have somewhere better than your backseat to take me?" Sansa forced her newfound shameless flirt persona back and put a finger to her chin to ponder their destination. "I wonder where?" Visions of every kind of dating scenario flitted through her mind from riding a Ferris wheel to going to see romantic movie. She was practically bouncing in her seat, already way too excited to find out where they were going.

"It won't be better," he scoffed, "but it should be fun."

"I love surprises!" She clapped her hands and sat up straight, paying attention to their route to help guess their destination.

"I'll remember that." For all of Sandor's protests about not wanting to be a 'boyfriend', he was really good at it when he made even the slightest effort. The pulled onto the old Main Street on the edge of the city before Flea Bottom and he parallel parked like a god. Sansa tamped down her envy, making
a mental note to have him teach her since both her parents lacked in that area.

"Come on," he got out and waited for her on the sidewalk, "we gotta walk the rest of the way." Sansa followed him, looking at the old buildings packed together like sardines with interest. Some stores were rundown while others looked well-kept. They stopped in front of one store that could be nothing other than a pet shop by the exterior decorations.

"Where are we?" She tried to peer through the dingy window into the dark store but her eyes could make nothing out.

"This is where I work," he explained as he approached the door.

"It's closed," she commented just before he pulled out keys and jangled them at her, "oh." Sandor flipped on the light as soon as they entered and an explosion of noise, mostly barking, rang out around them

"Alright," he yelled, "calm the fuck down." The store went completely silent except one small fuzz ball of a dog released a single bark. "Buster," he warned, "no one is going to adopt you until you learn to keep your bloody trap shut." Buster replied with another quieter yap and Sandor rolled his eyes.

"He reminds me of someone," she teased, thinking of the way he always had to have the last word.

"That's enough out of both of you," he groaned as he walked behind the counter to heft a giant bag of dog food. "Can't a man get some work done without being yapped at?" Sansa held her hands up with a smile and went over to pet Buster, whose pen was right in front of the window.

"You like working here?" She heard Sandor moving around and feeding the animals, somehow this job suited him perfectly.

"It's alright," he tried to act nonchalant but she could tell he like working with the animals. Sansa could hear him talking quietly to them as he went about his work.

"Strong words," she chuckled at his veil-thin attempt to act cool in front of her.

"Told you I'm not a talker," he approached her from behind and Sansa gave Buster one more pat before turning around to face Sandor.

"I think you like it a lot," she alleged. "Thank you for taking me here."

"Work's done," he grabbed her hand and led her towards the back of the shop, "time to play."

"Play?" She followed him through the back door and felt a rush of joy when she saw what awaited her. "Oh, PUPPIES!" Sansa squealed with happiness and knelt in front of the pen where at least a dozen puppies rambled excitedly. "Oh," she let one lick her hand, "I love you." Another charged and butted up against her other hand. "And I love you," one chubby pup curled up and slept while the others all played, "and I love you."

"There's only one way to do this," he moved to a closet and pulled out a clean linen to lay it on the floor. "Lie down," he commanded. Sansa raised her eyebrow questioningly but complied without argument. She finally understood when he opened the pen's gate and she was stampeded by puppies.

"Yay!" She laughed so hard she starting crying as the pups attacked her with puppy ferocity. They struggled to crawl over her with their tiny legs and chewed on her clothes. "I'm so happy," Sansa pulled one little fellow off of her hair and rested him on her stomach. "This seems like an eighth
heaven."

"You're right," Sandor knelt beside her, scooped up a pup, and held to his face to receive a tiny lick on his nose. "I like this job a lot," he grinned at her, "the perks are pretty good."

"You are incredibly sweet, Sandor." Sansa sat up slowly so as not to startle the pups and ignored his eye-roll. "I will keep saying it until you believe me." He set the puppy down and reached out to stroke a strand of her loose hair between his fingers. She leaned forward and pressed a quick kiss to his lips, smiling the whole time. It was the first kiss she gave him and she decided she liked it so she did it again. The second time he pulled her closer to give her a proper kiss that left her breathless.

"You make me like this," his voice was low and growling but in the good way.

"No," she argued, staring straight into his eyes. "I'm just lucky you like me so you show me your sweet side that you hide from everyone else."

"They can all go fuck themselves," he chuckled as a pup tried to climb onto her lap.

"Though not the words I would use," she tugged at the front of his shirt to regain his attention. "I completely agree."

"I'm a bad influence on you, little bird." His fingers curled around her neck and his thumb stroked cheek, which set her heart was racing a mile a minute.

"Maybe I could stand to be bad from time to time," she smiled as if she was joking but there was plenty of truth in her words. "I'll be bad and you be sweet, and neither of us will tell on the other."

"Sounds good to me," he leaned in for another slow kiss. Sansa thought, no matter how many times she imagined it, this first 'date' overshadowed every single one of her dreams. It was silly to wait for the boy to ask for dates or a kiss, if she wanted something, she should just tell him. He was the type that appreciated directness and it was something she could improve upon herself. The more time they spent together, she realized that they were absolutely perfect for each other.

GENDRY

"I want you to stay away from that girl." Mom collapsed at the table, placing her elbows on it and tilting her forehead to rest against her clasped hands. Long blonde hair fell like a curtain in front of her face and he quickly took a seat beside her, worried that she would start crying.

"Mom-" He tried to put a hand on her shoulder to console her but she interrupted him, turning in smacking his hand. Gendry tried to meet her gaze but she only frowned at him and furrowed her brow.

"No," she sighed and looked back to the table. "You won't turn those baby blues on me and get away with this." Mom pulled her hair back and tied it with a scrunchie then closed her eyes and shook her head. She held up her hands in defeat and turned her eyes towards him again. "This is a big deal, Gendry," she held his eyes. "What did you think you were doing?" Then it was his turn to look away, too humiliated to open his mouth. "I want an answer, young man."

"We just wanted to cool off," he waved his hand around right trying to find the words, "and things just happened."

"I don't want to know what 'things'," she grimaced. "But it was her idea, like she said?"
"Why is that important?" Honestly, Gendry didn't know what to think about Arya's admission of guilt. If it was true, it kinda made him happy she went to such trouble to plan his seduction. A simple 'kiss me now' would've sufficed. Also, it kinda made him pissed that she was able to set him up so easily.

"Gendry Waters." The way mom said his name did not bode well for him.

"I don't remember whose idea it was: both of ours," he couldn't let Arry take the heat for something they both did. Even more, the last thing he wanted was for his mom to think that he didn't care about Arya. "I like her a lot, mom," he confessed, "she's not like any other girl I've ever known."

"I always thought you didn't bring girls home because your standards were too high," she scoffed. "That girl, she looked like trouble..." Gendry couldn't help the smirk tugging at his lips as he agreed with his mother's assessment of Arya. 'Trouble' was exactly the way he would describe her, the best kind. "There - I saw that smile," mom gave him a worried look, "she's a bad influence on you."

"What did I do that was so wrong?" He threw up his arms and shook his head and protest. "Most guys my age have already done more." It made it all the more embarrassing that his first... everything was interrupted by the principal. Of course, he felt glad Arya was the first girl he kissed and saw naked and saw him... Fucking bloody hells! What were they thinking?! Clearly, they weren't.

"I was your age when I had you," She grew quiet and stared down at the table again, making guilt prickle at his conscience. "Because I didn't think," her unspoken accusation hit home, "because your father didn't think." Gendry's hand clenched when she said 'father', a word neither of them said often. "You say you like this girl but you care so little about her that you would risk getting her pregnant? That doesn't sound like my son."

"We didn't have sex," he grumbled, feeling both relief and regret. Again, he cursed himself for his lack of forethought but he never would've guessed that things would go that far that fast. He should've known, since Arya did everything passionately. What a girl...

"So," she interrupted his soppy thoughts, "even if she asked you would have said 'no thanks'?" He couldn't reply to that question because he knew the truth would be the wrong answer. "Maybe she's a sweet girl and I've just had a bad first impression." She gripped a hand on his shoulder and forced his eyes to meet hers. "Or maybe she's going to be the downfall of my precious baby boy. I can't tell you what to do but let me give you some advice: if you fall fast and hard, it's going to burn out quick." Mom patted his shoulder and looked away again rubbing her forehead with her fingers. "And buy some condoms - carry them with you at all times. I'm so young, Gendry, far too young and beautiful to be a grandmother. Do you have any idea how hard it is to meet a decent man at my age?"

"Mom!" Gendry didn't want to hear any of that. "I surrender, you win, I'll do whatever you say!" Although, he supposed mom would rather have not heard about his love life either.

"I'm still a woman!" She crossed her arms and scowled prettily at him, wrinkling up her nose. "And I'm your mother and I want to protect you," she laid her hand over his and exhaled slowly. "Please, be careful... and I'm begging you - for your own good - stay away from that girl." Never in his life had he disagreed with anything mom told him to do, she always had his best interest at heart. Suddenly he felt like he had to make a choice, and impossible one, between his mother and the girl who he loved. "It's not the just the girl," she murmured, "I don't like the way her father looked at you." Just bloody great, somehow he'd forgotten all about Mr. Stark's death-stare.
So fluffy! And then... poor Gendry. At least his mom is fairly cool. As with most things, it has to get worse before it can get better.

I am doing a short Jon POV next for sure but I'm a little torn about who needs a POV next. I'm stuck between Arya and Sandor because I love to write them and they both have a lot of thoughts about their weekend. Perhaps a triple POV chapter is in order...
Out of the Group

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Out of the Group

JON

He was running late, rushing to meet up with the group, on the way to the empty room. Jon spotted Arya in the hall hesitating outside the door and fiddling with some keys. When he caught up to her, she was so distracted she did not even hear his approach and only stared at the door with grim determination.

"Hey kiddo," he seemed to startle her out of deep thought but she soon grinned at him and visibly shook off whatever was bothering her.

"Hi," she greeted him and turned to open the door for him, "after you."

"Ladies first," he jokingly insisted, receiving a snort from her.

"Not a lady," she jerked a thumb at herself but her joking grin didn't quite meet her eyes. Jon was about to break down and ask her what was wrong when she darted into the empty room. He followed her and immediately felt the gloom settled over the group. They were all there early, sitting around the table in bowed silence. It was like somebody died or something! Sam stood up and approached Arya with his hands wringing in front of him.

"I'm sorry, Arya, I really am." Sam glanced away sheepishly, his face red with embarrassment and shame. "We, that is to say the group, decided... It might be best if..." He sighed, straightened his shoulders, and looked Arya straight in the eye. "You're out of the group." She stood still and did not make a sound or even blink as her eyes darted straight to Gendry. An expression of pure fury passed over her stunned features, mirroring exactly the way he felt.

"That's horseshit!" Jon exploded, reacting way faster and stronger than she did. He could not believe that the group made such a serious decision without him. He looked around the room to see everyone avoiding his eyes, the newcomer Dany looked like she had something to say. She stood up to open her mouth when Arya beat her to it.

"No - it's fine," she waved her hand like she couldn't give a single shit. "I was getting bored of this game anyway." Arya walked up to stand in front of Gendry and dropped the keys on the table. Jon knew something was going on with them and he intended to get some answers! He looked around the room to see everyone avoiding his eyes, the newcomer Dany looked like she had something to say. She stood up to open her mouth when Arya beat her to it.

"Arya!" Jon chased after her but lost her as she ran too fast, feet flying underneath her. He walked up and down the halls, peeking into an empty classroom window to see if she hid inside. A sound, pitiful in its softness, called him toward a custodians' closet at the end of the hall standing slightly ajar. Part of him never wanted to approach that wretched muffled sniffling. But his feet kept moving until he peered through the crack.

Arya knelt on the ground with her back to the door, her head lollled forward with her hands twisting
and pulling on her short hair. He felt paralyzed, unable to move forward and comfort her or run away from the heartbreaking scene. Jon almost went back to find Gendry and the other guys to tell them exactly what their rejection did to ‘tough’ Arya. But then he might say and do some things that would lose him the only friends he had. Maybe they weren't worth keeping, if they thought this was somehow the right thing to do.

He stayed, not helping her in any way but stood watch to make sure no one else saw her moment of weakness. Jon loved Arya and the way her feisty jagged shell covered a gooey loveable center if anyone cared to look deep enough. The problem was, most people only see what lies on the surface and never look deeper. Everyone viewed her as this unshakably confident girl who laughs in the face of authority and danger. That was only part of her, one little piece of the puzzle that fit together into something beautiful. Those bloody blind fools!

Jon quietly set his backpack on the ground and slid against the wall to sit outside the door and wait for it to get quiet. To call the sound she made 'crying' could not describe it: more like she was fighting with everything she had not to cry. It did not take long for her to get ahold of herself. He scrambled to make himself scarce before she emerged and realized her shame was witnessed. His next class didn’t start for a while since the bell had not even rung but he hustled there anyway, hoping to get caught up on some work.

When he walked in the classroom, it seemed he was not the only one with that idea. A certain redhead was bent over a book and furiously scratching on a piece of paper. Ygritte looked up to give him a wide grin as she slapped her book closed and leaned back in her desk. Jon ignored her, as best he could since his desk was right next to hers, and sat down to start rifling through his backpack. Unfortunately, she had no intention of letting him pay no attention to her.

"Oi," she tapped her sneaker against his shoe, "what's got your pretty face frowning?" Jon glanced up to see her lusty eyes raking over him and licked her top lip as their eyes met. "I bet I can put a smile on your face..."

"Not now, Ygritte," he groaned and hung his head. "I just watched my younger cousin get her heart broken for the first time." Usually, though he didn't encourage it, Ygritte's flirting was sort of an ego-boost. After what he'd just seen, he didn't want to feel good about himself because he felt bad for Arya.

"Aw, that's proper shitty situation right there." She sucked in a breath through her teeth and shook her head with sympathy. "Sorry for your cousin, but she'll bounce back. I remember the first boy who broke my heart. Older boy, fucked me and then broke up with me like I was nothin' - asshole." Just hearing about the shit-head that would use and throw away a goddess like Ygritte made him want to hunt the guy down. "But that's the way it goes. I learned not to get so hung up on the emotional side of things and just have fun."

"I guess," he shrugged, not really knowing much personally about sex, relationships, or heartbreak.

"Sex is fun," she gave him a little smirk and winked at him, "in case you don't know."

"Thanks for the tip," he turned away to try and hide the redness rising in his face.

"Anytime, Jon." She leaned close to murmur in his ear, sending a tingling shiver up his spine. "I'll teach you anything you wanna know." Ygritte sent back with the satisfied smile and resumed working on her homework. Jon finally could feel the blood starting to return to his brain.

SANDOR
The hound doesn't daydream - that's not what he was doing. Sandor sat at a table by himself at lunch, just having demolished a third helping of lasagna. He had no idea why other kids complained about school food. It was fucking delicious and the closest thing he could imagine home-cooking tasted like. The memories of his mother were fuzzy, like the way she smelled or the sound of her laugh, and he never recalled her cooking anything. For sure, he wasn't 'daydreaming' as he ate his food.

He was just remembering the way Sansa laughed as she cuddled all of the pups and the way her eyes shone with happiness. It was a gamble to take her to his work, he worried she might expect something fancy like a nice restaurant. Or something difficult like 'talking' about their dreams and other junk. The little bird had really done a number on him in the short time they'd been 'dating'. When was the last time he sat somewhere by himself and just smiled at nothing? Probably never - if he had to guess - but she made him smile all the time...

"Excuse me," a female voice interrupted his thoughts. He turned around to find himself unexpectedly flanked by flock of cheerleaders. The three of them had their arms crossed all of them giving him the evil eye. Oh shit, he knew them all, including the blonde with purple eyes - there was no way he couldn't know who she was. When his eyes settled on her, she looked away. The disgust he saw flash in her eyes confirmed that she knew exactly who he was as well. Fuck her, they didn't have to be friends, he'd done nothing to her personally.

"Me?" He raised his one eyebrow, pointed at himself, and looked around. Usually the cheerleaders acted like he didn't exist.

"Yes," Margery Tyrell gave him a sharp nod, "you." She was the bravest of the three, standing in the center and chin bucked up like she wasn't afraid. He admired her bravery, but didn't appreciated being bothered. Before the twit interrupted, he was - fuck it, he was daydreaming about his little bird and it made him fucking happy. He rose from his seated position, feeling gratified when her brave expression slipped and her eyes followed him up.

"What do you want?" Sandor glared down at all three of them in turn, and the two on the side stared at the floor in defeat. He could think of only one reason why they'd come to see him and he'd rather get it over with as quickly as possible.

"I think," she inhaled a deep breath and fixed her determined stare on him. "It would be for the best if you would stay away from Sansa Stark." Bingo! There we go - it was almost a relief now that the barriers started setting themselves up. Things had been going far too good for him and it made him uncomfortable waiting for the shit to hit the fan. He'd rather just get covered in shit already so he could go shower it off.

"Oh," he snorted a laugh, "do you?" He expected a 'friend warning' was coming but he never imagined they'd come directly to him. These cheerleaders were a lot braver than he ever gave them credit for - or maybe just a lot fucking stupider.

"She's a good girl," she insisted, "and doesn't deserve to be played with." Nothing Margery said was news to him, but it didn't feel very fucking nice to have someone point it out to your face. Even someone as ugly as him still had feelings - as much as he hated to admit it.

"Too 'good' for me, you mean." Sandor stepped closer to glare down at her and to her credit, she did not step back. "Yeah, I picked up on that." He chuckled at her widened eyes, even though he felt like total shit. "What'd she say when you told her about me?" His breath caught in his chest as he waited to hear that Sansa sent them to chase him away for her.

"We came to you first." She stood her ground but he noticed the way her hands clenched on her sleeves and her eyes flickered away from his face. Sandor struggled not to heave a sigh of relief that
at least the little bird hadn't had her ears filled about him... yet. He knew it was only a matter of time before she learned everything about him and his family - the lies and the truth.

"Well," he scoffed, "thanks for the fucking advice." This time she did move back as he approached another step, a slow grin spreading over his face. He knew how ugly he look when he smiled, and all three of the girls reacted exactly as they should. "Now you can go put that mouth to good use, I think I saw Joff around here somewhere."

"You're disgusting," Margery hissed, her face flushed with embarrassment. She should be embarrassed - Joff was the biggest asshole in all seven provinces. He'd never understand how the shithead bagged such hot girls... then again, the same could be said of him and the little bird. Fuck his godsdamned relentless honesty!

"I'm not the one who sucks his dick," he mocked and they all gaped at him with appropriate horror. They'd soon scamper back to the little bird to tell her what a scary rabid dog he was. "Go ahead - tell the little bird all about me." He lowered his face just inches from Margery's. His bad side was prickling and tingling as her eyes rolled over it seemingly against her will. "She'll come running to me so I can tell her it's all lies." Of course, he wouldn't actually do that. "Good girls always taste sweetest after they've cried a bit, so don't anything hold back."

"You really are a monster!" Her face turned beet red and she shook with anger as both of her friends tried to pull her away. Sandor laughed as he brushed past the strong-willed girl and her slightly more timid friends.

"Guilty as charged." Sandor didn't bother to turn around, just tossed a wave over his shoulder and kept strutting forward. Not having any idea where he was going, he just needed to find somewhere to be alone. Well, it was good while it lasted - made a few pretty memories to hold him over for the rest of his miserable lonely life. Fuck, he needed a drink.

ARYA

She wandered around the school in a daze, not really sure what to do with herself and found that her feet carried her to Gendry's Lincoln. It was always unlocked, who would break into such a shitty car to steal his shitty cassette tapes? Arya slipped into the passenger side, cracked the window for some fresh air, and looked around the interior to memorize it. Never again would she ride in this car, studying his handsome profile as he concentrated on driving. They spent more time talking while riding in his car than anywhere else. Who knew a lack of radio could be a good thing?

It never occurred to her before, too obsessed with how good Gendry looked, but his voice was beautiful too. Whenever he said her name, he said it wrong but it always made her heart squeeze in her chest. The same way her throat squeezed when she realized he'd never call her again. It was all gone, even though he was right where he always was. She could go see him anytime, but they would just be strangers to each other. Arya would never want anyone else as much as she wanted him, even if everyone laughed at her for believing that. How could she not realize it until she lost him - that she loved him?

Of course she did! He was perfect in every way - interesting, obedient, and glorious hot - what's not to love? Just like with everything else, she pushed too hard too fast and ruined everything... The choked sob that escaped her throat made her punch the dash before she could reconsider how much it would hurt. Ow. Her mind would not stop torturing her with visions of Gendry's smile and his laughter. Most of all, she could perfectly envision the cold way he ignored her after she got him into trouble. Fuck him! If he couldn't handle a little trouble then he wasn't worth it.

Break her heart - that wimp? Arya scoffed a laugh and looked around the shitty car again - working
hard to convince herself, she was better than him. Then she saw him, standing in the lot a few feet away and looking at her with a terrified expression. She rolled her eyes at his panic over confronting her and wrenched open the door to get out. Her bag swung over her shoulder as marched off in the opposite direction. Humiliation over being caught made her face burn and tears prickled behind her eyelids.

"Arya!" He did it - called her name - just like she knew he never would again. His voice made her feet freeze mid-step and Arya waged war inside her mind to resist the urge to turn around. She forced herself to keep walking, knowing if she turned around... If she looked at the pity in his gorgeous eyes as he tried to explain how he just didn't like her 'that way', she start crying. "Wait!" Gendry's footsteps sounded behind her, signaling he decided to chase after her. Part of her screamed to turn around and hear him out but her feet were already running away.

Arya didn't want to hear his apologies or his disingenuous request to 'stay friends'. Not after she just fucked up the best friendship she ever had and ruined her first love in one go. And just like always - Gendry gave up - and stopped chasing her. Just when anything gets too hard or scary, that coward always backed out. Fuck him then, she didn't need him. The tears streaming down her face begged to differ.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know... it hurts, I'm sorry. But life can't always be puppies and rainbows! I need angst to offset my fluff, that's just how the muse wants it.

Love without pain isn't love - it's friendship.

You can fucking quote me on that.

Next up: Sansa POV, entitled "OMG, This is Amazing"
SANSA

Cheer practice could have gone better, for some reason all the girls were polite yet avoided her like the plague. They appeared to get along well enough with each other. One exception being Myranda, who would be beautiful if not for the constant sneer on her face. Sometimes she would see a few of them huddled together and whispering to each other. Then they would stop and smile at her with some strange expressions of confused pity. Sansa had plenty of suspicions about their topic of gossip but possessed neither the desire nor enough courage to ask.

She let it go, they could whisper and pity her if they liked, because after school she had a standing promise to meet Sandor. He swore he would wait for her after practice out front of the school at their usual place. Sansa rushed to get dressed and when she noticed Margery approaching her with a smile she tossed a quick wave goodbye and bolted. Sandor did not like to be kept waiting and she did not want to wait any longer either. He stood leaning against the weirwood tree as the red leaves fell around him and one landed right on his head.

Sandor snatched the offending leaf off of his head and glared at it as if it chose to land on him and annoy him. She really must like him to think his grouchiness was cute... Sansa smiled as he crumpled up the leaf and tossed it on the ground. Then she laughed aloud as he crushed it beneath the heel of his boot, drawing his attention. He pushed off the tree and shoved his hands in his pockets, watching his feet as he approached her.

"Hey," she skipped the rest of the way to meet him and pulled one hand out of his pocket to wrap his arm around her shoulders. Sandor tucked her into his side as she curled her arm around his waist and sighed with contentment. Whatever else was wrong disappeared when they were together, nothing else mattered. "I missed you."

"I can see that," he grinned down at her with something like surprise in his expression. Why would he be surprised that she missed him? After her talk with Jon, Sansa started to worry about Sandor's self-esteem and wondered if his roughness was all just an act. "You asked to meet, so you get to pick where we go." He pulled her towards the parking lot where the Skylark was waiting to take them anywhere they wanted.

"Anywhere," she snuggled into his side and reached up to lace her fingers with his hand draped over her shoulder. "Just the two of us." It felt so amazing to walk around as somebody's girlfriend. He smirked down at her and she turned her face into his chest to hide the beaming blush on her face. She couldn't help it, Sansa was so happy! She always wanted a boyfriend, and the fact that he was so much taller than her and an athlete were just bonuses.

"Uh..." Sandor groaned and pinched her chin to unhide her face. "If you want a date just say so - otherwise I'll think you just want to make out."

"Either is fine with me," her cheeks burned even hotter but she kept her eyes on his. The steely color darkened as he stopped in the middle of the parking lot and frowned at her. Sansa was about to apologize on instinct when he removed his arm and grabbed her wrist to pick up the pace. "Oh!
"Where are we going?"

"To make out," the way he growled the three words set her pulse racing in anticipation. Who would have thought that being direct about what she wanted could be so rewarding?! Oh... probably everyone in the world knew that 'secret' before she discovered it. He opened the passenger door and practically stuffed her inside. She decided to forgive him eagerness because she felt the same. They hadn't kissed much since the night of Joffrey Baratheon's party and the memory still made her lips tingle.

"I'm going to assume," she narrowed her eyes playfully as he got in the car. "We are not going parking where you bring all the girls you make out with." In truth, Sansa worried quite a bit about her general lack of experience. Even after she forgave him for his barb about her lack of technique, the memory still stung.

"Yeah fucking right," he scoffed as he pulled out of his parking spot like he was staring in an action movie. Sandor always drove too fast for her taste but he was so good at it she could hardly lecture him. "You're one of a kind, princess." The sneer on his face made her worried she made him mad again and wished she could stop doing that. "Most girls pick the prince over the beast."

"So..." She paused as his words sunk in and she stared at him in shock. "Are you saying I'm your first girlfriend?!"

"I guess," he shrugged as he relaxed in his seat. "Technically."

"Oh," she wondered what he meant by that last part but knew he would bring it up if he wanted. "Me too," she confessed, "I mean, you're my first boyfriend."

"How is that possible?" Sandor was not an easy person to shock and his surprise was somewhat gratifying.

"Home-schooling," she guessed, never quite knowing the answer herself. "And being freakishly tall," she grinned at him, "you might know a little something about that." Sandor chuckled at her joke, seemingly past his little temper flare-up. Curiosity got the better of Sansa, driving her to suck it up and just ask already. "So, have you ever...? I mean, I never..." She faltered, embarrassment overtaking her bravery as she stared down at her hands.

"No," he sneered "I never fucked anyone if that's what you're asking." Sandor's temper came back with a vengeance but his words still surprised her. He was older and more experienced; she never would have guessed he was a virgin.

"I see," she murmured, unsure what to say. His answer only brought up more questions, but Sansa felt too afraid to push him further and risk ruining their day.

"There was a girl," he kept his eyes on the road and his voice low, "when I was a sophomore." Sandor scoffed a laugh and rubbed the side of his face. "She was the first person who showed any interest in me but I had to keep it a secret, she said..." His upper lip curled and his hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Because she didn't want to get a 'bad reputation'. One day she just pretended like she didn't know me - started seeing some pretty guy." He laughed without humor and shook his head. "I should've known I was fooling myself, thinking it was more than it was."

"That's awful," she whispered, "I would never do something like that."

"I know," he nodded but still wouldn't look at her. "I just thought you should know why I don't do this whole 'dating' thing - girls ignore me and I ignore them..." Sandor eyed her sideways and his
tense shoulders seemed to relax. "Except you." He heaved a ragged sigh and turned his eyes back on the road. "I've gone and ruined things haven't I?"

"No!" She touched a hand to his shoulder to emphasize her sympathy for him. "Of course not, I just... I don't want to make a fool of myself."

"I might be an ass and laugh at you sometimes," he pulled her hand down from his shoulder and held it in his own. "But I won't hurt you, Sansa. You set the limits and I'll abide by them - I wouldn't give that kind of promise to just anyone."

"I understand," she squeezed his fingers. "You know, I think the only way to master a skill is to practice as often as possible." Sandor laughed as he pulled into a emptied lot belonging to a vacant supermarket and drove around the building into the shade. Not the most romantic spot in the world, but at least it was quiet and private.

"Beauty and brains - how'd I get so lucky?" He grinned at her as he turned off the ignition and dropped his keys on the dash. Sansa suddenly felt nervous on top of anxious, which was surely doing terrible things to her blood pressure. Sandor tugged on her hand, looking expectantly at her so she sucked in a breath for bravery and crawled between the front seats. She settled in the middle of the backseat and peeked at him while biting her lip.

Sandor opened his door and pulled his seat up to move it all the way forward, leaning it against the wheel, and he climbed in next to her. She scooted to the other side to make room, as he took up a lot of space, and waited with her hands in her lap. He leaned forward to shut the door and turned back to her, holding out one hand in invitation. With every shred of bravery she possessed, she tucked herself up by his side and prayed he couldn't feel her heart pounding. His arm curled around her and his other hand cupped her face.

"You sure you wouldn't rather go on some stupid fucking 'date'?"] Sandor's words rasped low and Sansa shook her head in denial; she was exactly where she wanted to be. He kissed her slow at first, soft and gentle as his fingers trailed down the front of her neck and trace her collarbone. She followed as he pulled away to break the kiss, opening her eyes to see him smirking. "Tell me how far I can go."

"Um..." Sansa panicked, thinking she gave him the wrong idea by bringing up the current condition of her virginity. "I am not ready to go... all the way... yet." He chuckled at her and held up his hand, wiggling his fingers.

"I meant - where can I touch you?" Sandor's eyes hungrily roamed over her body before returning to meet hers.

"Oh," she blushed under his inspection, "um, anywhere over my clothes is fine?"

"Really?!" Sandor made a face like a kid who just walked into a candy shop and Sansa worried she might have been too hasty with her permission. "Anywhere?" His forehead furrowed as he gave her one last chance to rescind her consent but she only nodded in agreement. "Here?" He wrapped his hand around her waist and slid downward over her hip. She gave one nod to answer his question and his large hand slid up over her ribs, his thumb curving under her breast. "And this is ok?"

"It's okay," she wheezed her reply, embarrassed that he must feel her heart trying to escape her ribcage. Sandor closed his eyes as his fingers slowly moved over the front of her chiffon blouse to lightly stroke over her breast.

"And here?" He peeked at her, looking like he expected to be rebuffed. Her heart pounded wildly
and her skin tingled all over.

"Please," she begged, "kiss me at the same time." It was too embarrassing to have him watching her face as he touched her.

"As you wish," he smirked like he won something, tugged her closer, and kissed her senseless. His hands took full advantage of her permission, touching her everywhere fabric covered. Sansa curled her arms around his broad shoulders as her mind lost all sense of time and self. She was no longer herself, but a wholly new person whose sole purpose was to kiss Sandor. Somehow, she wound up in his lap, cradled in his arms where she fit perfectly. Her lips felt swollen by the time he broke away from her and she noticed a dim orange haze peeking through windows.

"Oh no!" Her eyes found the sun sinking beneath the trees. "Look how much time has passed."

"Not nearly enough," his hand behind her head pulled her up for another lingering kiss.

"I have to get home," she felt reluctant to leave as well. "Daddy is probably worried."

"He should be," Sandor chuckled evilly and she lightly punched him in the chest.

"Stop," she chided, "he would like you... if you came to meet him."

"Doubtful," he rolled his eyes.

"You'll see," she insisted, "he will like you. My father is an excellent judge of character."

"Let's hope that's not the case," his hands still held onto her and she had not let go of him either despite her insistence they leave. "Or I'm shit out of luck."

"If you can rein in that foul tongue of yours," she frowned at his dismissiveness. "Daddy would love your honest nature."

"You're the only one who has any power over my tongue, little bird." Sandor grinned down at her before capturing her mouth with one final and earth-shattering kiss. Then he lifted her off his lap like she weighed nothing and opened the car door to step out. He held his hand out to help her, a rare act of chivalry, and she walked around the car to get into the passenger side. They chatted about their plans for the weekend, both of them looking forward to the big upcoming home game. Before long the Skylark pulled up in front of her building.

"I'll miss you," she did not want to leave yet, although she had homework and would be expected by Daddy. "Call me."

"Sure," he agreed and leaned across the distance between them to kiss her goodbye far too briefly. "See ya." Sandor smirked at her likely dazed expression and she smiled back before exiting the car. As Sansa watched him drive away, her head felt like a balloon full of helium and her heart was even lighter than that. It did not matter what anyone else said, gods help her... she was already falling in love with him.

SANDOR

The day after his little backseat date with Sansa, he felt on top of the world. Didn't even feel like mocking his 'friends' for the stupid shit they said. The guys walked with him toward the gym, gossiping like girls about girls, before they split off to grab some lunch. He already ate - in private because it was bloody embarrassing. The little bird waited for him in the morning, holding up a little sack lunch she made for him. Damn, it was fucking good - some delicious pasta with white sauce -
"Hey!" Joff's call went ignored by Sandor as he walked away from the group to head to the gym to sink a few baskets before he met up with... "Sansa!" That stopped his feet in their tracks and whipped around to see the little bird hurrying past Joff and the rest of the guys. She was distracted, busy rummaging around in her backpack which she wore backwards over her chest. His poor little bird always seemed to be running late for everything.

"Joff's talking to you," Lancel stepped into her path and Sansa nearly barreled into him.

"What do you want?" She tried to walk around the asshole but he stepped in her way again. "I need to go..." Sandor wanted to run ahead and kick the guy's ass for harassing Sansa until she beamed brightly at Joff approaching her.

"I want to take you out, honey." Joff swaggered up to her side and Lancel moved out of the way. Sandor held his breath as he waited for his answer - knowing his newborn happiness hung in the balance.

"Sorry," she smiled cheerfully, "I have a man." Sandor felt a slow grin spread over his face as she used their little code word for 'boyfriend'.

"Come on," the little shit stepped too close, "you're too new to have a boyfriend already."

"I met him on my first day," she started to explain herself when an angry expression crossed her face, "not that it's your business. You even know him, it's Sandor."

"Who the fuck is Sandor?" Theon piped up and Sandor rolled his eyes that his clique didn't even know his real name. But Joff did...

"You think you're funny, bitch?" He took a menacing step towards her and Sansa scuttled backwards in fear, tripping over her own feet. She hit the ground - hard - making a loud cracking sound as her head hit the paved sidewalk. Time seemed to stop, nobody even moved to help her or run away, but his feet reacted faster than his mind. Sandor sprinted to the little bird's unmoving form, surrounded by scattered books from her bag. His hand shoved Joff out of his fucking way.

"Sansa," he fell to his knees beside her, "are you alright?" Sandor patted the side of her pale face and actually prayed for her eyes to open. Her eyelashes fluttered for a moment but her eyes wouldn't focus on him. "Can you tell me if you're ok?" Panic gripped him as he removed her bag as carefully as he could and tried to check her head for a wound. "Please, little bird, say anything." He tested her for a concussion, following each step to the letter, Selmy's safety drills finally paid off.

"I'm..." Her eyes peered up at him, pupils dilated and unfocused. "Okay."

"No you're fucking not," he felt like his whole world was shattering right in front of him. Sansa meant everything - the whole fucking world could blow up and he'd still be happy if he had her. Sandor pulled her arm around his neck and gently scooped her up in his arms. "I'm taking you to the nurse."

"Sandor..." She whimpered as she turned her face into his chest. "My bag..." Even concussed, the little bird still managed to worry about her schoolwork.

"Hush," he murmured, "I'm gonna take care of you." Sandor stood and set his eyes on Theon, standing there gaping at them like an idiot. "Pick up her shit and follow me." The threat 'or else' always went unspoken but was never misunderstood. The idiot scrambled to follow the hound's orders and he forced himself not to rush to the health office. He asked her simple questions to keep
her awake but her answers were short, quiet, and a bit slurred.

Sandor had never been more afraid in his entire life... and there wasn't a single flame in sight.

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhanger! Is Sansa going to die?! Uh, this ain't "Skins"... it's more like "Some Girls" meets "Awkward", without getting all preachy about pot like MTV is wont to do. Now that I think about it, it's kind of weird that none of my characters are getting high. I pretty much did nothing else all throughout high school. I guess the two characters I imagine would smoke have nobody to get high with... Oh. my. gods.

I have to go write now.
ARYA

She sprinted full-speed through the halls in complete panic, totally bypassing the health office. Arya skidded to a stop and backtracked on-the-double to burst through the door. The nurse stared in wide-eyed shock as she ran right past the desk, straight to the beds in the back where she spotted her sister.

"Sansa!" Arya quickly moved to her sister's bedside and looked her over, head-to-toe for signs of damage. Sansa was holding an ice pack to her head and wore a crooked smile that looked more like a grimacing pout.

"Gods, Sansa I was so worried." Arya slumped forward, bracing her fists against the bed to catch her breath. "I heard you got into a fight with the whole basketball team!" Then she looked up and finally noticed that the giant dude with the badass facial scar sat next to her sister's bedside.

"Arya, relax, I'm fine." Sansa nodded towards the giant dude that was friends with Drogo. "Thanks to Sandor... my boyfriend."

"Wait!" Arya waived her hand at the giant dude. "You're dating the giant dude?!!" She stared at her sister in shock - unable to believe this agreement to date took place before the head injury.

"You're her younger sister?" The giant dude's eyes glanced from her sister back to Arya in disbelief.

"You two know each other?" Sansa waved a finger from Arya to the giant dude with a look of total confusion on her face.

"You're actually 'dating' him?" Arya pointed at the giant dude, who sneered at her. "This guy, right here." Sansa narrowed her brows and nodded sharply, clearly annoyed with her sister's incredulity. 
"Have you told dad?"

"Not yet," Sansa gave Arya a warning look - unnecessary since she was no tattletale.

"Please," Arya gently took her sister's hand between both of hers and stared into her blue eyes. "Can I be there when you do?"

"Arya!" Sansa yanked her hand away and pouted with annoyance. "Stop being a pest when I'm hurt."

"So, giant dude, your name is 'San-door'?" Arya sounded out the guy's awkward name. "I think I like 'giant dude' better."

"Have it your way," he crossed his massive arms and smirked at her, "tiny girl." Sandor stood up, still amazing Arya with his massive height.

"Hey!" Arya mirrored his stance and glared up at him. "That's Arry Wolfborn to you!" Though she wasn't in the group anymore, the name she picked was way too cool to let it go to waste.
"Gods," he scoffed, "I don't know why Drogo hangs with you nerds." Arya bit back the sudden urge to spill the whole sad story and wail on her sister's shoulder. Instead, she sucked it up and smirked at her sister's randomly fierce boyfriend. She's no wimpy girl who gets all weepy over some boy... at least not in public.

"Cause you're such a conversationalist," she quipped.

"Drogo and I understand each other on a level you couldn't get, little girl." Sandor seemed to enjoy their back-and-forth while Sansa looked plain confused. That might've been due to the recent head-trauma.

"Then why don't you dump Sansa and date him?" Arya found herself grinning for the first time in days, almost able to forget... Who was she kidding? Gendry was never far from her mind, sometimes she could swear she even heard him calling her name. Then she would look up and nobody would even be around.

"Nah," he gave her a twisted smirk back, "he's not quite as pretty."

"Dany might disagree with that." Arya sighed - wondering how the group was getting along and if Drogo ever made it official with the blonde beauty. Did they ever find out what malicious fiend was terrorizing the Dragonborn clan? It was so brutal of Gendry to have her thrown out, effectively breaking every friendship she made since she came to Kings High. He was not worth one minute of heartache! Still... it is not like they were ever dating. She promised never to fall in love with him, he specifically told her to avoid it. Everything was her fault and being mad at him was asinine.

"Dany Targaryen?" Her sister rejoined the conversation, interrupting her thoughts and reminding Arya shut her mouth.

"Oops," she slapped a hand over her mouth. Letting secrets slip was a nasty habit of hers, sometimes her tongue worked faster than her head. Like the day she crammed it down her best friend's throat and ruined everything.

"Telling tales out of school?" Sandor chuckled, a deep rumbling sound in his chest. "Not good, Wolfgirl."

"It's Wolf-born,'" Arya huffed, "and I didn't say anything about Dany and Drogo." She made a motion like she zipped her lips closed and looked pointedly at both of them.

"Huh," he smiled in his twisted way and nodded his head in approval, "way to go, Drogo."

"That's what I said," Arya nodded along.

"Oh-my-gods!" A look of horror covered Sansa's face as she looked back and forth between her boyfriend and her little sister. "Oh no, I just realized who you remind me of." She covered her mouth with her hand and squeezed her eyes shut.

"Fuck that!" They both protested simultaneously, making Sansa groan again. Then she burst into laughter as they scowled at each other. Arya gave in and joined her nitwit sister's giggling, sort-of seeing the resemblance now that she mentioned it. The giant dude - Sandor - rolled his eyes and snorted something like a laugh.

"We're not letting you rest," his voice gentled when he spoke to Sansa, "come on, kid - before the nurse kicks us out." Arya had a hard time imagining anyone kicking Sandor out of any place.

"You don't have to go," Sansa murmured as she reached out to grab his hand, blushing and looking
away. Arya recognized that look on her sister's face. The girl was completely smitten - with the most brutal-looking guy she'd ever seen! Sandor seemed alright, little rough around the edged, but what in the seven hells happened to Sansa's taste in guys?!

"Quit your chirping and get some rest." He tucked his finger under Sansa's chin and pulled her gaze up. Arya felt a curious mixture of jealousy and disgust at their sappy lovey-dovey bullshit. Guess public school changes a girl - it certainly hadn't left Arya unscathed. Who knew she'd fall in love with some weak-hearted dumbass and then get dumped by him? She should've never left Winterfell, even if she had to chain herself to her bed. At least then, she could get some sleep...

GENDRY

He got a text from Sam to meet him in the empty room and it sounded pretty urgent, good thing he didn't skip like he planned. It's not like he could go to the forge anyway. Arya's ghost haunted him wherever he went: staring at him with grey eyes filled with accusations of betrayal. Even as he rushed to meet up with Sam, Arya floated alongside him dressed in the same outfit she wore when he had her kicked out. No matter how many times he told the apparition his actions were for both of their sakes, she just scowled at him.

There was nothing he could do: what's done is done and it was for the best, no matter how much it felt like a gunshot to the heart. Mom was right, she was no good for him, and Arya's father obviously shared his mother's disapproval. If both parents disapproved, there was no hope for them. It would be a constant uphill battle to hide their relationship and inevitably, it would blow up in their faces. Better to cut their losses and run than die a pointless and valiant death on the battlefield of love.

Arry's ghost snorted a laugh at his dramatic analogy. Gendry ignored his heartbreak-induced delusion as he entered the empty room. She gave him one last forlorn look before melting away. He shut the door behind him, pausing a moment to fix the permanent frown on his face. Sam waited for him alone, sitting at the table with his head in his hands. Ordinarily he was the most cheerful and upbeat person, something bad must've happened to make him so upset.

"What's up?" He took the seat next to Sam, sinking into it with a weary sigh and dropping his backpack on the floor.

"Jon came to see me this morning," Sam looked up with a drained expression on his usually cheery face. "He asked me what exactly happened to make us kick Arya out. I told him I didn't know, that you asked for a favor from the group and we granted it. Then he told me that he would not be joining us so long as she is out of the group." His friend narrowed his eyes on Gendry. "That was after he called me a coward and you a bunch of words I would rather not repeat."

"I've been with the group for over two years," he argued, ready for this confrontation. "I brought in Hot Pie and Rick." He knew Jon would have a problem but Gendry couldn't think of what else to do. "My word should be good enough."

"It was," Sam nodded, "until Jon told me he suspected there was something going on between you and Arya. I think I deserve to know, since I had to kick her out." Gendry couldn't explain why he had to get away from Arya, at least not without breaking down and sobbing like a baby. Complete avoidance was the only way he could be sure neither of them could get each other into more trouble. They were like fire and ice, just like mom said: they would burn hot and burn out. It was better to just... Oh, bloody hells! Even he didn't believe his own bullshit anymore!

"We got caught sneaking into the school's swimming pool," he slumped down on the table and buried his face in his arms.
"That's it?" Sam did not sound convicted by his half-story.

"We were naked and making out," he grumbled.

"Took long enough," Sam quipped knowingly and Gendry snapped his head up to glare at his friend.

"I said we got caught, didn't I?" He pushed off the table and raked his hands through his hair. "Her father came down and so did my mom: it was a mess." Gendry let his head roll forward and shrugged his shoulders. "We can't be together and it's too hard to be 'just friends'."

"And what did Arya say?" Sam asked the million-dollar-question. Gendry could not face his friend as he admitted he didn't know what she would say because he never asked.

"We didn't get a chance to talk-"

"You haven't talked to her since?!!" Sam's eyes widened with furious shock. "Then you... used me to break up with her?!" Gendry wouldn't put it like that exactly: they were never technically 'together', right? "Even I know that's messed up! You're the bloody coward, Jon was right!"

"I know..." Gendry stared down at his hands when Sam suddenly hauled up his bag and threw at him. "Ah!"

"Get out of here," he ordered as he pointed at the door. "Go and find her, and don't come back until you've made up or broken up without any help from me! Either way, I'm inviting her back." Then he stood up and stormed out in a huff, leaving Gendry staring open-mouthed. He couldn't do what Sam told him, if he even looked at Arya he'd beg her forgiveness and for another chance. When he saw her waiting in his car he lost all of his nerve, she did the right thing by running away.

'What about me?' The vision floated in front of his eyes, ghost-Arya stood in front of him with her arms crossed. 'Why would I wait in your car if I didn't like you? Why would I try to fuck you if I didn't like you? So, if we assume that I like you, what gives you the right to decide what's best for me? At least, don't I deserve to hear your reasons for avoiding me?' She was right as usual, even the hallucination in his head of Arry could never be wrong.

"I can't face you," he whispered to the mirage. Like a dying man in the desert, catching a glimpse of a crystal clear pool of water, Arya's phantom tortured him. How could he possibly deal with seeing her real self?

'If you leave it like this,' she knelt in front of him, like she did that first night they spent together at the forge. 'Won't you regret it?' Gendry knew it was wrong when he stood up and walked to the door. He'd never been more wrong as he swung his backpack over his shoulders and walked purposefully up the hall. The heavy wrongness of his actions nearly crushed him as he waited outside the classroom Arya should be inside. If she attended, not exactly a habit of hers.

The bell rung and the classroom door swung open as kids filed out, chatting happily as they spread out to find their next classes. Gendry was about to give up when a petite form trudged out of the room with her head bowed so she didn't even see him. All the wrongness melted away as he took in the sight of his tough-as-nails girl hunched over like someone whose dog died. Guilt swallowed him as he realized he did this to her and he followed behind, trying to gather the courage to speak.

"Arry," he called. She stopped but did not turn around, just shook her head and kept trudging forward. "Milady," he tried again and this time her head whipped around and wide eyes focused on him. There were dark shadows under Arya's eyes and Gendry's stomach turned at the thought of her
lying awake because of him. Even haggard and unkempt, she was still the most beautiful person he'd ever laid eyes on. The days away from her had been pure agony: he could fall asleep easily enough. It was the 'getting out of bed' part he had trouble with.

"What?" Her upper lips curled into a sneer before she turned around dismissively and kept walking, her head held high. He jogged to catch up to Arya's side but she ignored him and picked up her pace.

"Can we talk?" Gendry knew he didn't deserve even a second of her time but Sam and ghost-Arya were right: he needed to make things right between them. Otherwise, he would always regret ruining his first love and that's a burden no one should bear.

"You're talking to me right now," she grumbled.

"We need to talk," he insisted, "about what happened -"

"Gods," she interrupted, "you overreact about everything!" People in the hallway stared as they passed and Gendry felt his face burning from the attention. Arya rolled her eyes and grabbed onto his wrist to drag him towards the empty room and he followed silently. She marched through the door, yanked him inside, and slammed it shut. "It wasn't a big deal," she crossed her arms and scowled at him. "I'm fine - just fine." No, he'd gotten to know her over the weeks since she barreled into his life: Arry was anything but fine and neither was he.

"I'm not fine," his voice sounded horse so he cleared his throat. "It was a big deal to me," he took a step towards her as she regarded him with suspicion. "I really, really like you, Arya. Right up until we got caught: that was the best day of my life. Every day with you has been like..." Gendry searched his mind for the perfect analogy. "Being with you is like going to a theme park for the first time: overwhelming, amazing, and impossibly fun."

"So," she whispered, "what are you saying?"

"Your father doesn't like me," he started but then stopped himself, "but it shouldn't be up to him." Gendry faltered, unsure of the right thing to say because all he wanted to do was grab her and never let her go again. "Arry," he stepped closer and held onto her narrow shoulders. "I know what I should do: I should tell you we can't be together because it would be too hard." He let his head hang forward in defeat. "But all I want to do is be with you." "Now," she poked him in the forehead to lift his head and raised an eyebrow, "I'm even more confused."

"I'm saying: fuck it." Gendry was fooling himself, thinking he could ever let Arya go. "I'm yours, milady, if you'll have me."

"You really like me?" She asked the question like she just couldn't believe it. Her disbelief seemed so ridiculous to Gendry, considering how much he really cared about her.

"That's putting it mildly," he admitted. "I'm crazy about you, I think about you all the time, and I'd regret it for the rest of my life if I let you go like this." Gendry held his breath as Arya stared at him, open-mouthed with her top lip slightly curled and her brow furrowed.

"Why all this 'out of the group' bullshit?" She waved her hand at the table and he wished she had a better answer to give her.

"I just wanted to do..." He let his words trail off, it sounded even more ridiculous out loud than inside his own head. Gendry’s hands slid from her shoulders, knowing his defeat was at hand and waiting for the killing blow. He messed up too bad and Arya wasn’t the forgiving type...
"The right thing?" She put her hands on her hips and turned her eyes up at the ceiling to shake her head in disbelief. "Gods, you are stupid - you really do need me." Her eyes flickered over him before meeting his again. "Make it up to me."

"Anything," he’d go get her the moon if she asked it of him.

"Kiss me..." She put up one finger over his mouth as he was already complying with her order. "Like your life depends on it."

"It does," he smiled against her finger, "I need you, Arya." She removed her hand and he cupped the sides of her face, stepped even closer, and bowed his head to meet her lips. Gendry tried to give her a gentle kiss that conveyed the tenderness of his feelings for her. Arry attacked him like this was the last day they were ever going to be alive. For all he knew she was right, the world could end tomorrow and then what would be the point? They wasted too much this time circling around each other, fighting their mutual feelings.

"Say you're mine," she ordered raggedly against his lips. Before he could answer, Arry shoved him hard backwards until his legs hit the top of the table. She pushed him once more so that he fell back on top of it.

"I'm yours," he swore.

"Don't forget it." She grabbed two fistfuls of his shirt and pulled herself up on top of him, straddling his lap and rising up on her knees over him. Her hands plunged into his hair to yank his head back before she continued to devour his mouth. If he thought she was passionate and wild before, that was when she was in a good mood, when she was angry her kiss turned vicious.

"Oh!" A high-pitched gasp behind them caused Arya to tear away from his mouth, releasing his hair as she groaned in frustration. She hopped down off his lap and they both turned their eyes towards whoever invaded their making up making out. Dany stood beside Drogo just inside the door. She elbowed him in the ribs with a big smile on her face. "See, I told you they would patch things up! I'm always right about these things."

"We've really got to learn how to lock a bloody door," Gendry groaned.

"Sorry we interrupted," Dany beamed at them and held out a hand, "please resume." She tucked onto Drogo’s arm and started to lead him out of the room.

"No, that's alright," Arya held up a hand to stop them from leaving, "I've got to go anyway." She turned back to Gendry and tugged on his wrist for him to follow. Dany and Drogo moved to the table and he couldn’t help but wonder what they were doing in the empty room. "I have to get to class," she told him as they walked out into the hall. "I've skipped way too much already and now I'm on Varys' radar."

"Me too," he sighed as her hand slipped into his, "After school-"

"I'm so grounded," she cut him off. "It's not even funny."

"This is going to be hard," he inhaled deep, trying to build some fortitude.

"I can do it," she squeezed his fingers, "if you can."

"I won't mess up again, Arya." Gendry doubted his ability to keep that promise, though he intended to try his best. No matter how devoted he was to Arya, going behind his mother's back made him feel like a horrible asshole. Mom sacrificed everything to raise him and he owed it to her to obey the
few requests she made of him. But giving up Arry felt even worse than he could have imagined.

"You better not," she warned, "or I'll destroy you."

"That's milady," he pulled her hand up to his lips and kissed her knuckles.

"I am yours," she stopped in the middle of the hall to look up at him. Sometimes she looked so vulnerable, eyes wide and shining, it just about broke his heart.

"Don't forget it," he pulled her hand to his heart and just let his eyes drink her in. A few days without Arya reaffirmed what he'd known all along: he loved her. It wasn't just some crush, they were meant to be. Somehow he would find a way to convince their parents to overlook their rocky start.

“I have to go,” she pouted. “But I will call you later - you'd better answer.”

“As you command, milady,” he grinned like the lovesick idiot he was. She looked both ways up the emptied hallway and launched herself at him for one last fierce kiss. Then she took off running down the hall to her class and he let himself watch her disappear before hauling ass to his class. He ran the whole way with a smile still on his face. They might both be totally insane, but then again: isn't love always a little crazy?

Chapter End Notes

Officially, today was the worst day of 2014. Bright side, it can't really get worse. Of course, it can, but I never claimed to be a realist.

Today's Theme Song:
System Of A Down - Lonely Day
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnGdoEa1tPg

"Such a lonely day, and it's mine. It's a day I'm glad I survived..."

Hope everyone else is doing better. Here's to tomorrow.
Sansa lay on her bed, reading a book and humming to herself and Arya peeked down the hall to be sure dad’s office door was closed tight. She closed the bedroom door and walked across the room.

"Alright," she stood in front of her sister, hands on her hips. "I let you off easy yesterday because you were hurt." Sansa sat up, crossing her legs and setting her book aside, to face Arya. "Who are you and what have you done with my sister?"

"You're being dramatic," she crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. "Especially considering you and daddy can barely say two words to each other."

"Fine," Arya sighed and plopped down on the bed, "you tell me how you started dating Lurch and I'll tell you why dad hates me now."

"I met him in the gym on our first day, he walked me to class, we both started to like each other." Sansa shrugged and uncrossed her arms to lay back on the bed. "It's a completely normal relationship." Arya lay beside her sister and both their legs danced off the side. "Now, tell me, what actually happened? I overheard dad whispering on the phone so loud it could wake the dead. Something about you and a boy?!"

"Nothing really 'happened'," Arya turned away from her sister's wide-eyed stare. "I mean, stuff happened - but it was no big deal."

"What 'stuff' happened?" Inpatient annoyance crept into Sansa's voice.

"We kissed," Arya fiddled with her fingers, "and other stuff."

"Gods save me," Sansa groaned. "If you don't start talking, I am going to kill you."

"Fine," Arya relented, "my friend Gendry and I broke into the pool on campus - we got caught kissing naked."

"On campus?" Sansa geared up for a lecture. "Arya, you know it's highly against the rules to go on school grounds-"

"3-2-1..." Arya counted down the seconds until Sansa's brain started working again.

"NAKED?!!" She bolted straight up, her eyes as wide as dinner plates.

"Shh!" Arya sat up and covered her sister's big mouth. "Are you trying to get me grounded for eternity?" She pointed towards the office. "Dad is still fuzzy on the details."

"Oh-my-gods-Arya," her words were muffled until Sansa yanked Arya's hand away. "Then what happened?"

"I don't know-" Arya heaved a sigh, thinking back on how that whole day went so very wrong. "We
we're naked - and kissing - and, you know."

"Oh... my... gods." This time Sansa covered her own mouth. "Did you…?"

"No," Arya's shoulders slumped forward in disappointment, "we didn't. But, I think we might have if Varys didn't come in."

"Principal Varys?!" Sansa's high-pitched squeak made Arya laugh.

"Yeah," she chuckled, "honestly he was pretty cool about it. Way better than dad or Gendry's mom anyway."

"So," Sansa blew out a long breath, "is Gendry your boyfriend now?"

"I'm not really sure I get the whole 'boyfriend' thing." Arya waved a dismissive hand, not really caring about labels. As long as Gendry was 'hers', nothing else mattered.

"Do you want him to be?" Sansa, on the other hand, cared desperately about labels.

"I don't know," Arya pursed her lips to think about what Gendry would want. He said he was 'crazy' about her, so he'd probably just go along with whatever she decided - as it should be.

"Arya," Sansa rolled her eyes, "a boyfriend is just a friend that you like and want to make out with exclusively."

"Well," she put a finger to her chin and thought about it, "I do want to make out with him all the time and I like him most of the time."

"Then he's your boyfriend." Sansa nodded her head decisively, narrowing her eyes and crossing her arms. "Even if he's being difficult about it." Arya rolled her eyes at her sister's sulking, not surprised in the least that the giant dude was a handful.

"I doubt I'll have as much trouble with Gendry as you did with giant dude." She smirked at her sister's annoyed expression.

"Please, Arya, he has a name." Sansa got this stupid dreamy look in her eyes. "Sandor."

"Yeah," Arya snorted a laugh, "I'd keep that to myself too, if I was him."

"Hah, as if 'Gendry' is a better name." Sansa had a point there.

"I agree," Arya held up her hands in surrender. "They're both terrible names - no real options for nicknames either."

"A rose by any other name would still smell as sweet." Sansa giggled and flopped back on the bad, clasping her hands over her heart. Ew.

"That hulking man-beast you call your boyfriend is no rose." Arya flopped back down beside her sister, chuckling at the comparison.

"Hey now," Sansa protested. "Just because you started liking 'boys' doesn't make my 'man' any less ruggedly handsome."

"Oh, he's rugged alright," Arya snickered, "like a tire."

"At least I get to go out on dates with my boyfriend." Sansa arched one thin red eyebrow at her
sister. "How many years are you grounded for?"

"Go fuck yourself," she retorted.

"I do enjoy your witty comebacks." Sansa shook her head and stared up at the ceiling.

"I've never seen dad this mad before." Arya played with the front of her hair and she confessed her worries. "What if he does something drastic to keep me apart from Gendry?"

"Then dad has gone off the deep end." Sansa clenched her fist and determination. "You should date whomever you want."

"You, Sansa Stark, are telling me to disobey our parents?" Arya could scarcely believe it. "Gasp."

"I guess Sandor is rubbing off on me," Sansa mused with a half-smile.

"Ew!" Arya pulled the coverlet over her head. "Mental images!"

"Arya!" Sansa grabbed a pillow and thwacked Arya's face with it, only to have it ripped from her grasp for a counterattack. Her sister surrendered immediately like a coward and peaked between her hands covering her face. "Don't worry," she giggled, "Dad will cool off. Gendry will take you on all the paintball and horror flick dates you dreamed of, and soon we'll be moving out... into a house." She sat up and put her arm around Arya in a rare gesture of sisterly affection. "And our family will all be together again."

"And we'll get our own rooms again." Arya grinned at the idea and looked over to see the same expression on her sister's face. "I'll miss you."

"No, you won't." Sansa laughed and ruffled Arya's hair.

"You're right," she tugged on Sansa's loose hair and scowled at her, "I hate you."

"I hate you too, baby sister." Sansa pushed Arya out of the bed. "Now, get out, I need to get ready."

"I've seen you naked a million times," Arya grumbled as she left the room.

"You interrupt my thought process," Sansa called as the door closed. Arya didn't get it, her 'process' included picking up various items from the 'cleanish' pile and smelling them. It took Sansa at least ten times longer to get ready and most of that time was spent just choosing the shoes. The living room couch felt especially comfortable as she stretched out and checked her phone for texts.

'I am going insane with boredom!' She texted Gendry for the hundredth time and really worried that she was bothering him. But she was so BORED - and she missed him a little bit too.

'My heart is in an ocean of loneliness without you, milady.' Gendry started saying all this flowery nonsense after they made up and Arya hated that she loved it.

'Ew', she couldn't let him know she liked it, 'gross'. 'I miss you too', she added after a minute of him not replying.

'Can you call me?' Hearing Gendry's voice would be lovely but she didn't want to risk it since she was booted from the privacy of her bedroom. Dad holed himself up in his office and barely came out all day... Arya wondered if he was avoiding her intentionally and the mere thought made her want to march in there. Actually, she was getting sick and tired of his cold treatment - maybe she should let go of her pride and beg a little.
'I should chat with dad to see if I can cut this grounding sentence down for good behavior.' Arya knew she was being stubborn, only hurting herself by not pacifying dad's worries. Even though they were well-founded. Honestly, she didn't think it was any of his business who she dated or kissed. He didn't have to kiss Gendry - he didn't even have to like him - she liked him and that's all that should matter.

'Godspeed, Wolfborn.' Gendry's texts always made her smile and she looked around to be totally sure she was alone before pressing a kiss to the screen. Arya plugged in her phone by the TV and walked to the end of the hallway to dad's study.

"Dad?" Arya did not bother to knock, poking her head in to see her father hunched over his desk, piled high with paperwork. "We need to talk." Dad nodded his head before he took off his reading glasses and rubbed his tired eyes. She took a seat on the opposite side and sat up straight with her hands in her lap.

"About your punishment, I assume?" He did not look to be in a negotiable mood. "Six months is more than fair for breaking into school grounds."

"That's not why I'm uber grounded and we both know it," she argued, "it's because of Gendry." Her father sat back in his chair and nodded once in acknowledgment.

"That is part of it," he readily admitted. "How can I not think the worst when you won't explain yourself?"

"Dad," she sighed and hung her head, "he's the first boy that I've ever liked - ever." Arya peeked up to see her father squirm a bit in his chair, obviously uncomfortable. "I didn't know how to talk to you about it, mom isn't here," she laid it on thick. "Sansa and I are not the kind of sisters to gab about boys." She could see her arguments were softening him but continued to tread lightly. "So, I got a little... carried away."

"That is a tad vague," he narrowed his eyes, well aware of her tactics.

"Gendry liked me as a friend," she explained in half-truth, "he told me that over and over, but I didn't listen." Arya covered her eyes with her hand and hoped it look like she was about to cry. "After we got caught, he and all of his friends kicked me out of their group."

"I'm sorry, kiddo," he didn't sound very sorry - one peek through her fingers and Arya could see the corner of his mouth lifting. It made her feel a little less guilty about her little white lies of omission.

"Honestly," she raked her fingers though her hair and met her father's solemn gaze, "I think I'm done chasing boys for the time being." Arya clasped her hands together and leaned forward on the edge of her seat to beg shamelessly. "I messed up, but I never did any of it to 'rebel' against you. I got a little crazy over a boy... and he crushed my feelings into tiny little pieces. Now I have to find a whole new group of friends, which isn't easy being grounded on weekdays and weekends. Haven't I been punished enough? I learned my lesson, trust me."

"Arya..." Dad leaned forward to brace his forearms on the desk and gave her a serious look. "Your mother always tells me I'm too soft on you," he rubbed his eyes again, "she says I encouraged you to spy on the power plant's manager-

"I got the proof," Arya protested. "He was stealing petty cash to buy prostitutes-"

"Arya!" He slammed his fist on his desk in frustration. "You're a little girl! What you did was dangerous, don't you see that?!" Dad dropped his face into one hand, his voice sounded exhausted.
"And the 'proof' you got was obtained illegally, therefore-"

"I know, the cops told me." Arya bowed her head in a show of submission and shame. "It is 'inadmissible in court', but dad I-"

"No buts!" His dark brows knitted together as his steely gaze pierced through her. "I brought you with me to give you a fresh start. Your behavior has been unacceptable."

"This past week, I've attended every class and turned in all of my homework - you can call my teachers." Arya passionately argued her case. "I'm going to keep it up, not just to get out of trouble. I need to focus on school so I can get into a good college. That way I will know how to bust bad guys within the law." She knew dad liked when she talked about her plans for the future in a responsible way.

"If your attendance is perfect," Dad held up one finger, "and you obey me in all things." He held up a second finger and Arya leaned forward in her chair. "I will ease the sentence of your grounding." His eyes glanced up at the ceiling as he held up a third finger. "And no fighting with your sister at all." Arya's shoulders slumped at that tricky addition. "I can shave off a few months."

"I think it will take about two months to fully learn my lesson." Arya hoped there was still room for negotiation.

"Three," he remained firm.

"Two and a half," she bargained. "And! I'll throw in the one-time bargain of voting for steak every time we go out. You would have to relax your 'no fighting with Sansa' rule a bit."

"Done," the corner of his stern frown lifted into a smile. "You really should consider studying law to become a lawyer."

"Pish," she waved a hand in dismissal, "there's no action in the courtroom."

"You might be surprised," he smiled indulgently. "Now, run along, I have miles to go before I sleep."

"Need some help?" Arya eyed the many stacks of folders and stapled papers.

"It's boring account stuff," he warned.

"I don't mind," she shrugged and sat back down as he explained how she could help. Arya came into her father's office to pull the wool over his eyes but she had to admit she missed hanging out with him. Even though she had to disobey him and go behind his back to see Gendry, she vowed to herself to be a better daughter.

**SANSA**

She tried on at least a dozen outfits before she found something perfect, not too dressy but still impressive. After the entire cheer squad's stand-offish behavior, Sansa considered quitting. Then Margaery invited her along for a day if shopping with some of the girls and she hoped it was their way of welcoming her. She appraised her appearance one last time before calling goodbye to Daddy and Arya and going downstairs to wait.

Margaery pulled up in a shiny pearl-white sports car with the hood down and Sansa internally thanked the gods she braided her long hair. Dany and Missa were both in the car and all three greeted her cheerfully as she got into the backseat. The sun shone bright and high in the clear blue
sky and the weather was absolutely perfect. The mall turned out to be a bit crowded on the weekend. However, the crowds of people parted ways as the girls walked alongside each other.

Sansa felt in awe of the way they all walked and looked like professional fashion models. They all shone with unique strengths and confidence. Being part of their group made her feel confident as well and she opened up, casting aside any timid worries about fitting in. Marge and Dany shopped like they were on a warpath while Missa relented to any of her friends' suggestions. Finally, after they combed the whole mall twice, they dropped at a table in the food court to eat.

"Thank you so much for inviting me," Sansa took a sip of her lemon-lime soda. "I've never had so much fun shopping."

"We wanted to welcome you more formally to the team." Margaery smiled warmly. "Also, we want to help you fit in at school better since you are new. Tell me," she leaned forward, still smiling. "Would you like to be set up on a date? I know a lot of really cute and nice boys."

"Oh," she twirled the end of her braid around her finger, "no thank you. I'm seeing someone."

"I see," the smile stayed on Marge's face but her brows narrowed. "Anyone we know?"

"He's on the basketball team, Sandor Clegane." Sansa sat up a little straighter in her chair, suddenly nervous this trip was more of an intervention than a welcome.

"Ah," Dany and Margaery exchanged worried looks. The beautiful blonde wore the exact expression mother made whenever Arya did something dangerous. "Well, that's... That's what we were afraid of. I should have said something sooner, Sansa. There are some things about the hound that you should know."

"Stop!" Sansa held her hands up, resisting the urge to cover her ears. "Wait, just... hold on. I don't care what's happened before." She lowered her voice to a more reasonable level and tried to smile through her nervousness. "I like Sandor and he likes me. Whatever he did in the past is not important to me."

"We have nothing against him personally," Dany's voice softened to almost a murmur. "We only want to look out for your safety. I could tell you a hundred things about him that would make your hair curl, but I don't want to be unkind. However, you need to know that the way he acts around you just that - an act. He's not a good person-"

"How dare you?!" Sansa hissed through her teeth, struggling to keep her voice down. Dany sat back, stunned by Sansa's vehemence. "Sandor most certainly is a good person! He even saved me when I was in trouble."

"Oh sweetie, you are so innocent…” Margaery continued to look at her with pity. Throughout the conversation, Missa kept silent, staring down with a slightly disapproving expression. "He wants to get you into bed."

"MARGE!" Dany smacked her friend on the shoulder. 

"Of course he does!" Sansa could feel her face burning from embarrassment. "That's normal, when a boy likes a girl! I would be offended if he didn't want to..."

"Listen, honey-"

"Don't 'honey' me!" Sansa interrupted Margaery, unwilling to listen anymore. "You are trying to say terrible things about my boyfriend when you've never even talked to him."
"Oh, I've had the displeasure of talking to him." Margaery snorted a laugh. "The hound and I are in the same grade, I know more about the things he's done than anyone. Every year he finds some way to top the last," she clucked her tongue disapprovingly. "I guess seducing a virgin heiress is his last hurrah."

"You're being harsh, Marge." Dany admonished her friend before looking at Sansa. "I'm sure the hound has... some good qualities, but his family is dangerous."

"Dangerous? That's ridiculous," Sansa could barely speak above a whisper. "His father works for Mr. Baratheon." Margaery grabbed Dany's arm and shook her head sharply.

"Did he tell you what his father does?" Margaery asked the question more gently while Dany got a faraway pained look in her eyes.

"Security..." In truth, Sandor rarely ever spoke about his family.

"That's one way to put it." Margaery smiled at Dany, patting her shoulder apologetically before looking pointedly at Sansa. "He's their goon-squad leader. Anyone who threatens Robert Baratheon's business or family gets a visit from the hound's father."

"You're exaggerating." Sansa thought Sandor's father's action should not affect their relationship. Yet she did not want to believe what the girls were telling her. They made Mr. Baratheon and Mr. Clegane sound like gangsters or something!

"I wish I was," Margaery sighed, directing her sympathetic expression at Sansa. "The Tyrells have done business with the Baratheons for more than a decade. I know exactly what they are capable of."

"You hate them because Joffrey is your ex-boyfriend." Sansa knew making counter accusations was pointless but she felt cornered.

"The hound is one of Joff's friends," she insisted, "they're all the same."

"NO!" Sansa jumped up out of her seat, not caring people were looking at her. "You don't know what you're talking about, none of you!"

"Please, Sansa, just listen." Dany stood up, trying to coax Sansa back into her seat. "We will tell you everything. You deserve to know the truth-"

"I've heard enough!" Sansa glared at both of them for their intrusion and then at Missa for her complicit silence. "Sandor is... sweet and good to me. That's all that matters, don't try to break us up." Unable to hold back her tears anymore, Sansa ran away despite all three girls calling her back. She hurried to the front entrance, digging her phone out of her purse and instantly hitting the number one. Her thumb hovered over the call button with hesitation as she stepped outside. It seemed she was always calling Sandor when she needed help and she wondered if that made him feel used. Unable to deny herself, Sansa punched the call button and waited for him to answer.

"Hey, little bird," he answered.

"Sandor..." Sansa fought against the tears in her voice. "Can you please come get me?"

"Where are you?" He sounded worried and that already made her heart feel lighter.

"The mall," she inhaled and exhaled to calm her nerves, "front entrance."
"Stay there," he ordered, "I'm coming now."

"Thanks," she heard the phone click and put her cell back inside her purse. Sansa took a seat on the bench outside and prayed the girls did not come looking for her. The whole situation was so embarrassing, she should have kept her emotions in check. That way she could have explained how sweet Sandor really was. They just didn't know him like she did... she quickly swiped away the tears rolling down her face. 'He's coming for me', she repeated in her head until the Skylark whipped up in front of the mall.

"Sorry I bothered you," the apology slipped out as she opened the car door and climbed in. "I just did not want to explain to daddy..." Sansa held it in until she clicked the seatbelt into place and Sandor pulled away from the mall. More tears collected on her eyelids and she hung her head to hide behind her curtain of hair. They don't know anything... How many boys would drop everything to pick their girlfriend up from the mall?

"Wanna tell me?" He asked the question so reluctantly she had to smile through her sadness.

"No," she assured him, "I don't want to talk about it."

"Fine with me," he drove in silence for a few minutes before pulling over into a gas station and parking. "Where do you want me to take you?"

"Can you just..." Sansa needed to be alone to cry out all of her feelings and she refused to let Sandor see her lose her mind. "Please take me home?"

"Sure thing," he sounded a bit disappointed and she felt terrible.

"Sorry-"

"Stop fucking apologizing," he growled before he rubbed a hand over his face and put the Skylark into reverse. "Look - I'll take you home, but first I have some place to show you." Sandor whipped out of the parking long and back onto the interstate. "Don't argue." Sansa nodded, not caring to debate, and tilted her head against the window to watch the lines on the pavement. They pulled into a parking lot for the Blackwater Bay, empty at that hour so close to winter.

"The beach?" Sansa stepped out of the car to look out over the rocky shore and the sun dipping into the sea. "My shoes-" She started to protest, not noticing Sandor coming up behind her "Oh!" He laughed as he scooped her up effortlessly to carry her like a princess out over the beach. "This is beautiful," she put her arms around his neck, "thank you for taking me here." He walked out onto a collection of rocks jutting out into the water. "I feel a bit better already."

"Beautiful," he snorted a laugh, "look around - nobody is here." Sandor set her down on and grinned at her. "No one can hear you scream..." He looked out at the ocean and cupped his hands around his mouth. "FUCK YOU, KINGS LANDING! YOU ROTTING PILE OF SHIT! I hope the sea swallows you up like a giant toilet!" He turned to her and gestured at the water. "Now you try."

"I couldn't!" Her protest earned her a sideways scowl and Sansa sighed before she lifted her hands to amplify her voice. "Everyone can just keep their well-meaning advice to themselves!"

"You're being too polite," he scoffed, "nobody's here but me."

"You can all go to the seven hells!" Sansa started to feel lighter as she yelled out her true thoughts. "I like Sandor Clegane!" He snorted at her confession but she glanced over to see him smiling. "I'm afraid I like him more than he likes me!" His grey eyes turned serious as he reached out to grab her shoulder and spun her to face him.
"That's not possible," his voice was gruff as his hand slid up to cup the side of her face. "Girl, don't you know? I've never been happier than when I'm with you."

"Really?" Sansa gaped at his sudden romantic nature, too stunned to truly appreciate his sweet words.

"Don't make me fucking say it twice." He frowned down at her, looking more like the sour-faced boy who stole her heart.

"Sandor, I..." Sansa closed her eyes and breathed deep through her nose before meeting his gaze once more. "I was supposed to sleep over with my friends tonight..." She peeked at him, feeling her cheeks grow warm. "We could stay together, if you want."

"You're behaving badly, little bird." A wide wolfish grin broke over Sandor's face. "I should just take you home..." He grabbed her quick and spun her around to lift her into his arms again, surprising Sansa into making an embarrassing squeak. "To bad - I don't often do what I should."

"I don't mind," she nuzzled her face into his neck. He walked slowly as he carried her back over the beach and she memorized the sound of his strong heartbeat. In the backseat of the Skylark, Sansa spent her second night wrapped in Sandor's embrace.

Chapter End Notes

I thank everyone for their encouragement yesterday.

There's a big home game next chapter, Sansa's POV is first, entitled: "I Scream"
More Joff being a shit-stain!
More flirting!
More kissy time in the Skylark's backseat!
Stay tuned <3
SANDOR

He laid awake in bed all morning, thinking about Sansa, of course. How did those cheerleaders put it? Oh, that's right, he had the same idea the first time he saw her too. She's a good girl, not just her behavior but she's a good person - the epitome of what girlhood represents. She's pretty, soft, and sweet. Plenty of people look down on her for it and even more of them think it's just an act, as if the girl had a bad bone in her body. She's good, in every way that's bad about him. She looked at him like... Like she understood him.

She saw past the hound and to him, Sandor. She looked at him like he was a real person - not some circus sideshow freak that gets put on display to perform for the applause of the crowd. No one even liked him, no one except for her. Sansa didn't have to tell him what happened at the mall, he knew she went there with her friends and left crying to call him. He told those interfering cheerleaders what would happen if they tried to say anything against him. The little bird had her head in the clouds when it came to him - she wanted to see the best in him so she did.

He couldn't remember the last time somebody saw the best in him. It's an uncomfortable feeling, like wearing a jacket a size too small, he done that plenty of times. Dad never managed to find the time to take him school shopping and he grew about four times faster than all the other kids in his class. The only other option was wearing Greg's clothes, his castoffs, but Sandor always had too much pride to do that. When he was old enough, he got a job with his uncle and bought his own fucking clothes.

"If I have to tell you to get your ass out of bed." His dad opened the door without knocking, "you really must be tired." He hung onto the door frame while Sandor fixed a murderous stare at his intrusion. "That better not affect the game tonight." Ignoring his father, he got out of bed and started throwing shit into his gym bag to leave. "What, no smart response?"

"We haven't lost a single game since I joined the team." Sandor was tired of pretended he cared to live up to his father's impossible standards. "High school basketball is a fucking joke."

"Oh, you think it's funny?" Dad's voice hitched up in that way that let Sandor know he'd already been hitting the bottle. A little 151 in his morning coffee is a great way to start the day. "I feed you, clothe you, and keep a roof over your head all these years and you want to fucking sleep the day away and risk your future? That's the thanks I get?"

"Are you done?" Sandor walked to the doorway where his father blocked the only exit.

"Don't fucking start with me," his words slurred a bit. "Your brother never talked back to me like that. He knew how to take the game seriously, even in high school."

"It's you who never fucking talk to him like you're talking to me." Sandor took another step closer and looked down on his father literally. "Because you're scared of him, and that's about the smartest thing you've ever done."

"You think you're a big man now," Dad lived to fight, it made Sandor sick how he let himself turn
into the same fucking thing. "You think I can't still put you down? You think you're better than your family?"

"I think you're pathetic." Sandor didn't say what he really wanted to say, that it was dad's fault mom and his sister were dead - that he drove her to do what she did. That he should've done something about Greg, mom did the only thing she thought she could. Sometimes he still hated her for leaving, but he always understood why she did it. Who could accept that they gave birth to a monster? How could she still look at her child who had half his face destroyed by his own brother?

"Get out of my house," Dad stumbled back out of Sandor's way and pointed toward the front door.

"Gladly," he sneered, brushing past his father and not looking back.

"If you lose tonight," dad called after him, "don't come back." That was just fine with him, he could dip a little bit into his 'get out of Kings Landing' fund, and he could sleep in the Skylark if he had to. Maybe his uncle would let him bunk down in the office of the pet shop, only he might be sleeping there himself if he still at odds with the wife. Sandor was a grown man - he didn't need to stay in his father's house if he wasn't welcome. Just like the rest of his life before this moment, he'd figure it out on his own.

The little bird didn't need her sweet innocent head filled with his sad stories, she would be beside herself. Really, none of it was that big a deal. Being kicked out of his father's house is practically family tradition by this point - the first time he was what, thirteen? That was a hell of a night, in the middle of winter too. Who the fuck cares? Nobody, that's why nobody ever said anything or did anything about all the obvious fucked up shit going on in his family.

Sansa would care though, because she's a good person. If there were more people in the world like her, maybe he wouldn't be so fucking broken. Maybe somebody would've done something along time ago and saved him a lot of pain. Its fine, he didn't need her to know all of the fucked up shit. Sandor liked her the way she was, all sunshine and rainbows - it was like taking a vacation away from his usual shitty life. Why ruin a good thing just to see her eyes glaze over with pity?

No, it was better that she looked at him like he was some kind of big fucking hero. That felt good, it washed away all of the other people who called him a dog, said that he's no good, and that he was not good enough for her. He knew all of that - they didn't need to tell him shit that he already clearly knew. Why did everyone think that he didn't know how fucking ugly and nasty he was? Of course, he knew. Not good enough for her, that's the truth.

Good thing he didn't give a flying fuck what other people wanted. They could all go bury their heads in the sand, living their little perfect lives. Fuck those idiots crying over not getting the cell phone they wanted for their birthday. Everyone else living in the real world won't apologize for trying to take just a little bit of happiness for themselves. The little bird was his now, nobody was going to take her away from him, and if he had to - he would fight for her.

Sandor arrived early at the school, teachers and students were milling around, setting things up for the big game. He grabbed his bag out of the back of the Skylark and jogged to the gym, noticing a few more stares than usual. So, word was getting around about him and the little bird? Good, everyone should know who she belonged to. When he walked into the locker room, the only person there was Loras, messing with this phone with a giant grin on his face.

"Hey hound," he looked up still smiling, "how's it going buddy?" Sandor scoffed at his cheery attitude, doubting Tyrell didn't know about his recent falling out with Joff.

"I assumed King Joffrey would have decreed to the rest of the team not to talk to me." Sandor sat
down in front of his locker to change into his uniform.

"Oh, he did," Loras laughed. "I seem to remember him swearing revenge on you." Tyrell stood up and moved to stand in front of his locker to get ready. "I also remember you had my back last year when that one guy thought he should teach the 'faggot' to stay out of the locker room."

"No big deal," Sandor pulled his shirt over his head to stuff it into his bag.

"And besides," Loras sat down to take off his shoes. "That little shit somehow managed to break my beautiful sister's heart." He snorted in disgust. "King Joffrey can go fuck himself with his royal scepter, I don't care who his daddy is."

"You know," Sandor grinned at Loras, "I've always liked you Tyrell."

"Sorry," he chuckled as he pulled his curly hair back, "I'm seeing someone."

"Yeah, me too." Sandor let his head roll back and stared at the ceiling. "Maybe you've heard?"

"Of course I have, and may I say 'well done'." Loras stood up to pull on his jersey. "She is magnificent. If I was straight, I would've given you a run for your money."

"You never stood a chance," Sandor kicked his bag into his locker and pulled on his shoes, "good girls always want the bad boy."

"Oh, is she a 'good girl'?" Joff interrupted their conversation, the rest of the team filing in after him. They all stood behind the asshole but none of them had the guts to look Sandor in the eye as he stood up. "Or is it that she just can't stand to be fucked while looking at your ugly face?" He clenched his fist and took a step towards Joffrey. "Just turn her around and fuck her like the bi-"

"That's enough," Tyrell moved between them and stared Joff down, "we have a game tonight." He looked up at the rest of the team. "I don't care who is getting fucked and who isn't." Loras looked back to Joff's smirking face. "It stays off the court. I am not losing a home game."

"I don't have any problems, captain." Joff looked past Loras to smile at Sandor. Tyrell ignored him and turned around.

"I need your head on straight tonight," he kept his voice low as he put a hand on Sandor's shoulder.

"My girl is going to be out there," Sandor looked straight at Joffrey, letting him know he wasn't intimidated by him. "She'll be watching and cheering for me," he let his eyes roam over his teammates and they quickly averted their eyes. "The rest of you just stay out of my way so I can look good in front of her."

"Alright, Romeo." Loras laughed and patted his shoulder before turning back to the team. "The rest of you, I am the captain of this team." He poked a finger in the center of his chest. "I don't care what anyone else has told you to do. My instructions are the same as always, give the ball to Sandor, and make sure no one takes it away from him. That's our strategy and it works. Don't forget who got us the championship last year."

"Coach is coming!" Theon scampered away from the door and everyone took their places in front of their lockers like everything was cool. Coach got all bent out of shape whenever he sensed drama amongst the team and it was better just to keep him in the dark.

"Alright boys," Selmy walked into the locker room, "you know I'm not one for speeches." He held his notebook rolled up in one hand and slapped it against the other to emphasize his words. "We
have the advantage because it's a home game, those stands are filled with people cheering for you. We've done the drills and we played this team before and beat them. Now, get out there and show me what I know you can do."

"YES, COACH!" The entire team barked the reply and the latecomers scrambled to get ready while Loras and Sandor followed Selmy out to the court.

"Great speech, coach," Loras praised, "you always know how to inspire the team." Selmy patted Tyrell on the back and walked ahead to the court as they waited for the rest of the team. "Let's kill them," he smirked at Sandor.

"The other team or our own?" He jerked his head behind them as Joff and his followers approached on their heels.

"Whoever gets in our fucking way," Tyrell sneered back at their teammates. "Oh," his expression lightened, "there's your girl." Sandor's followed Loras' gaze to the group of cheerleaders, who were already pumping up the crowd. Sansa stood out, being the tallest, with her long red ponytail bouncing. "Don't let Joffrey make you look bad now."

"As if he could," Sandor turned one more glare behind him before he jogged out onto the court to the adoring cheers of the crowd. Oh sure, they adored him now. Fuck them - he wasn't playing for them tonight - and not even for himself. He caught Sansa's eye and she smiled brightly just for him, making him want to show off for her. The referee blew the whistle to start the game as both teams walked out onto the court.

He sized up the player who would face him in the tip-off and held back the urge to laugh as he looked down at the kid. The ref threw the ball up into the air and Sandor did not even have to jump to slap it over the kid's head. In one smooth motion, he spun around the other player and grabbed the ball to shoot it right from the three-point line. Swish! Points on the board for the home team! Try as he might, Joff could not convince the team to sacrifice a victory, they were way too used to a winning.

Before the first quarter of the game was over, even Lancel was passing the ball to Sandor. The opposing team had a great offense but their defense was for shit. None of the guys even came close to his size and it almost made him feel bad to run over them like a monster truck over a toy car. He got them a solid ten points ahead and then relaxed to let the other team lose with grace. In the final quarter, he decided to show off a little bit. He sprinted across the court, dodging everyone who tried to block his path.

Sandor launched up in the air to slam-dunk the final two points before the buzzer went off. He could hear the little bird screaming her pretty little head off, cheering for him. It was the only sound he heard despite the roaring din of the crowd inside the gymnasium. The team rushed him, forgetting the earlier locker room tension, hooting like idiots. Over the crowd, he could see the little bird waving at him and he lifted a hand over his head to return the gesture.

She pulled on her uniform's collar and then made a motion to the door and he understood she meant. Sansa was saying she would wait for him outside after she changed, and he gave her a thumbs-up to show he understood. He pushed through the team to hurry to the showers to wash off his sweat - because he was taking the little bird on a proper date tonight!

SANSA

As amazing as Sandor and the team's victory was it did nothing to ease the awkward silent tension in the girls' locker room. Sansa went inside to change but decided to just stay in her uniform and grab
her bag to wait outside. No one even looked at her as she started to leave and she stopped in the middle of the room to clear her throat, gaining the squad's attention.

"I thought everyone should know." Sansa felt grateful that at least her voice sounded strong, even when she felt her insides turned to jelly. "Sandor Clegane, also known as 'the hound' is my boyfriend. Anyone has a problem with it... they can keep it to themselves." Having said her piece, she turned on her heel and marched out of the locker room without waiting for anyone to reply.

She wanted to get away from the crowd pouring out of the gym, so she walked around the side to stand in the shadow of a pine tree. Sansa only stood there a moment before someone approached her, wearing a basketball uniform but too small to be Sandor. As he came closer, she recognized who it was and got a heavy feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Hey," Joffrey smiled at her, standing in front of her and blocking her view of the gym. "I wanted to tell you how sorry I am that you got hurt."

"That's alright," she peeked around him, "it was an accident, I tripped." Sansa looked up to his smiling face. "But you did scare me, and what you said was not very nice."

"I know," he took another step closer, "I'm sorry, it's only because I thought you were making fun of me. Now I know you were telling the truth about dating the hound. And I feel really bad about that."

"Like I said," she looked around him again, "it was an accident so I forgive you."

"I mean," he chuckled and shook his head, "I feel bad about him dating you because I think it's my fault."

"What does that mean?" Sansa held onto the strap of her gym bag tightly as she suddenly felt the urge to run away.

"At the cheer tryouts, he pointed you out and said he bet a thousand dollars that he could fuck you." Joffrey shrugged and pouted his lip in a mock innocent expression. "I thought he was joking, or else I never would've accepted the bet." Sansa wanted to run so badly but her feet felt frozen in place as he continued to step closer to her. "Before the game today, he told me and the rest of the team that he succeeded and I owe him a grand. But I don't believe a 'good girl' like you would actually fuck a monster like him. So?" He held up a hand to reach out to touch her loose hair. "Did I lose the bet?"

"I don't believe anything you're saying," she hissed and knocked his hand away, "and I want you to leave me alone right now. If you don't then I'll start screaming and I don't care if everyone thinks that I'm crazy. They're already talking about me anyway."

"Fine," he sneered, "it seems like you don't know a friendly warning when you hear it. Let me give you another, since I'm such a nice guy. Nobody fucks with me here - I rule this place - and you don't fit in. Before it starts to get ugly, you should go back to whatever hill town you come from."

"Sandor!" She looked past Joffrey and waved a hand. "I'm over here!"

"I'll be seeing you around." He took off towards the parking lot, thankfully without checking to see if Sandor really was behind him. Sansa slumped against the tree and slid down the trunk, pressing a hand to her pounding heart. Something about that boy really scared her and she wondered if she should tell daddy about it. Was she overreacting? Joffrey was just trying to hurt her feelings; he couldn't seriously mean to threaten her. She wrapped her arms around her knees and hid her face until footsteps approached a while later.

"Hey," Sandor sounded annoyed, "I was looking for you."
"Sorry, I was just-"

"You're always sorry," he crouched down in front of her, "what is it this time, princess. Being the hound's girl getting to be too hard?"

"Why can't you just be nice to me when I'm sad?" She shoved off the ground and dusted off her butt before grabbing her bag and slinging it over her shoulder.

"You're always sad," he rolled his eyes. "Always something wrong, you can't just ignore what other people say, you have to care about it." Sandor grabbed her wrist as she started to walk away from him. "I told you it was going to be like this. It's not even started yet - giving up already?"

"Part of me is dying to know," she yanked her arm away, "why is everyone against our relationship? It doesn't make any sense." Sansa met his gaze, caught halfway between shouting at him and burying her face into his chest to wail out her frustration. "It should be simple! I'm a girl and you are a boy and we like each other. But then, I don't want to know because it might ruin everything. I don't want everything to be ruined." Sandor heaved a heavy sigh and sat down on the grass next to her.

"I don't have to tell you that I've got a temper." He sounded apologetic but she still refused to face him, picking at the grass instead. "You don't know how hard I work to control my anger when I'm around you." Sandor gently wrapped his fingers around her wrist to pull her attention to him. "I would never, ever hurt you but that doesn't mean that I haven't hurt other people. I've always been the biggest and strongest so if I don't like somebody then I just put them down."

"But, you're not a bully," she protested, "I know that!"

"It doesn't matter," he laughed without humor. "I made my own reputation for being violent - that's nobody's fault but my own. And then..."

"Tell me," she slipped her fingers between his but he only looked at her and shook his head.

"Let's just say," he looked down at their linked hands, "I know what it's like to live in someone else's shadow. When you look like a monster, act like a monster, and spend your time with monsters - people start to form a pretty solid opinion. Look at you," he waved his other hand at her. "The whole fucking world can see that you don't belong with me - except you. No matter how many times you kiss me, I'm not going to turn into a prince."

"I don't know," she teased, "you do seem to become a bit more handsome every time I kiss you." Sansa smiled at his exasperated expression. "Perhaps, we are not employing the right technique."

"Did you not hear anything I just told you?" Sandor rubbed his free hand over his face with a groan.

"I did," she tugged on his hand, "you're working hard to change the bad things that you can admit about yourself. It sounds like no one else in the world is giving you a fair shot at being a better person." Sansa rubbed her cheek against the back of his hand and gave him her most encouraging smile. "I believe in you, I think you're good person, and it's not because I'm silly or believe in fairy tales. I might not know much about the world, but I know my own feelings. I couldn't like you as much as I do if you were truly bad. That's all the proof and truth that I need."

"Little bird," he stared into her eyes for a moment before Sandor stood up, pulling her along with him. "Come on, we got to go before it closes." He let go of her hand to grab her bag and started towards the parking lot.

"What?" Sansa stood there staring at his back, dazed by his sudden departure. "Wait for me!" She
rushed to catch up to his side. "Where we going?" He only snorted a laugh and hurried to the
Skylark to open the trunk and throw their bags in and... Miracle of miracles! Sandor Clegane opened
the passenger side door! Dreams really do come true! She bit her cheek to keep from grinning like a
ninny as she slid into the car and he jogged around to get in.

"I'm going to have to drive a little bit faster to make it on time." Sandor looked at his watch before he
turned over the engine.

"Faster?" Sansa snapped out of her happy haze. "As in 'faster than usual'? Oh, no, I don't think that's
a good idea." He chuckled as he put the car into reverse and eyed her sideways.

"Less chirping," he ordered, "more buckling." She barely had time to click the buckle in place before
he whipped out of the parking spot and sped through the lot.

"Remember how I said I like surprises?" She looked out the window nervously as he wove through
the traffic leaving the game. "I think I'm changing my mind about that."

"Too bad," he smirked as he accelerated even more, "I enjoy surprising you."

"I only like 'good' surprises," she insisted as she pushed her foot against an imaginary brake pedal on
the floor. "I forgot to specify that before."

"I swear," he held up a hand to silence her arguments, "you will like this surprise." Sansa sat back to
sulk, still somewhat upset by Joffrey Baratheon's petty bullying. She noticed they were driving pretty
far outside the city and her curiosity got the better of her. "We're almost there," he laughed when she
turned a pout on him. A short while later they pulled up in front of a tiny road-side al fresco
restaurant with rows of trees growing behind it.

"Oh," she noticed the neon road sign, "ice cream! I love ice cream!"

"Of course you do," he mocked, "but this is extra special ice cream. See all the groves in the back?
They grow every kind of citrus you can imagine here and then they make some of it into ice cream."

"So," she gasped, "do they have lemon ice cream?"

"Not just lemon ice cream, little bird." Sandor grinned and quirked his brows at her. "Chocolate swirl
lemon ice cream - if that's something you'd be interested in."

"Are you sure we haven't died and gone to one of the seven heavens?" Sansa bounced eagerly in her
seat as he pulled into the nearly empty lot.

"Come on," he opened his door, "they close in like 20 minutes."

"What are we waiting for?" Sansa jumped out of the car and raced to catch up with Sandor as he
walked up to the order window. She ordered the chocolate and lemon swirl, in a medium sized
waffle cone, topped with lemon sprinkles. He got an extra-large chocolate and lime swirl with every
topping they had, all in a giant bowl. It was almost comical how piled high his sweet treat was and
he stared at it as greedily as he usually looked at her. They walked back to sit on the hood of the
Skylark and eat their ice cream.

The employees closed up the shop while they ate and thankfully, no one asked them to leave. With
all the lights off, including the neon sign, all the stars in the sky seemed to twinkle a little brighter.
Sandor happily devoured his treat like a little kid and even licked some melted ice cream that
dropped on his hand. A sudden naughty thought made Sansa blush and look away, smiling to herself
until she noticed him watching her.
"What are you thinking about," he narrowed his eyes, "my little bird?" She opened her mouth to answer but ended up biting her lip and staring down at her ice cream with a shy smile. "Oh, shit - I think I can guess what you're dreaming about." Her blush deepened and she covered her face with her hand. "You taste better than this," he teased. Her jaw dropped and her head snapped to stare at him.

"Don't say things like that," she held her hand up to hiss the words in super-secrecy. Then she realized there was no one even around them when Sandor rolled his eyes at her. "Fine, you guessed right what I was thinking."

"Fuck," he pointed at her melting lemon-chocolate swirl. "Finish your damn ice cream, girl - we've got somewhere to be."

"Where's that?" She licked up the sides of her cone, smiling when she heard him growling.

"My backseat," his voice was rough and low, making her shiver.

"Ah," she nodded casually, "a very important appointment." Sansa laughed as he growled again, this time with impatience. "If I go to fast it will make a mess."

"I'll just have to clean you up." He got up to throw his paper bowl away in the trashcan.

"How?" She played innocent, still licking at the last bit of her ice cream as he sauntered to stand in front of her.

"I already said I wanted to taste you." He stood over her, arms crossed, staring down at her with a familiar hungry expression.

"Enough talk," she wagged her finger at him, "let me finish my ice cream or you'll get no dessert."

"You're killing me." He slunk down onto the roof of the car and sprawled out spread-eagle on top of it. "Literally, I might die."

"It would be a good death," she commented.

"That's true." He sat up and ran his eyes over from head to toe. "Have I said 'I told you so' already? That uniform, I mean." He growled again and scooted a little closer to her but she continued to ignore him in favor of finishing her ice cream. "You look real good."

"You looked good yourself, out on the court." Sansa continued taking little licks of her ice cream, making it last as long as she could. "My heart was racing while I watched you."

"You're just going to keep on chirping until I shut you up, aren't you?" Sandor turned her face towards him and moved so close that their noses almost touched.

"I thought you wanted to hear me sing?" Her voice was breathy and low as his fingers trailed down her throat.

"Little bird, I can make you sing." His other hand slipped between her knees and curled around the inside of her thigh. She gasped and dropped her ice cream cone in surprise.

"Sor-"

"Don't," he quickly pulled both his hands away and held them up by his head, "it's up to you completely." He stood up off of the hood of the car and turned around to face her, stuffing his hands
in his pocket. "You don't always have to just do what I want - we can do whatever you want to do."

"I didn't mean..." She regretted her overreaction and felt her face burning with embarrassment. Instead of answering, she stood up and walked to the driver side of the Skylark to open the door. Sansa pushed the front seat forward to climb into the back and waited. He stared at her through the windshield for a moment before joining her and closing the door.

"Tell me," he waited for her to make the first move, "anything you want."

"Would you take off your shirt?" It was the first thing that came to mind and he grinned as he shrugged his shirt off.

"What else?" He sounded a bit smug as she admired his broad chest; reminding her how she wished to see him like this the first time they met.

"Can I kiss you?" She moved closer to him, tearing her eyes away from his impressive physique to meet his gaze. He laughed at her question and waved a hand over himself.

"You can do pretty much whatever the fuck you want." With his permission, she moved even closer and placed both of her hands on his shoulders. His skin felt warm and soft under her fingers as she leaned forward.

"Thank you," she kissed where his neck met his shoulder, "for agreeing to be my boyfriend even though it is hard." He opened his mouth, likely to argue, but she pressed another kiss to his lips to quiet him. "Thank you," she looked into his eyes, "for knowing exactly what I need." Sansa brushed another light kiss onto his bare shoulder. "Thank you for working so hard for my sake." Her lips kissed the center of his chest, where his heart pounded. His arms wrapped around her and pulled her against his chest to bury his face in her hair.

"That's enough," he rasped, "don't say any more."

"Don't you believe me?" Her words were muffled against his chest and he stayed quiet for a while so she worried he might not of heard her question.

"I do," his voice was tight when he finally answered.

"Does it makes you feel pressured when I say those kinds of things?" She tried to pull loose of his embrace to look at his face but he held her tighter.

"Yeah," he rasped, "but not in the way you think." He buried his face into her hair, barely speaking above a whisper. "Nothing ever goes this right for me - nothing - ever. It scares me. It scares me that I can even admit to you that I'm scared."

"Nothing anyone tells me will change anything between us," she promised, "not if you still want to be together."

"I won't lie little bird," he held onto her shoulders and pulled her away from his chest to look into her eyes. "I will always want us to be together."

"Really?" She stared at him and wide-eyed wonder.

"You hard of hearing, girl?" He growled in annoyance but it only made her smile. She pulled his hands down from her shoulders and sat back to slip her uniform top over her head and set it on the seat behind her. His jaw unhinged and it was his turn to gape at her in shock. "Shit."
"Is that a complement?" She crossed her arms and raised a brow at him.

"What-?" He reached up to scratch his chin as he has his gaze flickered up-and-down from her chest to her eyes. "What are you-?" His hands slowly moved from his chin to cross the distance between them but stopped before touching her. "Can I...?" She took a hold of his hand and placed it over the center of her chest, over her heart.

"I want us to be together always, too." She smiled at Sandor's still stunned expression.

"I swear," he suddenly grinned, "I didn't say that to get your top off. But I would've said it sooner if I'd known-" She pinched his arm to stop him from teasing her. "Ow."

"Sometimes," she moved close to him again and put her arms around his neck. "I really don't know how I put up with you, Sandor Clegane." He curled his hands around her waist and they felt warm against her skin, sending tingling shivers all over her body. Her eyelids fluttered closed as Sansa raised her mouth to his, timidly attempting to mimic his way of kissing. She moved her lips against his, gently sucking and nipping. Just the tip of her tongue darted out to taste the ice cream still lingering on his lips.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured against her mouth, "I can hardly fucking believe it." He wrapped one arm around her waist as his other hand moved up over her ribs to cup her breast. The contact sent a bolt of electricity through her chest and she cried out in surprise at the force of the sensation. He released her with a reluctant groan as she panted to catch her breath. "Alright?"

"Yeah, it's just... intense." Sansa put her hand to her chest and smiled sheepishly at him. "My heart is going crazy." His fingers closed around her wrist as he gently tried to pull her back towards him.

"We should stop now," she whispered.

"Fine..." He released her hand and she scooted back to put a bit of distance between them.

"It's not that I don't want to keep going..." Sansa fiddled with her fingers in her lap. "I just don't want to get carried away and waste my precious first time in the backseat of a car. I want it to be special.”

"Feels plenty fucking special to me." He slumped down in the seat and crossed his arms for a proper sulk.

"That's because you are not a romantic," she admonished, “I have it all planned out in my head. It's going to be perfect, you'll see.”

"I'm invited?" He perked up, turning his face towards her.

"I don't have anyone else in mind," she blushed and looked around for her top.

"Tell me," he put a hand on her shoulder and turned her around as he closed the distance between them.

"It's embarrassing," her face burned even hotter as he cupped her chin and tilted her eyes up to meet his.

"You're being selfish, little bird," he teased. “My 'precious first time' hangs in the balance too. I always hoped I'd get laid in the back of my car.”

"You have no imagination," she tried to scowl but ended up smiling. "I thought, well, I know it is some time away..." Sansa wrapped her arms around his waist and put her face against his warm chest. “The Winter Formal is coming up and you haven't asked but I hope..." She bit her lip, fighting
her shyness. "That night would be special to me, my first high school dance with my first boyfriend. A good night for 'firsts'."

"A dance?" A chuckle rumbled in his chest. "You don't ask for much, do you?" He leaned back into the seat and rested his cheek on the top of her head. "What else? Expensive hotel room, flower petals, candles?"

"Ah, so you do have a romantic side." Sansa pressed a kiss against his soft skin as he lightly brushed his fingers through her hair. "So?"

"Are you asking me to the dance?" Sandor snorted a laugh and she smiled against his chest.

"I am," she answered.

"Then I accept on one condition - let me plan and pay for everything." Sandor's request surprised her into silence for a moment before she brushed another light kiss over his skin.

"That's not very modern of you," she scolded.

"Tough," he grumbled, "or else I'm hanging on to my virginity, I'll save it for a girl who appreciates an old-fashioned guy like me."

"I'll have to make do," she let out an over exaggerated sigh, "since I like you so much."

"Can I keep you a little longer?" His reluctance to let her go was obvious and touched her more deeply than any sweet expressions of affection.

"Breaking curfew on a school night?" Despite her protest, she squeezed him a little tighter. "What kind of girl do you think I am?"

"My girl," he growled.

"You're right about that." Sansa nuzzled as close as she could, enjoying the warmth of his skin touching hers. "Just a few more minutes."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter ended up being pretty different from my original intention but I hope it turned out alright. It's kinda long but when I considered splitting it up into two chapters it just felt *wrong*. I didn't take as much time as I should to proofread it because I'm still kinda in a bad mood but at least I didn't get writer's block this time! That's something, right?! Baby steps.
Planning the Rendezvous

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Planning the Rendezvous

GENDRY

He arrived first in the empty room and took a seat at the table to get caught up on some homework. After school, he had to head straight to the restaurant for his shift and by the end, he'd be too tired to solve equations. It astounded him how willfully ignorant some teachers were. Many of their students had to work upwards of twenty hours a week, no time for hours of homework every night. Just to live in the Kings Landing school district, mom paid twice as much for an apartment half the size.

As soon as he was old enough, he started working, at least pay his own way. Mom never let him help pay with the bills, even when she was down to her last coins. She was too proud of being a good mother sometimes, but he knew that made him a lucky person. There were plenty of rich kids and plenty of poor kids, some of them had parents who love them, and some of them didn't. At the end of the day, he wouldn't trade his mother for all the money in the world.

"Hey," Arya walked in and ruffled her fingers through his hair as she passed by to take a seat beside him. "I had a great idea the other night." She pulled out a piece of paper and put it in front of him. "Write me down your work schedule."

"Why?" He wondered what she was up to now.

"Just do it already, gods." She groaned and did her little scowl-pout expression. "Don't argue with me - who do you think I am?"

"Sorry, milady, just curious." Gendry quickly wrote down his work schedule from memory.

"Damn, you work so much." Arya frowned at him before she folded up the piece of paper and stuffed it in her bag. "When I'm done being grounded you have to cut back your hours."

"Oh, okay," He rolled his eyes, "I'll do that. Whatever you say, Arry."

"That's right," she crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at him, choosing to take his sarcasm literally. "In the meantime - I'm going to come visit you at work."

"I only get one fifteen minute break." Gendry knew whatever he said was not going to dissuade her when she got that look in her eye.

"We are only going to see each other on Monday and that's with the whole group around." Arya held onto his arm and stuck her lower lip out, her eyelashes spreading apart wide. "I miss you too much - I need to see you more."

"Aw," he looked away from her adorable pleading expression, "I miss you too, Arry." She stood up over him and pulled his face towards her. "Alright, come visit me, but I can't get distracted while I'm working."

"I'll text you when I come in with my family, you text me when you go on break." She grinned at her victory. "I'll act like I'm going to the bathroom or something."
"For fifteen minutes?" He laughed at her optimism.

"Dad's the one who keeps taking us out for steak - he'll have no problem believing it took fifteen minutes." Arya smirked smugly, confident as ever.

"You've got it all figured out, don't you milady?" Gendry took ahold of her fingers and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. She smacked his hand away and plopped down on his lap.

"I am ridiculously smart." Arya tilted her head and looked up at him through heavy lidded eyes, an uncommon coy expression. Usually, when she wanted to kiss, she just went ahead and took it. He lowered his lips to briefly brush over hers, watching her the whole time as she watched him. When she made no move to attack, he repeated the motion, lingering a bit longer.

"Ah," they turned to see Rick, Torgo, and Hot Pie all hesitating in the doorway, "looks like the gang's all back together." Arya sighed as she removed herself from his lap and sat in her own seat.

"You called it Torgo."

"I think Hot Pie said it first," Torgo tilted his head towards their cherubic companion.

"Did everyone know we liked each other?" Gendry smiled at the group until he noticed Jon lingering in the back with a scowl on his face.

"Wulp, pretty much yeah," Hot Pie laughed, "it's sorta obvious." They all came in and took their seats and soon they were joined by Sam, followed by Dany and Drogo.

"I just wanted to tell everyone: I'm sorry." Gendry stood up out of his seat and swept his eyes over the room. "I didn't mean to get you all caught up in my own personal shit."

"We forgive you, right everyone?" Sam gave him his usual cheery smile and the rest of the table followed suit, except Drogo who nodded once. "But as Dungeon Master, I am setting a new rule that dating drama stays out of this room."

"What about making out?" Arya raised her hand like she was in class, leaning forward on the table.

"This room is kinda convenient."

"I'm also interested in that answer," Dany smiled at Sam, who blushed furiously. Gendry had to admit, he was totally wrong to be wary about girls being in the group. Oh, they were a distraction alright, but it certainly made things more interesting.

"Well... um... I suppose," he stammered, "as long as we are not gathered for a game..." Then Sam looked shyly down at the table with a little smile on his lips. "This room is most suitable for a romantic rendezvous."

"Sam..." Arya sang his name. "I think you have someone you like."

"What?" He looked up with the startled expression and shook his head. "No! Well... yeah. Sort of, there's a girl," he cleared his throat, "but we should focus on the game." He lowered his voice to set the scene. "You stand on the shore of Lake Neliwed, which surrounds the base of the Suinha Mountain, home of the Dafaura Dragonborn Clan."

"I must be the one who goes," Khaleesi crossed her arms and glared at their leader.

"I will go," Drogo argued, "I have used the staff once. Not that hard."

"I'm sure it caused you great pain and I admire your endurance." Khaleesi tried to pacify the
Barbarian with flattery, "but I must insist."

"No," he refused the budge.

"We can stand here and argue all day," she stamped her foot. "It won't make a difference. The legends say the entrance to Boccob's temple can only be found by one of the clan who possesses the Scared Ordovician Staff." Khaleesi stepped closer to Drogo and looked up to him with a glimmer of affection. "I must go." He relented and handed her the staff and she did not hesitate to step into the water, shivering with pain. She disappeared under the surface and the rest of them waited impatiently.

"I wish I could go," Arry whined, drawing strange looks from the rest of the group. "I mean, I don't like pain or anything. But I wonder what's down there." Grey Worm sat alone on the shoreline, calmly meditating, but broke his silence to answer her question.

"The Clan Elders say their god can only open this temple once in a generation, when the clan is in dire need." Grey Worm lowered his hood and looked up to the sky in deference to the god he worshiped. "Khaleesi will face a test only she can witness. If she passes, her god will deem her worthy and 'reveal The Path to The Way'."

"What does that mean?" Pod snorted in disbelief. "Bunch of superstitious mountain folk, there is only one god... Oh my god." Gendry followed his line of sight to the water. "Would you look at that?" The water parted, creating a wide opening as if being cut with a knife and pulled apart by giant invisible hands. Khaleesi, soaked and shivering, trudged through the muddy lake floor back up to the shore.

"I have passed," she coughed and dropped the staff as she fell to the ground. Drogo ran to her side as did Grey Worm. "The Way... is open!" Their leader strapped the staff to his back and lifted Khaleesi into his arms to carry her.

"Let's go," Arry jumped up excitedly and grinned at Gendry.

"After you," he returned the grin, "milady." They walked down the muddy land to a massive underwater temple, guarded by a stone door.

"The first test is passed," Grey Worm commented as they approached the door, "but there are still more."

"Yes," Khaleesi patted Drogo's shoulder and he let her down, "I do not know if I have the strength to pass the next four." She reached out to stroke the giant door. "Our clan would not have sent me to seek our Protector's help if we were not desperate. No matter what we try," she tilted her head against the stone. "The dark power draining my people's life-force cannot be stopped."

"Four Tests?! That seems excessive," Arya echoed Gendry's thoughts, "your god is kinda tough."

"And for that, I am forever grateful." Khaleesi stood in front of the stone door, still soaked and weakened from her ordeal but standing tall. "Long ago, in a time of madness and desperation, the Clan Elders made a pact with a creature they believed was a god. This demon tricked them into selling the souls of their children. They agreed, unknowing the pact would passed down through the generations. Our clan was forced into bondage and made to amass magical power. To be sacrificed so the Trickster could gain our abilities. Then our Protector, Boccob, sent a Savior: born of our clan. He opened this temple and freed the god my people once worshiped before they were enslaved. Since then, we have devoted ourselves to worshiping only Boccob. We are duty-bound to gather knowledge so that we can never be enslaved for our ignorance again."
"Wow, great story," Arya and Hot Pie applauded. "You should write that down."

"The second test, Earth," Khaleesi waved at the stone, "it is not meant to be moved by strength or power, but by faith."

"Then," Grey Worm moved next to Khaleesi and bowed his head, "I offer a prayer to the Protector, to grant us the faith we need." Khaleesi smiled at him before moving towards the stone to kneel before it. "Faith can move mountains," she murmured. Khaleesi struck her hands out to brace against the stone with her fingers splayed and began to murmur a prayer in Draconic. "Boccob, kiwieg sia eluihol. Soves ve ekess wer donoap, letoclo sia xiekivi." Grey Worm followed her example, kneeling and touching the stone while remaining silent. Arya grabbed Gendry's arm and pulled him towards the stone door: he wasn't a religious man but it was worth a shot. Soon the whole group knelt beside each other as Khaleesi's prayer grew more fervent.

The ground shook beneath Gendry's knees as the giant stone door shifted. It opened to reveal a stream of flame rushing behind the massive opening. A wave of heat flowed out onto his face and he rocked back as bright orange light filled the room. The room beyond the door was completely engulfed in an inferno burning without fuel. He couldn't help but think his forge back in his home village could benefit from this magic.

"The test of Fire," Khaleesi gasped, her eyes filled with wonder at the sight and reached out to touch it. Drogo quickly grabbed her arm to stop her but she only smiled. "I cannot be burned." He released her arm and she reached into the flame, rising to her feet to walk inside the room. Her robe burned away, leaving her scaled skin bare and Gendry turned away to protect her modesty. "Faith should burn... but cannot destroy!" She reached the other side of the room and the fire died down.

Gendry and the group moved into the room, filled with thousand reflections of their group looking back. Giant reflective crystals covered the walls set at different angles, filling the room with light. The pale bluish light shifted and moved, giving the impression of being underwater. Which, technically, they were. Grey Worm rushed to Khaleesi's side to give her his robe, leaving him in simple black armor. A wide crevasse separated the room in half and they all approached it cautiously. "Wind," Khaleesi breathed, "we are almost through." She stepped close to the edge and the hem of Grey Worm's robe lifted in the breeze that came from the depthless crevasse. "Faith," she stepped out onto nothingness, "can give us wings."

"No!" Drogo reached out for her but she was already floating forward. Her hands were outstretched like wings as the robe ruffled around her legs. "T'rek ek kod'dmach," he cursed in Orcish. As Khaleesi touched down on the other side, she smiled as a crystal bridge appeared for them to cross. The group crossed the bridge quickly, none of them brave enough to look down. The path that lie ahead lead to another smaller chamber, the crystals on the wall were carved. The shapes formed patterns which looked to be symbols or even a language Gendry didn't know.

In the center of the chamber, a statue of a male figure with Dragonborn features knelt on the floor as though fallen to that posture. Both its arms reach upward in supplication, and its face was overcome with grief. Two great scaled wings drooped from its back, both sculpted to look broken. Gendry admired the statues' skillful craftsmanship, being something of an artist himself.

"I know what needs to be done," Khaleesi stood before the statue with a grave expression. "This is the last test: the test of Spirit."

"This is your 'Savior'?!" Drogo walked to her side. "He is dead - you will die." He grabbed her by
the shoulders and turned her roughly to face him. "We find another way."

"There is no other way," she whispered. "I will not die: I live forever." Khaleesi waved her hand around the chamber, "surrounded by this beauty. Drogo," she cupped his cheek, "I thank you for your worry and your help. Now I must do what I was born to do." She suddenly launched herself at Drogo, wrapping her arms around him. Gendry gaped at the pair in shock until she quickly ducked out of his embrace. In one motion, she pulled the staff off his back and quickly set it in the Savior's outstretched hands.

"No," Drogo sounded stunned, they all were: the statue's wings crumbled as Khaleesi's limp body lifted into the air. "NO!" Their leader's roar could do nothing to bring her back, a bright light flashed as wings sprouted from her back. She lowered slowly to the ground, falling into a kneeling position before Drogo.

"Live well," Khaleesi murmured, stretching up her arms to Drogo as tears rolled down her face. Then her body shuddered once and turned to solid stone, frozen in that pitiful position. The Barbarian stared at her before being distracted by the only movement in the room: the statue stood up. The Savior came to life only to be accosted by an angry Half-Orc.

"Bring her back!" Drogo shouted in the Savior's face.

"I cannot," he bowed his head sadly, "I'm sorry."

"Who are you?" Arry asked the question on all their minds.

"I am..." He seemed more surprised than anyone by the answer. "The Protector."

"I thought you were supposed to be the 'Savior'." Gendry didn't trust this guy, not with all the mad things he'd seen that day.

"I was..." The Protector's eyes turned to Khaleesi's frozen body... The bell rung. Everyone blew out a collective breath and started packing up to leave. Arya put a hand on Gendry's arm to hold him back and jerked her chin at Jon, grabbing her cousin as he stood up but he ignored her and followed the rest of the group to leave.

"Jon, can we see you a minute?" Arya called to her cousin, who cast a disgruntled look at Gendry before relenting with a nod. The room emptied, leaving just them three and she jerked a thumb in his direction. "This dumbass right here seems to think you have a problem with us seeing each other." They both stared at her in shock before Jon's head slowly nodded.

"I agree he's a dumbass, but this time he's right." Jon crossed his arms and glared at Gendry. "I do have a problem."

"What?" She's scoffed and mimicked Jon's stance. "Are you joking?"

"You're too young."

"I can't fucking believe what I'm hearing." Arya bobbled her head back-and-forth angrily. "You sound just like dad." Gendry wished he could just slowly back away from the argument without either of them noticing.

"Uncle Ned is right," Jon insisted.

"Wow," she made a disgusted throaty sound.
"Look, Jon," Gendry tried to defuse the situation by holding his hands out and keeping his voice low. "I don't have any sisters so I can't really know what it's like. My mom doesn't date often but when she does, all I can hope for is the guy won't hurt her."

"You already hurt her." Jon dropped his fists by his side and took a step towards him. "You think she skipped merrily to class after you had her thrown out?" He looked at Arya, thrusting a hand in Gendry's direction. "What's to stop him from trying that again?"

"I appreciate the concern," she didn't sound very appreciative. "But it's really not your business." She put her hand to her forehead, closed her eyes, and exhaled slowly. "Please don't make this harder than it already is. Do I really have to ask you not to tell dad?"

"No, I'm not going to get you busted," he clenched his jaw. "Though I should. I'm gonna regret this, Arya."

"Even if Gendry rips my heart up into a million little pieces and I have to cry for a year to get over it." She was always so passionate when she argued, that's when she was the most beautiful. "It should still be my choices that get me to that point." Gendry vowed to himself, to prove to her that she could trust him and that he would never break her heart or hurt her again. "You and dad have no right to ask me to lose the person I like just because it you're uncomfortable with the idea of me having sex."

"Whoa!" Jon covered his ears with his hands and shook his head. "Don't say that!" He looked up to glare at Gendry, even though he never said anything!

"It's not his fault either, it's my choice." Arya stepped in between Jon and him. "Nobody can ever make me do something I don't want."

"Do not mistake my silence for approval." Jon shot one more disapproving look over her head at Gendry before turning on his heel and marching out of the room.

"He can be a real tight-ass sometimes." She made a short hissing sound between your teeth. "Takes after my dad."

"I see the resemblance now." Gendry pointed two fingers at his eyes. "Death-stare."

"Trust me," she shuddered, "I know, cree-py." With a heavy sigh, Arya wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head against his chest. "I gotta go..." She groaned reluctantly as she released him to trudge out of the empty room with her shoulders drooped. Then she perked up, straightened her spine, and spun around to smile at him. "But I'll text you when I get to the restaurant, see ya!" She turned around and rushed away down the hall. Gendry followed her example in the opposite direction, managing to make it to class only a few minutes late.

The day passed by same as any other day: class was boring and the drive to work was uneventful. The restaurant was bustling by the time he pulled into the back lot for employee parking. He changed into a work shirt inside the Lincoln, rushed to punch his time card, and headed to the sink. There isn't much glamor in being a dishwasher but without him, the restaurant would cease to run. Most everyone in the kitchen appreciated that he took his job seriously. His mind wandered to Arya, of course, about how cute her little schemes to spend time together were.

"Dude, she's back!" Rast burst through the kitchen doors to distract Lommy who was busy sweeping the floors like he was supposed to be doing.

"The hot redhead? Shit, get outta my way!" Lommy set his broom down and both of them peeked
through the windows, blocking the kitchen door. "Daaaaaamn, she is so fine." Gendry was about to tell them off when they quickly scurried out of the way to let a server through. He shrugged and let it go since they weren't causing too big of a problem. If they didn't watch themselves, Chef was going to have a problem whether or not they caused any real trouble.

"Holy fuck, dude, you know how I told you her brother is a funny little smart-ass?" Rast snickered and waved Lommy closer to lower his voice. "Well, 'it' is actually a girl!" Gendry's heart dropped into his stomach as he remembered Arya's sister was a redhead. "She bent over and I saw her little tits."

"I can't tell from here," Lommy looked out the window again, "looks like a boy to me."

"Fucking dykes-" Rast's words cut off as Gendry grabbed him by the shoulder, turning the asshole to face him. "Hey, man, what's your problem?" He shoved Rast out of the way and looked through the window himself. A quick glance confirmed they were in fact talking about his girlfriend and her sister.

"That's my girlfriend," he informed them coldly.

"You're full of shit," Rast sneered as he brushed his shoulder off where Gendry grabbed him, "you couldn't go near a girl that hot."

"I'm not talking about the redhead," he snarled, 'I'm with the 'dyke'. She's not gay, but if she was, she'd still be my best friend because she's the most interesting person I know. And I think she is the most beautiful girl I've ever seen."

"You're fucking with us," Rast gulped under Gendry's hard stare.

"You aren't good enough to lick the dirt off her little combat boot." Gendry stepped towards Rast and the coward backed up so he took another step closer and leaned forward. "If I hear you talking like that about anyone, especially my girl, I won't let it go."

"What're you gonna do?" Rast looked around the kitchen, hoping someone would notice and come to his defense. Though the idiot was new, he already made plenty of enemies. "Beat me up?"

"Nah," Gendry laughed, "I'll just get you fired. You think the manager wants some uppity busboy who hurls bigoted slurs around the kitchen? This is workplace, not your living room. Show some self-control and act like a professional, or find another job." His phone buzzed in his pocket, distracting him.

'I need to make out with you', her text made him smile and he looked out the window to see her getting up from her seat.

"You can thank my girlfriend for saving your ass," Gendry quickly sent a response and put his phone back in his pocket to glared at Rast once more, "I'm going on break." He untied and threw his apron at Lommy. "Take over for me." He rushed to punch out and set his watch for fifteen minutes, feeling the tension melting from his shoulders with every step he moved closer to seeing Arya.

Chapter End Notes

How about a nice long Gendry/D&D chapter? Was it fun? I hope so. Don't you hate
Rast? I'm so glad I could include him. Ayra's POV is up next: "Executing the Rendezvous" (Alt Title: 'How Much Can You Really Do in Fifteen Minutes?")

The Last Friendly Warning: Anyone who decides to *tell* me they skip EVEN A SENTENCE OF MY FIC (for "reasons") can just go away and read something else. Keep that information safely tucked away in your own heart and leave mine still beating. Thanks! ;D

I didn't even tell you all the shit icing on the shit-cake weekend... The Bathroom Spider left me. Why does everything I love leave me?! T_T

Song of the Day: Christina Perri - Human
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5yaoMjaAmE
"Your words in my head, knives in my heart. You build me up and then I fall apart...
'Cause I'm only human."
'Meet me on the side opposite the road', he replied to her text and Arya quickly excused herself, forcing feet to walk at a normal pace. Dad and Sansa did not even notice her leaving and she could hardly believe her luck. They were too busy discussing Robert Baratheon's business practices. Suddenly her sister was very interested for some reason. She walked out of the restaurant and around the side to see Gendry waiting for her on the sidewalk curb. Though they saw each other just earlier that day, it would be different being completely alone with no one to disturb them.

"This worked out pretty good," she skipped toward him as he stood up, "I'm so smart." Gendry smiled at her before his eyes flickered over her shoulder before returning to her - as if she would let someone follow her. This time, no one was going to interrupt them or that intrusive someone was going pay dearly. Arya couldn't wait any longer so she wrapped her arms around his waist and tilted her head back to wait for him to kiss her. She discovered that she liked the way Gendry kissed her, all soft and careful, like she was something precious to him. Not that she'd ever say that to him.

"And beautiful," he swept his fingers across her forehead to tidy her messy bangs. Arya raised an eyebrow at him, thinking he was the only boy who would ever call her 'beautiful'. "I mean it, I thought so the first time I saw you."

"You copped a feel, you mean." Arya snorted a laugh at the memory of the day she fell for him literally. It was no big deal at the time but later she dreamed about his arm around her waist and his hand sliding across her chest. Those nights she would wake up panting with a fine sheen of sweat on her brow. She wondered if he ever thought about that day and if that random mishap started the spark between them.

"I didn't mean to!" He chuckled while protesting. "You fell into me!"

"You opened the door too quick," she argued, grinning up at him. Gendry frowned at her and trailed his rough fingers lightly down the side of her face.

"I was being serious," he tapped her on the nose, "why don't you ever let me give you a bloody compliment?"

"It's fine if you don't," she rolled her eyes, "I don't need to hear stuff like that."

"I don't say it because you need to hear it: I say it 'cause it's true." Gendry put his hands on both sides of her face, curling his fingers around her head, and just looked at her. Arya could barely stand to be watched with such... adoration? How could she have been so blind to it before? It made her want to kiss him to death - his death or hers, whatever came first.

"We're wasting time..." She stood on her tip-toes to try and kiss him but Gendry pulled his head up and smirked, using his superior height unfairly. Arya growled low in her throat and tugged on his shirt with impatience.

"I don't think it's a waste of time," he chided. "Your eyes are the prettiest I've ever seen: they're so
big and expressive." Arya narrowed her eyes at his flowery bullshit and wished he just get to the kissing already. "The way you scowl is cute too, the way your little nose gets all scrunched up." Gendry sighed contentedly as he smiled at her like a besotted idiot - which he apparently was. The knowledge made her even more impatient to feel him and have him feel her. Why was he being so difficult?!

"You're so weird," she groaned, "but thanks, I guess, for thinking I'm pretty." Arya grabbed his wrist wearing a watch and gave it a pointed look before turning another glare at Gendry. "Now shut your mouth and feel me up, we've running out of time." He smirked at her impatience and grabbed her hand to lead her further behind the restaurant. They stood next to a catering truck parked out back. The truck provided a bit of privacy and she didn't wait a moment longer to grab the front of his shirt and pull him down to capture his lips. The way he smiled as they kissed caused a curious sensation in her heart - like she was so happy, it would burst.

Both of her hands wandered under his shirt to trace the tensing muscles of his stomach. Arya could feel his body trembling under her hands and his heart thundering just for her. Both humbled her and made her feel powerful at once. What remained of her conscious mind was torn between focusing on touching him and kissing him. His hands gripped her waist to pull her close but remained infuriatingly still. She pushed away from him, breaking their kiss, pressing him back against the wall of the truck.

Arya grabbed his wrist and shoved his hand under her shirt as she launched herself at him, curling an arm around his neck. Her other hand resumed its exploration of his muscled chest, erratically trying to feel everything at once. His rough fingertips scraped upwards over her breast. An explosion of electrical currents ripped through her body, tearing a loud cry from her throat. It was slightly muffled by his mouth, but still loud enough to draw attention if anyone stood nearby. Gendry tore his lips away from hers as she tried to remember how to breathe.

"Admit it," he teased in an incredibly sexy husky voice, "you like getting caught don't you?" He cruelly removed his hand from under her shirt and ruffled her hair. Arya reluctantly removed her own hand from his sculpted torso. She could still feel the warmth of his skin through his soft shirt as she wrapped her arms around him.

"I can't help it," she whined and pressed herself against the length of his body. Gendry bowed his head and tucked her hair to press his lips softly to her ear.

"When you're grounding is over," he murmured, as he brushed soft kisses down her neck. "I'm going to take you somewhere you can be as loud as you want." The light contact on her sensitive skin sent a hot tingling sensation spreading out from each point of contact. Lost to her instinct again, she moved her hands up to pull Gendry's head down for another mind-melting kiss. Arya's fingers dug into his scalp, clutching the shoulder seam of his shirt with the other hand to crush her chest against his.

"Then," she ripped her mouth away from his, somehow still able to form words despite being unable to think clearly. Arya inhaled sharply as she saw naked lust glazed over his stunning eyes. "We can finish what we started in the pool," she meant it to be a promise but even to her own ears it sounded somewhat like a threat. Gendry didn't answer at first, putting one hand to the side of her face and somehow she knew he needed to kiss her in his soft way. Though it physically pained her, she closed her eyes and let him press his lips tenderly against hers.

"If that's what you want," he stopped his torturously gentle kissing, pulling back to meet her eyes once more.

"Oh, I want it," she insisted, keeping their eyes locked together so he could see how serious she was.
Arya had never been more certain of anything in her entire life - she needed him like air and food, only a lot more.

"So," he put his hand over his chest and bowed his head, "I have no choice." Gendry peeked up at her through his thick dark eyelashes with a grin. "I am yours to command."

"As it should be," she guided his hand back under her shirt. "I'll try really hard to be quieter." Arya claimed his mouth again, her lips pressing hard against his parted ones - claiming him as hers. There was something primitive about tasting him and knowing he was tasting her. Skin and heat and slick mouths chaotically devouring each other - that's what they were born to do. Everything else faded into the background as both desperately sought to take and give pleasure.

It felt right, like they belonged together - body, mind, and soul. She caught his swollen lower lip between her teeth and bit down. Gendry flinched before thrusting a hand into her hair and returning her ferocity with enthusiasm. He liked to pretend he wanted to be soft and gentle, treating her like some precious doll, until she pulled the beast out of him. In apology for being too rough, Arya ran her tongue over his tender lip before slipping it back inside his mouth. It could have been a minute or an hour before the broke apart again, time lost all meaning.

"I wish," his broken voice whispered against her mouth, "I could see you." Gendry rested his forehead against Arya's as she clung onto his neck. One of his hands ran down her spine to splay on her lower back while the other still slowly explored her. The rough prickling of his calloused fingers roamed over her skin, leaving a trail of burning heat in their wake. Though all the sensations were new, they felt somehow familiar - like coming home but to a place only they knew.

"What's there to see?" She tangled his fingers in Gendry’s hair and tried to resume the kiss but he insisted on wasting precious time talking.

"Everything," he turned his serious beautiful eyes on her, "I could ever want."

"You say a lot of pretty words," she chuckled, "but this is more believable." Gendry gasped, turning into a low moan, as her hand slid over the bulge in the front of him pants.

"Bloody hells!" He struggled to catch his breath, trying to say something through his panting, his mouth hanging open. "I have to go back to work soon," he wheezed. Ignoring his weak protest, her mind was consumed with a single purpose - to get Gendry naked and touch him everywhere. She fumbled with the button on his jeans but he wrapped his fingers around her wrist to stop her. "You don't know what you're doing to me." Arya knew exactly what she was doing to him because he was doing it to her, making her legs shake with wanting him so bad.

"Later on, tonight." She leaned forward to press her body against his hardness, causing him to drop her wrist and wrap his arms around her tight. "Will you think of me?" Arya curled her arms around his shoulders and pulled herself up on her tiptoes to whisper in his ear. "I'll be thinking of you." "Call me." Gendry slid his hands up over her shoulders and pulled her away to give her a hard look that made her want him even more - if that were possible.

"You mean..." Arya was surprised the idea hadn't occurred to her first - desperate times call for desperate measures.

"That's exactly what I mean." His words were determined, with almost covetous expression on his face. The combination squeezed her heart with possessiveness, almost frightening in its power. Arya couldn't tell which one of them moved first. They were back on each other in an instant, pushing their mouths and bodies in a careless rhythm that made her ache for more. Then Gendry's stupid
watch beeped and he broke their kiss to tilt his head back against the side of the truck.

"I've gotta go," he caught his breath before looking down at her, "but I'll call you tonight after work."

"Hey, I just wanted to ask..." She held onto the front of the shirt and avoided his eyes. "So, you're - like - my boyfriend now, right?"

"I'm whatever you want me to be," he answered cheerfully, "I call you my girlfriend."

"To who?" Arya narrowed his eyes at him but he didn't notice because he was glancing towards the restaurant anxiously.

"Everyone who will listen," he answered distractedly.

"Well, cut it out," she gave him a quick punch to the chest, "we've got to stay on the down-low."

"Right," he grimaced and rubbed over the spot she hit, "got it."

"Get out of here," she pulled him away from the truck and shoved him towards the restaurant. Gendry paused to fix her hair and pressed one last kiss on the forehead. He gave her another lopsided smile before hurrying back to work. After watching him leave, she sprinted to the entrance to rejoin her family. As Arya walked inside, she smoothed her hair and clothes but realized she always looked messy so they wouldn't even notice.

"What took you so long?" Sansa watched Arya with suspicion as she slid into the booth. Their food had arrived and it looked like dad and her sister were already well into theirs.

"That's personal," she quipped and took a few gulps of her unsweetened iced tea. Kissing sure was thirsty work, but well worth it! If that's what they could do in fifteen minutes - she couldn't wait for them to spend the night together. Arya regretting not jumping him sooner, like on that first camping trip...

"You're food is getting cold," her sister scolded, pulling Arya out of her lustful daydreams.

"You didn't get the steak?" Dad eyed her plate in surprise. "You're missing out, kiddo." He took a bite of his porterhouse and smiled as he chewed. "It's delicious." The slab of meat on his plate did look rather tempting but the chicken cordon bleu on her own plate smelled divine.

"I don't want to get sick of steak too soon," she grinned conspiratorially at him, "I'm really starting to like this place." Poor dad, he had no idea that his favorite restaurant was also the workplace of the boy his daughter wanted to get naked with. Someday, she would make it up to him. After she had Gendry enough times to satisfy the yearning hunger that consumed her every thought. Can't blame a teen for being a slave to their hormones - blame evolution or the gods.

"You two think I'm stupid, but I'm not." Sansa's nasally whining voice broke through Arya's dreaming again. Her sister crossed her arms and glared at them both. "I know exactly what you are doing. This isn't right! I'm part of the family too, and you both always gang up on me."

"Oh, lemon cake..." A guilty expression settled on dad's features as he set down his fork and wiped his face with his napkin to stall.

"I got this one, dad." Arya held up a hand to stop him before turning to her sister. "My dear sister, you are as clever as you are beautiful." Sansa narrowed her eyes in distrust. "I am humbled by your astute wit and dazzling beauty. On the bond of our sisterhood, I swear to you, once my grounding is
over..." This was the hard part - it will all be worth it - just say it already! "I will let you choose where to eat for the following two months."

"Seriously?" Sansa gaped at her in shock at Arya's generosity. "No take-backs!"

"I serve as a witness," dad held up his hand as if he were taking a solemn oath.

"The agreement is witnessed," she stuck out her hand to her sister for a handshake. "All that's left to do is seal it, baby."

"Alright, little sister," Sansa took her hand and gave it two firm shakes. "You've got yourself a deal." It pained Arya to put up with so much appeasing her family members just to get a steal a few minutes with her... boyfriend. It felt so weird - she had a boyfriend! And he's super ridiculous hot! VICTORY! She struggled to keep her expression neutral as she carved a generous bite of her chicken. Her eyes grew wide, watching hungrily as the melted cheese stretched.

"It makes me so proud to see you two getting along," dad smiled at them both. Arya felt a little guilty about playing him, but she was glad everything seemed to be turning out for the best. "I think this move has made us all closer."

"I'm just glad you brought us with you," she talked with her mouth full and could see the desire to lecture in Sansa's eyes. "I never thought I'd say that, but it's true - so you didn't have to come alone, I mean." Arya returned her focus to her food in a valiant attempt to catch up with her dad and her sister.

"Me too," Sansa nodded her agreement, "I miss mom and the boys, but I'm truly glad we three are together."

"I don't miss Robb playing his drum set all Saturday," dad chuckled as he cut another piece from his steak.

"Or mom cleaning out the oven once a month..." Arya chimed in with a mouthful of food. "Who does that?"

"Or Rickon's tendency to walk around naked..." Sansa giggled as the three of them looked at each other.

"All the time," they all said together. They shared a laugh before Arya's thoughts turned somber.

"I miss Bran," Arya pushed her food around on her plate, suddenly all sorts of homesick. She knew the merger would take several months - even up to a year - before her family joined them. Back then, she thought about how wrong it was to split up their family, especially so soon after Bran's accident. A hit-and-run - who does that to a little kid?! She stabbed her knife into her food and carved the chicken with renewed ferocity. Someday, no matter how long it took - she would find out who took away her brother's ability to walk.

"Me too," Sansa frowned and looked down at her own plate.

"I talked to him yesterday," dad tried to assure them, "he's in good spirits and doing well in his studies."

"Oh good 'studies'," Arya scoffed, "I'm sure he's having a ball."

"We'll all be together soon enough," he promised, looking at both of them in turn.
"Ah!" Sansa clapped her hands together. "We should invite Jon next time, to come with us... here, to dinner." She twisted her hair around her finger - the way she always did when embarrassed or lying. "Why are you both staring at me like I've lost my mind?" The fact that her sister disliked their cousin always did confuse Arya, maybe they both really were changing a lot.

"I think it's a great idea," Arya responded happily, her good mood returning.

"I second that motion," dad added, a slightly confused smile spreading over his face.

"Motion passed," Arya thumped her spoon on the table like a judge's gavel. "Jon's coming with us - tomorrow?" She looked up to dad, hoping she didn't appear too eager and raise his suspicions.

"You girls don't mind coming back again?" Dad looked to them both, a boyish hopeful expression on his face. He was going to give himself a heart-attack if he didn't cut back on the steak.

"We can come every day," Sansa took the words right out of her mouth, "if it makes you happy."

"There was never a father more blessed," Dad reached across the table to hold out his hands. They both quickly slipped their hands into his and he squeezed to emphasize his words. "Thank you girls, I mean it. You're both still growing up, and I know it wasn't easy to leave home. I'm glad you are here with me. I love you girls."

"We love you daddy," Sansa got all weepy and launched herself at dad to hug him.

"Love you dad," Arya grinned at him and squeezed his hand before letting it go. He really was the best father... His only fault was his stupid 'no dating until sixteen rule'. Well, what he doesn't know can't hurt him.

Chapter End Notes

Like, here's how wrapped up in writing I get: I KNOW what's going to happen and I'm still worried about Gendrya getting caught. I'm the good kind of 'crazy' right? I think, if I have to ask - I already know the answer.

I have the next-next chapter solidly planned and outlined but I'm considering throwing in something in between. Dany and Jon are strong contenders but I'm open to suggestions. I'm terrified to write Drogo but the challenge calls to me... then I run away from my computer in wretched failure.

9_9 I kinda just want to write Sansan making out and being cute to each other some more. Eventually that's just going to get boring... to other people. San<3San
Dany

Dothraki lessons with Drogo simultaneously became Dany's most and least favorite activity. Alone together in the empty room, her progress with both the boy and the language were moving slower than a glacier during an ice age.

"Wait, wait." She held up her hand to stop him. "You're going too fast. Jal-an zhe-ana-lat." Even to her own ears, the word sounded stunted and broken.

"No, 'jalan zheanalat.'," Drogo corrected her again with absolute patience. "The moon is beautiful."

"No," Dany tore through her notebook, scouring her notes until she found what she was looking for. "I know the word for 'to be beautiful': lain-at."

"Lainat is for..." He struggled to come up with the right phrasing to describe why she was wrong and this is what made their lessons difficult. The rising sexual tension between them, or at least on her part, didn't make things any easier. "Things - with no life."

"The moon is not alive." She didn't understand the difference at all, and she was starting to get frustrated. Learning another language was always a good thing. But that wasn't exactly why she arranged these little lessons. He was taking his tutoring duties far more seriously than she anticipated or hoped for.

"It... has the..." He stopped, and she could almost see his brain working to translate the Dothraki in his head into common tongue. "It moves and - it has life."

"I suppose you would know best." Dany thought learning Dothraki would be easy compared to High Valyrian but it proved rather difficult. "Wait," something clicked in her brain, "you said that word the first night we met." She smirked as his impassive expression slipped. "Did you call me beautiful?" She watched his jaw tense up as his dark eyes lowered to the table. Once again, his silence spoke volumes, lending credence to all of her doubts. He never made a move on her, he never flirted back with her, and when she flirted with him... nothing happened.

"What am I supposed to do when you just stop talking? I feel like an idiot," she braced her elbows on the table and dropped her forehead into her hands. "Really, I do. We come here and you give me terrible Dothraki lessons. I try to flirt with you and you shut up like a giant handsome clam." His continued silence was deafening and she rose to gather her things and leave, mortified and just the tiniest bit angry. "If you just want to be friends, I'm fine with that," she lied. He reached out to hold onto her arm to stop her from leaving.

"You're right - I called you 'zheana'." Drogo's feature softened as he looked up at her and Dany sat back down, surprised, but highly pleased. He still held onto her arm so she covered his hand with her own and smiled at him.

"Thank you," she leaned closer to him, "I also thought you were 'zheana'."
"No," he chuckled and shook his head. "A man is 'haj' - not 'zheana'."

"I think you are both beautiful and strong." Dany scooted to the edge of her chair, even closer to him, hoping he would take the hint and kiss her. If what she truly hoped for from him was a just kiss then her expectations were far exceeded. He wrapped a hand around her waist and stood up, pulling her with him as if she weighed nothing. Drogo set her on the table and buried his other hand in her hair to tilt her head back. His eyes pierced her as she slowly lowered his face to hers but he was moving far too slow to her opinion. Dany wound her arms around his neck and pulled herself up to his height, crashing their lips together.

There was no awkward need for Dany to instruct him how to kiss her or touch her: Drogo took control immediately. All of her senses took leave their leave without a farewell, and good riddance. Intoxicated on his dominating kiss, her mind fell into a hazy state of frantic urgency. Her knees parted of their own accord when he slid her towards him, raw passion controlling her motions. She was dimly aware of her hand pulling at his belt and his fishing around under her skirt.

She lifted her hips as his fingers curled around the hem of her panties and pulled them off. In a desperate version of teamwork, their hands ayed one another and managed to free his hardness. Not once having broken their kiss, or pausing to remove any more clothing then necessary, she guided him inside her. And that was it, or rather, that was the beginning of it. Dany's head lolled back when Drogo removed his hand supporting her to grasp both of her hips.

Dany wanted nothing more than to pull herself as close to Drogo as possible. Unfortunately, she doubted her body possessed the strength to hold herself up. As she sank down to lie back, his hand moved down behind her thigh as he braced one knee on the table. Then he just took her, the way warrior should take a woman. Sometimes slow and hard other times just fucking her senseless, causing the whole world to shake beneath her.

She almost didn't recognize the sensation when it started building and rising within her. It never happened with anyone else: ever. Drogo leaned forward, bracing a hand next to her head, staring down at her with such intensity. It snapped the coiling pleasure tightening every muscle in her body. When she came around him, it was the most satisfying orgasm of her life: she might have lost consciousness for a second. Eyes closed and basking in the post-orgasmic high, Dany barely felt him pull away.

Her joy and relief was sharply cut through by twinge of anger that she had put up with so much terrible sex when this... Heaven existed out there in the world. Otherwise, Dany was calm, without a care or worry in the world until she opened her eyes to see her unmentionables laying on the table. Her hand reached out to grab the discarded scrap of fabric, as if hoping it were not tangible. She stared down at her underwear in her hand and reality came crashing back.

"What's wrong?" His question brought up a tidal wave of panic that rose over her head. Dany sat up to see Drogo sitting in the chair before her, still staring his soul-piercing stare.

"Nothing." Except that, her brain just kicked in. The ramifications of unprotected sex started listing themselves in her mind. "I'm fine." A trip to the pharmacy seemed in order, and then a call to her gynecologist couldn't hurt. "Or... I will be fine."

"I love you," Drogo stated. He 'stated' it, not at all like a confession of love but more like an obligated greeting one might give distant relatives.

"What?!" Dany couldn't believe her ears, or her eyes: none of this seemed real. "What did you say?" The wall started closing in around her and one thought repeated in her mind over and over, 'escape'! "I have to go," she mumbled as she grabbed her bag and scooted off the table to make her flight.
Drogo did not try to stop her this time, which only made her more confused, but her brain kept repeating it: 'escape'! The hallways turned into a fun house as the walls melted and twisted while the floor wobbled. Dany searched for the one place she knew she find sanctuary.

Not now, she begged the gods as her heart threatened to beat right out of her chest. The darkness started closing on her eyes as she launched into the bathroom and lurched against the wall. Her breath was wheezing in her chest, hardly getting any air and she knew it she knew she was dying this time. Dany thought she had this under control, that's how she convinced the doctor to stop the medication. She didn't need it, she had everything under control: just keep repeating that and it will become true. Everything... was out of her control.

Her hands gripped the filthy bathroom wall and it made her feel even sicker to think of all the germs getting on her. Dany thanked the gods the bathroom was empty as she braced her body against the stall and fell inside, shutting and locking the door. Her stomach heaved and she held back her hair and squeezed her eyes shut as she fought to control her breathing. This panic attack would give her a real heart attack, she would die, and they would find her body in a high school bathroom! She dug around in her bag, groping blindly until she found her phone.

"Please, pick up." Dany punched in the number one and her life flash before her eyes as it rang once and then twice. "Please pick up!"

"Hey, babe," Marge finally answered.

"I need to see you right now!" The word wheezed out of her dry throat as she clung to the stall door to stay on her feet.

"What's wrong - wait," her lighthearted tone disappeared. "Where are you?"

"Hiding in the girl's bathroom," she whimpered.

"I'll be there in two minutes," Marge promised before she hung up. All she had to do was hang on for two minutes, and then everything would be okay. Margaery would know what to do: she always knows what to do. Time passed, enough for her to contemplate her miserable existence before she heard the door open. "Dany?" Dany left her hiding place and faced her friend with tear-streaked shame. "I thought you were past this, honey." Marge opened her arms with the sympathetic expression. "Tell me what's wrong."

"I thought so too," she blubbered as she put her arms around Margaery and let her friend sooth her as Dany sniffled on her shoulder. "I messed up," she whispered, "I just had sex with Drogo."

"The big foreign muscly guy who plays that silly game?" Marge pulled Dany by her shoulders back to look at her with brows raised in interest. "Was it good?" Margaery did not seem to be taking her seriously at all.

"Yes, but that's not the problem." Dany covered her face, feeling a fresh welling of tears in her eyes. "He told me... he loves me."

"Still not hearing a problem." Margaery pulled Dany's hands away from her face. "I think you might just be freaking out for no reason."

"It's not supposed to be like this! I don't want..." She could never explain what it was like to someone as self-assured as Margaery. Dany didn't have the confidence to love or be loved by someone. "I just want a 'normal' high school relationship. I don't want to be the girl who moves too fast and gets her heart broken anymore. Why do I do this?!"
"I hate to break it to you, muffin." Margaery geared up for some tough love, though hard to hear, usually exactly what Dany needed. "There's no such fucking thing as a 'normal high school relationship'. Because - and this is fairly obvious - we're teenagers. None of us know what the hells we're doing!"

"I couldn't even tell if he liked me and now he says he loves me!" As if Dany needed any more bad feelings on top of how terrible she already felt, guilt started to weigh heavy on her shoulders. "And then I ran away... What am I going to do?!"

"You like him?" Margaery gave her shoulders a little shake.

"Yeah, I really like him," Dany groaned, shaking her head. "But, I'm not ready to be 'in love' again." Margaery walked her to the sink, holding her by her upper arm, and turned on the water faucet. The cold water felt good on her face it helped her to calm down.

"I think you're over-thinking it." Her friend used her most soothing tone. "When you've cooled down - go find him." Dany opened her mouth but Marge held up her hand to stop her. "Ah, don't argue. Go get as much good sex as he's capable of providing and have some fun." Margaery smiled and took hold of her shoulders again. "If he breaks your heart, I'll be here to pick up the pieces as usual."

"How are you so confident all the time?" Dany wished there was some secret, that she could just learn and study. It was true: no matter how bad she fell apart, her best friend could always put all her pieces back together again. She told Marge she should become a therapist but she had her heart set on fashion design.

"It's a curse, really." Margaery wiggled her head with a smug smile. "Now, Missa is meeting me for lunch in our usual spot. Are you up for it?" Dany nodded weakly, not trusting herself to answer an affirmative. They walked arm-in-arm to the outdoor lunch room and sat down at the table with Missa, who greeted them with a halfhearted wave. "I need you both to hear me out. I think I kind of admire Sansa for being so brave. I know," she sighed, "I was the one who wanted to help her the most. I've thought about it and she should follow her heart, no matter what anyone says."

"That's romantic of you, Marge," Dany was suspicious of her friend's sudden change of heart. "But we agreed that she is too innocent to realize what she is getting into. I wish someone had taken me aside when I that naive and helped me."

"Well," she shrugged, "then she won't be so innocent anymore." Margaery crossed her arms and then waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. "That's life - it happens to us all."

"I shouldn't have to point out," Missa looked at both of them with narrowed eyes. "I have not agreed with either of you this entire time."

"Missa, considering you've never had a boyfriend," Dany rubbed her hand over her face in frustration. "I think we know just a little bit better."

"You two always know better! Fine, I have homework." Missa gathered up her stuff and abruptly turned to walk away.

"Missa!" Dany called after her friend but was ignored. "Come back! I'm sorry!!!" Missa continued to walk away like she couldn't hear her and Dany dropped her face into her hands, feeling more wretched than ever. "Nooooooooo! What is happening in my life?!"

"I wasn't finished." Margaery fiddled with her perfectly manicured fingernails. "I know this is the last thing you want to hear, but I don't want to lie to you."
"What?" A sense of foreboding made the hairs on the back of her neck stand straight up.

"I wanted to say that..." Marge smiled sheepishly. "I'm back with Joff." At the familiar starry look in Margaery's eyes, a sick feeling clenched Dany's stomach. "He came to me after the game and he was so sweet." She immediately rushed into an explanation with her hands outstretched. "He really can be good sometimes."

"Sometimes," Dany repeated the word with emphasis. "The rest of the time: he's a monster."

"He's just immature," her friend insisted. "He'll grow out of his need to control everything-" Margaery's words cut off as her phone made a little tinkling sound. "Ah," she checked the text with a frown. "Oh, it's him. He wants to know who I'm with."

"It begins." Dany lost all hope in that moment. Her most confident and smartest friend, at least as far as street-smart goes, just became the biggest fool she knew.

"No," she argued cheerfully and she replied to the text. "It ends with me standing up for myself and him dealing the new and improved Margaery. 'I am with a friend and I will call you when I'm free'," she narrated as she typed. "See? I'm on top of it."

"This is a nightmare." Dany slumped down onto the table, burying her head in her arms. Might as well just give up and die right here... in the lunch room, at least it's better than the bathroom. "This is my nightmare."

"You're being dramatic," Margaery scoffed and petted Dany's hair. "I love you and I love him, I can't help it. The heart wants what it wants. Me and you honey - we're forever best friends and I will love you until I die - I can't be without you." Her friend tugged her elbow, coaxing her into sitting up. "Now, promise you'll call Missa and smooth things over with her and I'll patch things up with Sansa. Deal?"

"You are going to be the death of me, Marge." Dany grasped her friend's hands and stared into her beautiful eyes. "Please, please be careful. If anything happened to you... You were there when I needed you most, when... the attacks started."

"Don't mention it, that's what friends are for." Margaery squeezed her hands before letting go. "The hard times are over - we're almost free of this hellish high school. The world won't know what hit them when we finally step out on center stage." Dany always got annoyed whenever Marge started acting all dramatic and unrealistic. "Don't roll those beautiful eyes at me. I know what I'm talking about... There's something in the air, something good is coming."

"You're nose always knows," Dany relented with a sigh. "Call me later, tell me how it goes with Sansa."

"And I will expect to hear all about Jo-Jo," she rolled her eyes when Dany started to correct her. "Or whatever his name is, and please talk to Missa. Find out what's been bothering her lately." Marge kissed her on the cheek goodbye. "Love you, babe."

"Love you!" Dany called after her friend, who was already digging her phone out of her purse. Probably to call that wormy-lipped asshole! She laid her head back down on the table and wished she could just start the day over.

JON

He knew Arya was acting too nice, after he made his opinion about her and Gendry perfectly clear. When they pulled up in front of the steakhouse, everything clicked. Jon knew that this is where that
asshole worked. She thought she was so clever but as soon as she got up, he moved to follow her. It wasn't right for her to trick Uncle Ned like this, for them to break his rules and sneak around right under his nose.

She walked around the side of the restaurant quickly and he peaked around the corner. Arya ran and jumped into Gendry's waiting arms. They hurried to stand behind a large white truck and Jon followed as they disappeared behind it. The scene that he found once he caught up with them wasn't exactly unexpected but it was still horrible to witness.

"Arya!" They both quickly broke apart as he called her name.

"Jon, what the fuck?" Arya blew out a breath and put a hand to her chest.

"I need to talk to Gendry," he jerked his chin at the asshole. "Alone."

"No," she glared at him and flipped him off. "Go away."

"I'm serious." Jon took a step towards them, returning her fierce expression with one of his own.

"As am I!" Arya voice lifted and octave as she moved close to Gendry and took a hold of the shirt. "Go away or watch us - doesn't really matter to me."

"Arry," Gendry sighed and disentangled her hand from his shirt to push her away gently. "Just let him say what he clearly needs to say."

"This is bullshit!" Arya shoved Gendry back against the truck and marched up to Jon to buck her chin up at him like she wanted to fight. "It's starting to feel straight-up sexist."

"Arya..." He couldn't help that he wanted to protect her, that's not sexist. That's what a good older cousin-brother was supposed to do.

"No, I'm not buying it!" She snorted a laugh. "If Bran was making out with a super-hot sixteen year old girl, you'd act exactly the same?"

"I don't know," he answered honestly, "maybe."

"No, you'd hand him a box of condoms and get out of the way." Arya pushed on his chest and Jon took a step back, in case she got the idea to hit him. "This - is - bullshit," she looked back to Gendry like she expected him to back her up but he just shrugged and looked down at the ground. "Fine, have your little 'boy talk' but don't expect me to meekly bow my head so the menfolk can 'handle things'. Fuck you." She backed away from them, holding up a double middle finger combo and spun around to march back towards the restaurant.

"I don't think she's happy, man." Gendry leaned against the truck and tilted his head back to heave a heavy exhale. Jon walked up to stand in front of him, arms crossed and eyes narrowed.

"What they fuck is your problem?" Jon's question made Gendry's head snap down with a confused expression.

"I think that's my line," he was making a joke out of the whole thing. Well, it wasn't a joke to him!

"You grew up without a father, like me." Jon thumped his palm against his chest, admitting to himself that he actually felt betrayed. "I always thought we were cut from the same cloth, both 'freaks' who never had a girlfriend. Now I feel like I don't know you at all!" He tossed his hand in the direction Arya stalked off into. "You're trying to fuck my little fourteen-year-old cousin! How am
I supposed to deal with that? How am I supposed call you my friend? How am I supposed to just stand by?

"Arya's fourteen: I get that." Gendry nodded slowly, with his jaw clenched. "I don't forget it or ignore it," he banged his fist against the side of the truck, "I worry about it all the time. But she's not a little kid, and she's not just any girl to me... She's the most amazing girl I've ever met," he squeezed his eyes shut. "I love her."

"If you loved her," Jon laughed, though he didn't find anything about the situation funny at all. "You would never even consider risking doing to her what was done to our mothers."

"I took sex-ed, man." He crossed his arms, leaning back onto the truck with an irritated expression. "I think I can handle it."

"Wrong answer," Jon clinched his fist and took a step towards his former friend. Gendry's eyes widened and he held up his hands and surrender.

"Then how about this: Arya is my life." Gendry put her hand over his heart. "I'd die and kill for her if I had to. What happened to my mom would never happen to Arya." His expression tightened like he was in physical pain. "I would never abandon the girl I love! Because I can't let her go, somehow I would find a way... But that's not going to happen, I won't let it."

"Her future is too important to be wasted on the likes of you." Jon couldn't believe a word Gendry said, he'd only known Arya for a few weeks. How could he possibly be in love with her already? "If you keep filling her ears with pretty words, she's going to let her own dreams fade away and blindly follow you." Jon had seen it happen too many times to the women and girls in his life.

"Man, listen to me," Gendry's head rolled forward and his voice got quiet, "I'm the one following her. You don't know what it's like to be in love until it happens. Having another person leading you around by the nose... is the best feeling in the world. I have one dream, Arya: nothing else is more important to me." The dramatic confession alone would've been enough to stun Jon really shocked him was the way Gendry's voice broke. "It's already hard enough with her father hating me," he lifted his hand to quickly swipe at his eyes and then looked up. "I don't want to lose you as a friend."

"Her father is the man I respect most... but I won't rat you two out. I will be watching very closely." Jon did not want to admit it, but Gendry's devotion to Arya seemed real. That didn't mean he trusted him not to hurt her again. "Don't fuck up."

"I won't, but not for you." Gendry met Jon's eyes and some an unspoken understanding passed between them. They both cared about Arya, and it would have to be enough. Gendry's watch beeped and he groaned as he pushed away from the truck. "Gotta go, it's been real great chatting with you."

"Hey," Jon caught his arm, "if it was anyone else... I would've already beat him bloody."

"Good to know." Gendry's expression lightened as he put a hand on Jon's shoulder. "Don't worry, everything will work out. Someday, at mine and Arry's wedding, you and I are going to share a laugh over this." Jon watched Gendry sprint back inside the restaurant before heading towards the entrance. A quiet sniffling sound caught his attention and he turned around. Arya sat crouched down behind the front of the truck, holding her face in her hands.

"Arya..." Jon quickly moved to her side and crouched down to put a hand on her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"He... is..." She gulped in a deep shuddering breath. "So... fucking... perfect!" Arya's voice cracked
and a high pitched whine escaped before she clapped a hand over her mouth. Jon gathered her tiny form in his arms and let her cry even though he didn't understand. "I don't deserve a guy like him," she hiccuped, "I'm ugly and weird! Why does he like - 'love' me so much?!" She gripped his shirt tightly and turned her wide teary eyes up at him. "Please, Jon, I can't lose him. Please don't try to drive him away, please help me convince dad. Please," she begged, "please, please."

"Arya..." Jon couldn't stand to see her like this but blaming Gendry wasn't going to solve anything. "I promise I won't interfere anymore."

"Thanks," she sniffed and wiped her nose on her hand. Jon couldn't help but smile at her crying over such grown-up stuff like 'love' like a little kid. He wiped away the tear tracks and stood to help her to her feet.

"Go to the bathroom and wash your face," he ordered. "I'll go make some excuse with your dad. Okay?"

"Thanks, Jon." Arya launched herself at him, wrapping her arms around his waist, and burying her face in his chest. "I'm sorry if I disappoint you..."

"Not at all," he held her tight, "I'm sorry I made things harder for you."

"It feels good to be cared about," she whispered. Arya pulled away and scowled at him again. "Even if you are dead wrong for interfering in the first place." She pushed him back and punched his arm. "I love you, cuz."

"Love you, kiddo." Jon slung his arm around her shoulder as they walked back to the entrance together. He still lacked any faith that the decision to keep her secret from Uncle Ned was a good idea. But, he had to admit, Arya had the right to make her own decisions: no matter how stupid they might seem. All he could do was let her know he'd always be there for her.

Chapter End Notes

I seriously don't know how I am still writing, I keep expecting to run out of... I don't know - whatever is inside my brain that comes up with this.

Next chapter, Sansan are going on a date - a REAL date. To a sit-down restaurant!!! OMG!!!
In Spanish class, he just couldn't keep his hands off his little bird and unlike usual she didn't scold him or swat his hands away. Her hair was tied up into a high ponytail and Sandor pushed the long red tresses aside to stroke the graceful slope of her neck. Sansa shivered under his touch but leaned back in her seat in encouragement. She squirmed in her chair and he could hear her making soft gasps and hums, turning his tormenting her into a kind of self-torture. Every time the teacher turned away from the board to address the class, she would sit up straight in her seat like a good little student.

As soon as Mr. Forel turned back around, she relaxed back into his touch. It made him want to throw her over his shoulder and find someplace quiet. Ever since she walked into class she'd been eye-fucking him, though at first he accused himself of imagining it. His hand reached further to trace the soft shell of her ear and she turned her face into his fingers. Suddenly, Sansa sat forward and scribbled something furiously in her notebook. Then she tore out the page out and discreetly passed a it back to him. Sandor rolled his eyes at her silly behavior while he unfolded the note to read it.

The page only had two words 'date tonight' and then a question mark with a bunch of exclamation points with hearts in place of the dots. He snorted a laugh at the thought of actually replying and passing a fucking note as he crumpled it up and stuffed it into his pocket. Sandor bent forward to whisper in her ear when a knock at the door distracted the teacher. As Forel walked outside the classroom, the students erupted into conversation. Sansa turned around with a rosy blush on her cheeks and bashful smile curling her lips.

"Lover..." Her eyelashes flattered as she reached forward and took his hand in both of hers.

"What'd ya want?" He relaxed back in his seat to chuckle at her obvious attempts to seduce him into getting a date. "Don't just bat those pretty eyes at me, use fucking words."

"I'm sick of steak," she whined, "I want Italian." Sansa told him all about her father and sister uniting to control their dinners. Personally, Sandor loved beef and admired the little runt for her cunning ways. But he wisely kept silent as the little bird complained.

"On a school night?" He didn't know what had gotten into her but whatever it was - he liked it. Sansa's lack of shyness, letting him touch her and flirting openly in class, had him ready to agree with whatever she wanted. She stuck her lower lip out and leaned closer to him, propping her arms on the desk.

"I really do want some pasta... but I also want to spend some time alone together." The bashful flushing of her cheeks did not match up with the flirtatious way she looked at him through heavy-lidded eyes. "Neither of us have anything going on after school. Daddy and Arya can spend some quality time together." Her lips pursed again, making it difficult to suppress the urge to drag her out of class. "Do I have to keep listing reasons?"

"Can't we just skip the date?" He shifted towards her, brushing his fingertips along her jaw line to
play with the wispy lose hairs curling around her ear. Sandor nearly groaned aloud as she put a finger to her chin and glanced up to the ceiling - like she was actually considering it. Sansa's silence tortured him for a few seconds before she turned another wicked smile on him.

"Tempting... so very tempting..." The tip of her pink tongue darted out to lick her lips. "But, what if I pass out mid-kiss because I don't have the stamina? That would be embarrassing." In an expression of exaggerated disappointment, she lowered her head to peek at him through her lashes. "We don't have to-"  

"Fuck it, let's go if you want." He laughed as her expression completely changed into one of pure delight. "I assume you need to go home to get changed for some fucking reason?" Sansa always looked gorgeous but he knew she would want to look even more beautiful - which shouldn't even be possible.

"I do," she was starting to realize that he couldn't refuse her anything, "as do you." Sandor growled at her insistence he change as well - nothing he wore would fix his nasty face.

"What I'm wearing now is fine." He leaned back again, sulking and wishing he hadn't already agreed. Sansa removed her hands from his and sat back to cross her arms in annoyance.

"Do I have to repeat that whole process of wheedling what I want out of you?" She narrowed her pretty eyes at him, getting all huffy for no reason. "Can't you just do what I ask and not argue?" Sandor couldn't help but grin at her irritation - she always looked hottest when angry.

"You're feisty today," he teased. Whatever put his little bird into this odd mood - he had to find out what it was and make sure she got it every day.

"I'm hungry!" She groaned and put a hand to her stomach. "There's nothing on that steakhouse menu I can eat but a tasteless chef's salad." Sansa's head rolled back as she whimpered pitifully, pounding her little fists on his desk. "I need noodles and tomato sauce and garlic bread!!!" Actually, that did sound really fucking good.

"I didn't realize it was like that, my poor little bird." Sandor reach across the desk to grab ahold of both of her arms and pull her close, keeping his voice low so only they could hear. "I'll take care of you."

"I knew you would." A pretty blush spread over her cheeks as the meaning of his words reached her, causing a slow smile to curl on her lips. "Will you wear something nice?"

"Gods fuck it, yes," he relented with annoyance. "I'll wear a godsdamed button up." Sandor never thought he'd be dressing up to go on a sit-down date at a fancy Italian restaurant. Since he met Sansa, everything he thought would 'never' happen became everyday occurrences.

"With the sleeves attached, please," she insisted. Sansa how no idea how difficult she was being - it wasn't his fault the shitty shirts he bought never had big enough sleeves for his arms.

"Picky," he accused with a sneer as Mr. Forel reentered and the class settled down. Sansa turned away with victorious beaming smile on her face and Sandor couldn't wait. He could take or leave the date - that's not what he was looking forward to most. Afterward, he was going to kiss those smiling lips until she was panting and making those sexy little whining sounds. Just the thought was making him hard so he decided to keep his hands to himself for the rest of the class. Before long, the bell rang and the little bird twisted around in her seat again.

"I'll miss you," she furrowed her brow and pouted prettily, "until tonight." Sandor thought about
pressing his luck and asking her to skip and go parking. Fat change of 'Straight-A Sansa' agreeing to that - he doubted she ever skipped a day in her life.

"I'll pick you up at five?" He stood up and grabbed her bag off the back of her seat to help her sling it over her shoulders. Sansa faced him to hold of one of his hands, bowing her head shyly.

"It can't come soon enough." When she glanced up to meet his eyes, the look she gave him could only be described as 'lustful' and it nearly made him fall back into his seat.

"Offer to skip this whole 'date' thing is still on the table," he proposed hopefully.

"Not a chance, lover," her coy smile turned into a triumphant grin. Sansa tugged him towards the door of the classroom and squeezed his fingers before letting go. She walked off towards her next class, her ponytail swinging behind her. With nothing better to pass the time, Sandor attended all of his classes and the day passed by in a fairly boring fashion. He headed straight home after school, glad to find the house empty and hurried to his room to find his nicest set of clothes.

He came up with nothing. Not a thing in his closet was near good enough to make him look even slightly worthy of her - especially when she was all gussied up. With no time to run to the store that carried sizes large enough for him, long enough and wide enough, he settled for the best he had. His newest pair jeans were clean and had no rips in them yet and there was one button up that had yet to lose its sleeves. Sandor didn't bother to check his appearance in the mirror, there was no point before he headed out to go pick up the little bird.

When he pulled into the lot of her apartment Sandor texted her and she came down a few minutes later. It took his breath away with how pretty she looked. Her hair was piled up on her head, swept around in a twisted bun on the crown of her head. The only thing that made him okay with how bad he would look standing next to Sansa was the knowledge that she looked this good just for him. Feeling grateful and a bunch of other flowery feelings he'd rather not ponder, he quickly got out of the driver side. He walked around the car to open the passenger door for her - she loved shit like that.

Sansa gave him directions to the restaurant and then proceeded to tell him about every delicious food item that they had on the menu. Most of the things she talked about he had no idea she was even saying but her descriptions made his mouth water. Sandor didn't exactly go out to eat much, not unless it was fast food. If his father ever took their family out to eat, he didn't remember it. Why waste good money on food when there's booze to be bought? They pulled up at the restaurant and walked inside, getting seated right away because it was still early.

"Thanks for dressing up," she beamed at him, "you look nice."

"You're the only one who thinks so," he scoffed. Sandor knew she meant it though - there wasn't a dishonest or mean bone in her body. Somehow, Sansa found a way to look past his hideous face and brutish size. Though, his bulk actually seemed to work in his favor, he smirked at the memory of her face when he took off his shirt. He hoped he didn't look that thunderstruck when she removed her own top.

"I doubt that," she frowned playfully and crossed her arms, "I see women giving you the eye."

"Which ones?" He turned around to look and felt her cruel little nails pinching his arm. "Ow! Little bird, you're becoming violent." Sandor wouldn't mind those nails digging into his skin, but not because he made her annoyed.

"Whose fault is that?" She raised her chin the haughty expression and wiggled her head. "I was never a violent person before I met you." Sansa poked her finger in the air at him. "You bring out the
worst in me."

"I do, don't I?" Sandor hung his head in shame, knowing he was taking his teasing too far.

"Aw, no I just joking-" Her protest cut off as he lifted his head with a smirk. "Ah! Sandor!" Sansa covered her laughing mouth as she tried to scold him. "You're so mean!"

"I'll make it up to you later," he promised in a low voice. Sansa stopped laughing and the tell-tale gleam in her eyes returned. She glanced at his mouth before returning to meet his gaze.

"Oh?" She smiled and bent over the table. "How?" Sandor was about to tell her exactly 'how' - and in great detail - when the fucking waitress came to take their drink orders. The woman somehow managed to keep her glancing away from his face to a tolerable minimum. He wished he was a few years older so he could order a drink, help calm the nervousness he was trying to hide. But the little bird got this unbearable disappointed look on her face whenever he was drinking so he didn't do it around her.

"You still want me to tell you," he smirked as she leaned over the table towards him, "surrounded by all these people?" Sandor didn't know how much more teasing and torment he could take from the little bird.

"If you say it quiet," she whispered, "so only I can hear." The mischievous look in her eyes sent his cock from semi-hard to ram-rod and Sandor closed his eyes in an attempt to calm down. Sansa waited patiently, still wearing that tantalizing expression when he regained control.

"First," he murmured, "I'm going to tell you how beautiful you are - that could take some time." He chuckled at Sansa's pleased expression. "Next, I'm going to enjoy messing up your pretty hairdo." That earned him a little scowl but Sandor could tell she was trying to fight a smile. "No pouting, it makes me want to skip to the next step."

"No more," she looked away and lifted her hand to fan her face, "please."

"Making you embarrassed?" It always was an ego boost whenever he flustered Sansa.

"No..." She looked down at the table before peeking up at him. "Eager." Sandor grabbed her hand and started getting up from the table.

"Fuck the pasta then," he growled too loud. Her eyes widened and looked around, clearly worried that someone heard his 'foul language'.

"Shh!" She put her finger over her lips. "I'm still hungry!" Her disapproving expression slipped, turning playful once more. "We need our strength up... it sounds like we have a lot to accomplish after we eat." Sandor slumped back down from his half-risen position. Other parts of him were still fully raised up and standing at attention.

"You can just relax," he assured her, "I'll do all the hard work." Sansa gave him a weak smile before turning her eyes down to study the menu, even though he knew she had it memorized. He was about to ask her what was wrong when the waitress came back with their drinks. She ordered for both of them, and he would pretty much eat whatever so he trusted her. After the waitress left, her worried expression returned and he just couldn't take it anymore. "What's it now?"

"Oh, nothing." A hurt look passed over her eyes and Sandor regretted his grouchy tone. "I just... I wish I was not affected so strongly when we kiss." She braced her elbow on the table and rested her cheek and her hand. "You are always so in control of yourself while I float away into dreamland. It must be like kissing a ragdoll." He immediately regretted his bark of laughter because her expression
fell even more. His hand quickly reached across the table to take her chin and tilted her eyes up at
him.

"I have to be in control - else I'd end up fucking you." Sometimes being blunt is just the best option,
it was better than her thinking that she was somehow more affected by him that he was by her. That
was just fucking ridiculous. Apparently, it wasn't the right bloody thing to say though because she
still wore that sad expression on her pretty face.

"Oh." Sansa closed her eyes and sighed as she took ahold of his hand, setting it on the table to trace
the lines of his palm. "I know it is hard for you to wait for me..."

"I've been waiting for you this whole time," he shrugged. "What's a few more months?" Sandor
never dared dream he would ever get to be with someone that actually cared about him. There had
been a handful of girls who made it clear they'd like the hound to fuck them but he couldn't let go of
the hope... Someday, someone would look at him - and want him for something other than a big dick
and quick fuck.

"It's hard for me to wait too," she confessed, still looking down at his hand. "When you kiss me, I
forget all about my dreams for having the 'perfect' first time." Sansa glanced up with a worried
expression. "Maybe I should not tell you this."

"You can trust me," he promised, "even if you don't trust yourself." Sandor pulled his hand away
from her fingers - even that innocent contact was making him crazy. "Now stop talking about kissing
and fucking before I drag you out of this restaurant."

"Fine," she agreed. "After dinner, though... Oh, I suppose you want to stop talking about it." He
scowled at her teasing him, about to pay her back when the waitress showed up with their food.
Sandor turned his angry look at the server and she's scuttled out of the way quickly.

"You're gonna pay for your naughty teasing, little bird," he warned. "I won't let you off easy this
time."

"I certainly hope so," Sansa tortured him some more with that flirty eyelash batting thing that drove
him wild.

"Godsdammit, girl." He groaned and gestured towards his giant plate of delicious smelling food.
"Let a man eat!" Sansa giggled and held her hands in surrender before turning her greedy eyes down
at her plateful of noodles. Sandor could only hope she did not transform back into the timid jumpy
version of herself once he got her all alone.

Chapter End Notes

My A/C has been busted since all day yesterday and still not fixed!!! I wanted to write
Sansa POV but it's too bloody hot. The repair person is already an hour behind
schedule. I just want you all to know - if I die from this, I did it all for you...

Remember me... <3

OMG! The doorbell just rang and I ran to answer... just FedEx.
AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!! I need to leave the deep south. Dear gods, why
do I live here?! Oh right, Disney World. Frack.
The day before she got a call from Margaery, apologizing and wanting to patch things up, and part of her wanted not to answer. They chatted for a while Sansa realized that though misguided, the girls really did have good intentions at heart. Afterward, they agreed to meet up and talk some more in person later and she felt like a burden was lifted off of her heart. She hated being at odds with other people and her first impression of the cheer-leading squad was good. Despite their interference, she still wanted to be friends with them.

On the heels of her good mood, came an overwhelming urge to just be with Sandor. She wanted to touch him, talk to him, and hear his voice whispering sweet things in her ear. The knowledge that the relationship would no longer be challenged made Sansa realize how nervous she was. That anxiety translated into being reserved around him. A new uplifting sense of freedom encouraged her to throw caution into the wind. He gave in easily to her demand for a date to her favorite restaurant, even on a school night.

Sandor even agreed to dress up and she could hardly believe how good he looked. She always thought him attractive but in a tight dress shirt, he was downright dangerous. Sansa ordered fettuccine alfredo for Sandor and classic spaghetti with chicken meatballs for herself. Even though she ordered her favorite meal at her favorite restaurant, eating with him made it taste even better. The meal was over too quickly but she was eager for what would come after. He patted his stomach with a satisfied growl and tucked his arm around her waist as they walked towards his car.

Sandor opened the door for her again and she nearly fell over from shock. That was the third time he ever did that and that made twice in one day. If it continued, she might start to suspect that some alien invasion was taking over the people in her life. Not that she minded him treating her a little more nicely; it was just a bit strange. Her sister and dad were also acting out of character lately. But she had too much to worry about without involving herself in their problems. Arya was oddly silent at dinner last night and daddy worried even more than usual, presumably about the merger.

"Do you like cinnamon or mint?" She rifled in her purse until she found the two packages and offered him a choice. Sandor looked over at the gum with a puzzled expression but Sansa only grinned at him before explaining. "For the garlic breath, I thought of everything."

"Cinnamon," he answered with an approving grin. Sansa handed the package over for him to pull out a stick, unwrap it and pop it into his mouth. She replaced the gum in her purse after taking a piece of spearmint for herself. Sandor pulled the Skylark out of the restaurants' parking lot and in the opposite direction of the city.

"I knew you would like spicy gum." She looked out the window but did not recognize the route they were taking. "Where are we going?"

"The abandoned supermarket is for emergency making out," he informed her. Sansa laughed at his serious usage of the word 'emergency'. "I've somewhere better in mind."
"Oh, but..." She scolded herself for hesitating and turned to face him. "Can we stay in the Skylark? It's my favorite place to kiss you."

"And that's why you're my girl - fucking brilliant." He grinned wide and punched the gas, instead of feeling scared by how fast they were driving, Sansa found it thrilling. They pulled off an exit just by the Kings Landing Bridge into the parking lot of a small of a nature preserve set up for hiking. The view was spectacular, all of the lights on the bridge were lit up. Stars were just beginning to shine as sun sunk down and dissipated behind them. Headlights and taillights of cars driving over the bridge created a steady stream of twinkling lights.

"Oh, Sandor, this is so beautiful." Her sister would love to hike this trail and she made a mental note to tell her about it. "Can we get out and look?" Sandor nodded and they got out of the car to walk to the front and sit on the still warm hood. "This is perfect..." Without even realizing it, tears welled in her eyes to spill over onto her face and she quickly wiped them away before he saw. "It's just... perfect."

"Why're you crying?!" He turned her towards him with a confused and worried expression on his face.

"I'm so... happy," she inhaled a shuttering breath, "sorry."

"Silly little bird." He gathered her in his arms as he laughed softly at her. He was trying to comfort her but the closeness reignited the sense of urgency that had been tugging at her all day. She wrapped her hands around his neck and pulled herself up to the press a kiss to his neck, feeling his pulse quicken beneath her lips. "I'm gonna take you to that fucking restaurant every day," he growled. "They must put something in that sauce."

"No, it's you," she pressed another kiss to his jaw. "I want to kiss you... so badly." Without warning, he tugged her into his arms and stood up to carry her to the side of the car before setting her down. Sandor opened the door and crouched to move the seat before holding his hand out for her to get in first. Sansa slid into the backseat and scooted over as he followed and shut the door. At this point, her stomach should have been fluttering but she did not feel nervous at all. "Maybe we shouldn't wait," the words rushed out of her mouth, "this feels special enough."

"No," it sounded physically painful for him to deny her and Sansa admonished herself for pushing him. "I know that's not what you really want." Sandor gave her a determined look that was far more touching than any look of longing. He was right that she still wanted the dream... But she also wanted to be with him more than she ever thought she could want someone. "I'm gonna give you that 'perfect first time', you deserve it."

"So do you," she moved to his side to hold onto his arm. "I think no matter where we are... being with you is what will make it right for me." It was not right for her to be selfish and dictate when, where, and how. Sandor squeezed his eyes shut and gulped before shaking his head as if to clear his thoughts. Sansa worried she might have made him angry or he thought she was still teasing him. He slowly let out a breath and turned to face her with a hungry expression as he took ahold of her wrist to place her palm over his racing heart.

"Same rules as before," he growled, "do whatever you want." Sansa nodded, unable to speak, and lifted her hand to the top of his shirt. He stopped her, still staring at her hard, as she unfastened the first button. "I can't say no again - so don't ask."

"I won't," she promised to both him and herself. If Sandor was determined to make her first time perfect, then perhaps he was his way of having his own 'perfect first time'. With impatient shaky fingers, she unbuttoned his shirt as he sunk against into the seat. His head tilted back to rest on the
top of the seat as Sansa slid her hands under his shirt to part the two sides and reveal his broad chest. A quiet gasp escaped her throat and he chuckled at her reaction, still relaxed and otherwise unmoving.

Sansa doubted he would believe her if she told him how beautiful he was. Her fingertips skimmed along his collarbone, finding his skin soft and warm. She moved her hand lower to the patch of dark curly hair in the center of his chest. Despite his calm demeanor, his heart pounded in his chest giving her a heady sense of control. She followed the springy hair down to his stomach, which tensed under her hand. Her breath was coming out in short pants as her pulse raced and her thoughts became fuzzy.

She lightly scraped her fingernails over his taunt stomach and Sandor growled low in his chest in response. Her own chest timpled and ached due to the overwhelming impulse to press her skin against his. A mischievous voice in her mind whispered temptations, urging her to let go of her remaining reservations. His eyes flew open wide in surprise as she braced against his shoulders and shifted her position, rising up to kneel over him.

His hands moved up to her hips, the heat from them seeping through the fabric of her dress. Her tight grip on his shoulders relaxed to curl her fingers behind his neck before she dipped her lips to meet his. Sandor tasted like cinnamon and her knees grew weak as she moved her mouth against his. Sansa sank down onto his lap and he tugged on hips to push her face against the hard bulge in his lap. She broke away from the kiss with a sharp intake of breath and he made a frustrated groan as he removed his hands.

"Your hands..." Sansa panted to catch her breath, fighting the instinct to pull away and the urge to squirm in his lap. "Are fine where they were." Sandor moved his hands over her dress to return to her hips, just the tip of his fingers grazed over her bare skin. "Wait," she laughed softly at his impatient growl but he halted his movement. "If you want," she wished it was not so hard to say what she wanted. That she craved his touch on her bare skin did not embarrass her but for some reason saying it out loud made her self-conscious. "Underneath the fabric is fine, too."

"I won't argue," he growled as his hands moved impossibly slow to the hem of her skirt. "I'll just... go ahead then." Sandor gave her an unsure look, to which she gave a nod of approval. Sansa nearly felt mortified at the sound she made as his hand slid up her thigh, under the skirt of her dress. "Sansa," he whispered her name it send a hot flush through her body.

"Again," she ordered in a voice she did not know, "say my name." Sansa moved her hands under his open shirt to hold onto his bare shoulders.

"Sansa," he growled, digging his fingertips into her hips and pulling her against his hardness again. She cried out again, uninhibited as overwhelming desire imprisoned her consciousness. Sandor sat up to brush his lips up her neck, continuing to hold her in place. "You're like a dream," his hold breath whispered over her skin, "my Sansa." Her fingertips dug into the hard muscles of his shoulders. "So perfect," he kissed under her ear, "you can't know how much I want you."

"Tell me," she whimpered, "you'll want me always." That was close enough 'I love you', it was fine if Sandor did not want to say those words, Sansa knew she loved him but it still scared her to say so.

"You're all I want," his voice was low and tight, "always and all the time." Sansa pushed on his shoulder to urge him back against the seat, pressing her lips against his without hesitation. She arched her back to flatten her chest against his, the friction between her legs made her gasp against his mouth. This time, Sandor did not let her go but held her tighter and tugged on her hips to repeat the motion. Her hands tugged zipper on the back on her dress and she pulled away to remove her shrug and pushed down the bodice. "You're not making it easy," he choked.
"Good," she collapsed against his chest, her face buried against his neck. Her body shivered despite the heat radiating from his body. "You don't make it easy for me either." Sansa had never been so close and intimate with another person but it was not nearly enough. "Sandor," her lips moved over his heated skin as she spoke. "Kiss me before I start asking again." His hands left her hips and flew to her arms to pull them behind her back.

"Cruel, little bird," he accused. Sandor captured her mouth, holding her back from the skin contact she desperately craved. His kiss was harsh and demanding while his fingers locked around her forearms but Sansa wanted him to lose control. She did not know where her newfound wildness came from but it dominated her mind and body without any resistance. Her knees bumped into the leather seat as her hips rocked against him. As soon as his hands loosened their hold, she threw her arms around his shoulders and repeated the swaying motion.

The friction sent a thousand shooting stars flying across her eyelids and made her dizzy like she was spinning around too fast. His arms wrapped around her, one hand curling around her shoulder and the other braced against her lower back. He pulled and she pushed, moving their bodies together as their lips moved in rhythm. The warmth from his chest and arms enveloped her trembling body as another surge of heat rose within her. Every inch of her skin felt oversensitive, the intense sensation building and growing...

"Fuck, stop," he tucked his hands under her arms and removed her from his lap then pulled his hands away like she burned him. "Fuck," he rubbed a palm over his face and clenched his other hand in a tight fist.

"What's wrong?" Sansa put a hand to her chest to catch her breath, watching Sandor with a mixture of worry and longing. "Did I-"

"I'm too close," he grumbled, still rubbing his face. Sansa wanted to argue, they were not nearly close enough! But then... his meaning sunk in.

"Oh," she sighed a laugh, "me too." Sandor turned his face sharply towards her toward her. "We can stop now." Sansa rested her head back against the seat and closed her eyes, attempting to relax her restless body.

"If you want," his voice was quiet but closer and his fingertips skinned over her knee. Sansa opened her eyes when he did not finish speaking and looked down to his hand tracing small circles on her skin. She probably should have felt embarrassed but her body still hummed with yearning. "Sansa," he growled her name softly and her head fell back against the seat as a whimper escaped her throat. "Let me touch you.

"Hold me," she pleaded, nearly sobbing with relief when he complied right away and pulled her to his side. His fingers hooked behind her knee and drew her leg up over his before slowly sliding up the inside of her thigh. "Please," she wheezed, "please touch me." Sansa hardly recognized the person controlling her body and voice. A tiny prudent voice in her head demanded she snap her legs shut. That voice was lost to the deafening roar of desperation screaming its demand for satisfaction... So her knees shifted further apart.

"Sansa," he rasped her name again and she turned her face against his neck. "My girl," he murmured as the back of his fingers grazed over her damp panties. Her hands fist the front of his open shirt as he teased the sensitive pulsing flesh between her legs. "My beautiful girl," his deep voice vibrated his throat beneath her lips and she whimpered against his skin. "So perfect," he nuzzled his face into her hair as she shook from the force of the rising tide of sensation threatening to tear her apart. "Sing for me... Sansa."
So she did, crying out loud and wanton as indescribable pleasure racked her body and flooded her with ecstacy. Her hands lost all strength and fell from his shirt and her ability to breath returned as the intensity died down. Sandor loosened his tight hold around her waist and slumped back against the seat, as if the experience was just as intense for him. They both sat motionless, tangled together but loose-limbed until he started to pull away.

"Don't go," she weakly resumed her hold on his shirt, "just a bit longer." Sansa sighed in contentment as he nodded and laid his cheek against the top of her head. She started to drift off to sleep against his shoulder when his movement jostled her awake. Sandor shushed her sleepy protest and opened the door to step outside the car for a few moments before returning. "I'm sorry," she yawned as he resumed holding her.

"What for," he gently tugged at the band holding her hair up and Sansa knew her hair must be completely mussed. "That was the best thing that ever happened to me."

"You gave me the most wonderful feeling," she gushed, still basking in the afterglow. "Then I forgot about you."

"Told you I'd do the hard work," he chuckled as he ran his fingers through her loosened hair. "So, I did alright? It was easier than I thought."

"It was... amazing," she sighed, "I never imagined it would be like that."

"That wasn't..." Sandor held onto her shoulder to pull her back and gave her a disbelieving look. "Sansa, was that - your first orgasm?" His incredulity made her feel self-conscious and Sansa's eyes avoided his to look out the window.

"Yes," she whispered. Sandor made a soft 'ha' sound and pulled her back against his warm chest.

"My poor, sweet little bird," he chuckled against her hair, "no wonder you're so eager." Sandor's hand ran along her back in a soothing motion.

"I tried it before but I stopped when it got too intense." Sansa never thought it was unusual not to touch herself since her parents never discussed it with her. Outside of her siblings there were few people her own age she was close to in Winterfell so the topic never came up. "I guess it is silly that it kind of scared me." She tilted her head back to look up at Sandor. "I'm not scared when I'm with you."

"I should get you home," he loosed his hold and swept her hair forward as Sansa zipped her dress. "It won't be good if you father wises up."

"Daddy is very wise," she insisted, "he's just a bit of a stickler for the rules." Sansa sighed as she did her best to fix her mussed appearance. "I feel guilty about not telling him I'm seeing someone."

"How much longer until your birthday?" Sandor quickly rephrased the question when she turned a pout on him. "I know it's December seventh," he rolled his eyes, "I just don't remember what today is."

"Three weeks and two days before I'm officially sweet and sixteen!" She informed him with a grin, happy he remembered her birthday. "I can't wait! Dates, driver's license, and soon... The Winter Formal!" Sansa flung her arms around Sandor's neck and nuzzled her face against his. "It feels almost wrong to be so happy."

"Thanks," he squeezed her back, "for letting me make you happy." Sandor released her, holding onto her upper arms and regarding her with an unreadable expression.
"We can have another date this weekend," she gazed up at him with wide-eyed hope.

"We can go on a date every fucking day if it's gonna end like this." Sandor laughed as he started buttoning his shirt. "I'll quit basketball and school and get a real job to pay for all the dates."

"That's not even funny, Sandor." Sansa slapped his giant clumsy hands out of the way to fix his shirt herself. "You are too glorious on the court to quit basketball."

"But school," he chucked, "you think I should just give up now, huh?"

"No!" Sansa tapped his arm and scowled at him. "I think you should study harder so you can get into a good school."

"I can get into any school I want," he scoffed dismissively, "if they have a basketball team."

"I'll miss you terribly," she confessed quietly, hating to even think about what would happen once he left for college. Sansa already knew she would be willing to keep up their relationship long-distance but feared he did not.

"I'm not going anywhere yet," he turned her face up for one more kiss before opening the door and offering a hand to help her out. Sansa stepped out of the Skylark and held onto his hand, drawing his eyes down to her.

"Wherever you go," she placed her hand over his heart, "I'll always be with you." Sandor did not answer, only lifted her hand to his lips, and kissed it before leading her to the passenger side. When he opened the door for her, again it cemented in her mind that though he did not express it in words... She felt loved.

Chapter End Notes

I wish I had a million more years to make this chapter perfect but that's how I get fizzed out. It makes me insanely happy to write every day, to be honest I've never been so... confident? Is this what confidence feels like? Whoa. So, if you'll keep putting up with my sub-par editing, I'll keep trying my best to publish every day. Okay? <3333

So, are we more interested to see how Arya is dealing with Gendry's love confession or Dany's post-freakout apology? There's a revelation about Gendry's relationship with his mom I've been holding onto but I feel so bad for Drogo and Dany... But Arya's feels are wicked important!
He watched the burrito spin around and around inside the microwave. It taunted him with its bean and cheese goodness that he couldn't wait for. Mom ran past in a blur of blond hair but he paid no attention, his full focus on that humming beautiful machine making his dinner. In two minutes, seventeen seconds he was going to sink his teeth into that tortilla package of deliciousness. His mouth watered in anticipation as he was sorta getting dizzy from watching or maybe just from hunger.

"I forgot to tell you," mom threw over shoulder as she passed by again. "I have to go out of town and we won't make it to the fair this year." She stopped at the fridge to pull out her lunch. "I'm really sorry, and I'll explain it all later."

"What?!" Gendry turned away from the microwave to stare dumbfounded as she dashed back towards her bedroom. "What you're saying doesn't even make sense," he called after her. "You can't just say something like that and then rush off!"

"I'm sorry honey I have to go," she was too busy running around like a madwoman for the night shift at her second job to argue with him. Mom stopped rushing around to face him while pulling her hair back into a bun. "I'm doing a favor for friend and I had to make miracles happen just to get the time off from both jobs." Her face was a mask of apology as she explained. "I'll only be gone for a week, I promise."

"A week?!" Gendry could not believe it, this news just kept getting better and better. "It's tradition," he protested. "It's my 18th birthday!" The microwave beeped, usually his favorite sound but at that moment it was just annoying. "I'll only turn into an adult once in my life: and you're gonna miss it?!"

He opened the microwave door to retrieve his burrito and walked over to the table to try and enjoy his meal. The first bite was too hot, burning his tongue and not nearly as satisfying as he hoped it would be.

"I know, and I promise I will make it up to you." Mom hurried to the front door, back and forth across the kitchen until Gendry grabbed her by the wrist. He picked up the keys from the table to hold them up with a jingle and she snatched them without a thank-you. "The woman I am filling in for is a good person," she stuffed the keys in her pocket, "she needs time to figure things out. What do I always say?"

"There's an eighth hell," he recited, "reserved for women who don't help other women." The second bite of the burrito was better, but it did nothing to improve his worsening mood.

"That's right," she turned to look at him, stopping her frantic rush. "When I found out I was pregnant with you, most people told me you would be too big a burden." Mom sat down at the table and took his hand. "Then you turned out to be my hero."

"Mom, you don't have to keep bringing that up." Gendry shrugged and took another bite out of him burrito, talking with his mouth full. "I did what any son would do."
"I would have died if not for your marrow," she insisted for the millionth time, "that's a fact." Mom's face scrunched up into a familiar guilty expression. "You were even held back that year in school and you never complained." Gendry opened his mouth to argue that it was no sacrifice to be able to help save his mother. "You were never a burden..." Her eyes welled up with tears that she quickly wiped away. "Now my baby is grown and I have to help others like me."

"I know," he bowed his head, regretting whining like a little kid when his mother was being selfless. "I'll miss you," he stood up and held out his arms, "love you, mom." She smiled and rose to wrap her arms around him squeezing hard.

"I love you, baby," she held onto him. "You're still my baby, no matter how big you get." Mom suddenly released him. "Darn it," she frowned at her watch, "I'll be late!" She walked backward to the door, blowing kisses at him. "Bye, honey-baby-sweetie-pie! I'll make up to you, promise!"

"Bye," he waved, laughing at her as she grabbed her purse and dashed out the door. Gendry fell back into his seat, staring at his half-eaten burrito because he hated always eating alone. His phone buzzed in his pocket and he fished it out with a smile, knowing who it must be.

'I need to see you tonight,' she sure liked to get straight to the point. Arya had been giving him the cold shoulder since they were interrupted by Jon. Gendry figured she'd come around again once she cooled off: or at least that's what he prayed for fervently every night. He must've started a hundred different apology texts but in the end he just let her be, not wanting to seem too desperate."

'That seems risky,' he doubted Mr. Stark had any patience left for Arya to wear out. 'Still grounded right?' Gendry knew arguing with her was pointless and potentially just going to piss her off again. But, if they got caught again, she wouldn't be able to talk her way out of it or take the blame all on herself again.

'Totally,' she replied instantly. 'But, I could sneak out if you come pick me up!' Gendry set the phone down and scarfed the rest of the burrito to give himself time to think. 'I promise it will be worth it,' she added: Arya's final text didn't leave much room for misinterpretation. He gulped the chunk of burrito, nearly choking.

"You're gonna get in more trouble," he countered, wishing just this once she would listen to him. Arya did not reply to his text so he stood up to get a glass of water, still filling the cup from the tap when his phone buzzed. In his haste back to the table, he spilled some water on the floor and nearly slipped on it.

'Don't make me beg,' she finally responded. 'Please, Gendry, just this once.' He could just picture her face, pouting at the phone with her little nose all scrunched. 'I'm begging and it hurts my pride,'

'What time?' He knew arguing only delayed the inevitable, he was going to give in to her eventually. At least, he just had to make an effort to appear as if he had some self-control. They won't get caught, he told himself. They'll only do this once, he assured himself. They were probably going to do this a lot and eventually get caught, he admitted to himself.

ARYA

She found her sister on her bed, hunched over her pink laptop looking at prom dresses. Arya quickly shut the door and mentally rehearsed what she planned to say.

"Sansa," Arya wasted no time and immediately got on her knees and assumed a begging position. "I need your help."
"Arya," Sansa sighed as she shut the laptop. "I can't get caught up in your schemes right now."

"I know," Arya set her clasped hands on the edge of the bed. "I don't deserve your help - I 'need' it."

"I can't-"

"Gendry said he loves me," she cut her sister off - whispering in case dad might pass in the hallway. "That I'm his 'life' and a bunch of other ridiculous romantic things."

"Wow," Sansa patted the bed beside her. "What did you say?"

"He said it to Jon and I overheard." Arya braced against the bed to rise from her kneeling position and plopped down beside her sister. "I haven't spoken to him since and I'm going crazy," she whimpered. "Please, honored elder sister, I will owe you so big." Arya linked her fingers once more and put her hands under her chin to give her sister another pleading look. "Anything!"

"You are really good at getting what you want." Sansa finally relented, a real softy for love confessions.

"Thank you," Arya reached out to grab her sister's hand. "Thank you so much - I love you." Sansa rolled her eyes and pulled her hand away. "I owe you B-I-G - big."

"I intend to collect," she warned.

"Okay, if I'm not back before dad wakes up," Arya hoped off the bed to pace as she explained her plan. "Tell him I went out early for coffee and doughnuts... Oh right, Sansa?" Her sister scoffed a laugh as she reached over to her bedside table to pick up her purse and rummage through it.

"Here's twenty," Sansa held out the bill, "and I want the change."

"I love you more than shrimp friend rice," Arya accepted the money gratefully and crammed it in her pocket.

"Now you're just flat-out lying." Sansa stood up from the bed as Arya started to leave to get ready to meet Gendry. "Arya, wait... I won't waste any breath telling you what to do." Her sister's face wore a concerned expression that reminded Arya of their mother. "Be careful and if you get caught," she held up one finger and wagged it in the air, "I am not accepting any responsibilities."

"Understood," Arya saluted before turning around and walking out of the bedroom to take a shower. Inside the bathroom, she turned the water on all the way hot and placed the twenty on the counter top to keep it safe. Her clothes were discarded on the floor and she stepped inside to let the near-scalding water pour over her. She adjusted the temperature and smoothed her hair back to let the water rush over her face. Inside her mind, thoughts were flying faster than she could keep up with. One thought remained constant - she would have Gendry this night.

She was tired of waiting, sick and tired of everyone trying to tell her what she should want or should do. Gendry loved her - apparently a fuck-load - and she loved him too. They already said they belonged to each other, having sex was just the logical next step. Also, gods damn - his body was rockin' hot! Arya washed every inch of herself thoroughly twice. When she finished showering, she opened the shower curtain to confront her foggy reflection. Her eyes tried to see why a devastatingly sexy guy like him would ever want a scrawny weirdo like her...

The reason didn't matter! He wasn't a liar and the things he said were too dramatic to not be real, Gendry truly loved her - that was enough. She wrapped a towel around herself and crept back into the bedroom so as not to wake her sleeping sister. Arya grabbed whatever clean clothes were sitting
on top of her basket of laundry that would never get folded. Once dressed, she made up her bed to look like someone slept there and snuck to her father's bedroom door to listen for his snores. Her phone buzzed in her pocket and she pulled it out with a shaky hand.

'Here,' was all he said and she inhaled and exhaled slowly before making sure she had the twenty and her phone. She apologized to her father inside her head and made her great escape out of the apartment. Her heart beat wildly as she rode the elevator and walked out of the apartment entrance to see Gendry's Lincoln sitting out front. Arya jogged up to the car and wrenched the door open to slide inside.

"Hey," he greeted her with his signature lop-sided smile and Arya forced herself to act cool.

"Yo," she kicked her feet up on the dash. "So, where are we going?"

"The forge," he put the car into drive and pulled out of the parking lot. "If that's fine with you?"

"If this was a horror movie," she raised an eyebrow at him, "you realize we would die first, right?"

"Shit," he laughed, "didn't think about that."

"That's why you need me," she shrugged, "good thing I know the twist ending."

"What's that?" Gendry directed the car towards the Kings Forest National Park and Arya struggled to hide the sweat collecting on her brow.

"I was the killer all along," she kept her tone light, "and nobody suspected a thing because I'm so cute."

"So," he chuckled, "do I get to live?"

"Depends," she shrugged, "you'll have to work hard to convince me to spare you."

"A blacksmith is no stranger to hard work, milady." Gendry's voice got all low and husky - like it did when he wanted her - and it made her squirm in her seat. To distract herself, she looked around the car as he drove and noticed his sleeping bag rolled up in the backseat with a grocery bag next to it. Arya reached for the plastic bag, moving faster when Gendry started stuttering a protest. She laughed her ass off when she saw what was inside - a giant box of condoms. The box had '100 count' written on the side.

"You were optimistic," she chuckled at his blushing face.

"It's more cost-effective to buy in bulk," he protested her teasing, "that's just economics." Gendry pulled the Lincoln into the parking lot of the park and pulled into his usual spot. "But yeah," he ran a hand through his hair, "I was kinda hoping we'd get to use the whole box."

"Let's get to it then," she carried the bag as she hauled open the car door to get out and head into the dark woods.

"A-are you sure?" Gendry scrambled out of the car and jogged to catch up to her. "Tonight?" She pulled her phone out to light the trail as they walked to the forge.

"You don't want to?" Arya held up the box, raising an eyebrow at him. "I'm getting mixed messages here."

"No, I do!" Gendry waved his hands, shook his head first in denial, and then nodded an affirmative.
"Trust me, I do. I just... don't want to pressure you-" Arya's cackle of laughter cut off his words.

"As if you could," she scoffed, acting a lot cooler than she actually was. Doubts crept into her mind as they approached the clearing. "Do you feel pressured?"

"Nope," he shook his head again. They walked in silence the rest of the way, the air between them getting tense. Arya thought about cracking some jokes but worried her voice might sound as trembly as her legs felt. Gendry laid out the sleeping bag and she tossed the giant box of condoms on the ground next to it. She stared at the place where she would shortly lose her virginity with a sense of disbelief it was actually going to happen.

"Let's do this," she whipped her shirt over her head and stepped towards the sleeping bag. Gendry caught her arm and Arya turned to face his serious expression.

"I think the correct phrase is: 'I want you'." His lips pulled into a tense smile and it actually put her at ease to see he was clearly nervous too.

"I love you, Gendry." There - she finally said it. Gendry's jaw came unhinged as his bright blue eyes opened up wide before he blinked at her a few times.

"I love you, too," he whispered. "You mean it?" Gendry took ahold of her shoulders, brow scrunching up with worry. "Say it again."

"Gladly," she laughed at his dramatic behavior. "I love you - now, take your pants off." Arya's hands attacked the button on his jeans, tugging at it with impatience.

"Always the romantic," he halted her attempt to undress him by pulling her close against his chest and kissing the top of her head.

"That's why you love me..." Arya mumbled into his chest, a bit embarrassed but extremely happy to hear him confess his love to her personally.

"And why do you love me?" Gendry pulled her back to give her another serious and disbelieving look.

" Mostly for your body," she teased, earning a scowl from him. "Then your eyes," she answered more seriously and his expression soften ed. "You're pretty cool, I guess." Arya jerked her head towards the forge with a grin. "I think a medieval forge would soak any girl's panties." Gendry laughed, shaking his head.

"Nah, you're one of a kind, Arya." Gendry gazed down at her with his overwhelming adoring look and she couldn't take it so she pushed him hard. He fell onto the sleeping bag with a grunt and she came down on top of him to straddle his lap.

"You talk too much," she murmured before grabbing both sides of his face and pressing her lips to his. Arya tugged his shirt, breaking their kiss for only an instant as she removed the fabric in her way. Gendry was useless, not making any moves to help remove her clothes or his, so she pushed away from him to strip to her underwear. She turned back to see him watching her with a half-smile and dazed glassy eyes so she smacked his chest with a scowl. "Pants - off - now!"

"Gods," he laughed as he moved to obey, "I'm just the luckiest fellow who ever lived." Arya crawled down to remove his boots and then helped tug off his pants. Underwear seemed the most difficult barrier to cross, even though they'd both been basically naked in the pool. It was one thing to get swept away and almost have sex - planning to have sex was terrifying... "Arry," he pulled her out of her thoughts, "you okay?" She couldn't reply because she didn't even know the answer to that
question so she kissed him instead.

He laid her back on the sleeping bag and covered her body with his, moving down to kiss her neck and collarbone. Arya wanted to focus on the sweet tenderness of his light kisses. But the rough rasping of his calloused fingers on her thigh stole all of her attention. A light push on his shoulders was all it took for Gendry to jerk backwards as if he was hooked around the neck like in a classic cartoon. She snorted a laugh at his overreaction as she crossed her arms to pull her bra over her head and then wiggled out of her panties.

"Naked!" Arya felt the need to announce it, acting more of a ham whenever she felt nervous. "Now you," she commanded and Gendry just laughed at her, rolling his eyes as he complied. She didn't get a good look at his - it - that day in the pool and cursed the lack of light to see better. He did not give her much of a chance to look anyway before reaching out to dig around in the condom box.

"It's not easy," he grumbled, "to do this in the dark."

"Where are my pants," she propped up on her elbows to look around, "my phone is in there..."

"Got it," he assured her and Arya shrugged before laying back, pulling at her fingers as she waited. Gendry moved over her again, the dark obscuring his expression until he was only a breath's distance away. He looked tense, every muscle in his face was pulled taunt as she slid her knees up around his sides. "Ready?" His question was a little ridiculous - considering he was naked, sheathed in latex, and poised between her legs. She reached between their bodies to curl her fingers around his hardness and positioned it at her entrance.

"All systems are go," she hated how wobbly her voice suddenly was. Gendry sank down, pressing the very tip against her before looking down for encouragement. "I'm not going to break," she rolled her eyes and tugged on his hip. Then he really started to press himself inside her and it felt - fucking HORRIBLE! Oh fucking gods, what is that terrible dreadful excruciating torture?!!! "Ow," she tried to hold it back but it hurt a lot more - way extremely more - than she thought it would. "Ow-ow-ow, stop!"

"Sorry," his voice was strained and breathless, "it hurts?" Arya swallowed hard, afraid if she opened her mouth then she might be sick. Gendry was perfectly still - not even breathing - for way too long to be healthy.

"Of course it hurts - that's what 'ow' means!" Arya clung to his shoulders to keep her face buried against his neck so he wouldn't see the tears welling in her eyes. "Just be still and quiet," she commanded, focusing on breathing in and out to give the pain some time to dull. "Okay," she whispered "a little more - stop!" It was like torture to want something so badly and then have it feel so awful! "Ugh," she groaned, "this is so annoying."

"We can stop-" Gendry started to pull away but she locked her legs around his and held him tighter.

"No way - we are doing this tonight even if it kills me." Arya whimpered as he relaxed on top of her and she closed her eyes to think of relaxing thoughts like snow slowly falling in a clearing. "It's hurting less," she told him, "keep going." The piercing unpleasantness gave way to a sudden rush of pressure. She felt him slip further in, less painful than before but the odd sensation was surprising. "Ah!"

"That's it," he ground out, "I'm in." Gendry trembled all over, slowly lowering himself to brace on his forearms.

"Oh my god." Arya could hardly believe it - nothing at all had changed - except for everything.
"Virginity vanquished," she joked and his laughter sent skittering jolts of sensation everywhere. "Don't laugh - just be still."

"It still hurts?" He started holding his breath again and she smiled against his neck.

"It's not that bad," she assured him as she experimentally shifted her hips, causing Gendry to suck in a breath. "Feels weird though," she moved again and his body shook even harder but stayed still. "I think it's okay to move now." He thrust into her as soon as the words left her mouth and it was... "Oh gods!"

"What?!" Gendry froze again.

"It feels... good." Arya grinned - finally things were going her way - and bucked against him again. Oh gods in all the seven heaves... Yes! The pain dulled to a tolerable level and she felt every other sensation heighten in its absence. Gendry moved in rhythm with her as she lifted up to meet him. The synchronized effort sent waves of impossible pleasure washing over her.

"I love you," he whispered it over and over with each push and pull. "Arya," Gendry nearly sobbed her name as he halted his movements, trembling from head to toe.

"Don't stop," she pleaded, writhing against him.

"I can't..." He rose up to brace himself on his hands while his head lolled forward.

"Look at me," she demanded, he immediately obeyed. "I love you." Arya lifted her knees higher to a better position and he hissed and bit his lip. "Don't look away from me," she held onto his hips and moved against him. He let go of his restraint, pulsing within her, making her tortuously close to her own climax. Gendry panted as he slumped down on top of her before he started to pull away.

"Stay," she tightened her limbs around him.

"As you command, milady." Gendry's voice wheezed weakly as he caught his breath. For him, it was over - for Arya it had only just begun.

"Gendry..."

"Hmm?"

"Can we do it again?" In answer, he thrust once inside her, making her gasp.

"Seems like it," he sounded as happy about it as she felt. "Does it still hurt?"

"Not at all," she rocked her hips up to him and he countered with a pushing deeper inside her. Their motions found no rhythm, moving together faster and more erratically than before. Arya dug her fingers into the muscles of his back and shoulders, flexing with every thrust. It grew harder to breathe as he moved one hand to her breast. His fingertips brushed over the peak, causing her to shudder and writhe beneath him. An inferno of intense pleasure ripped through her body and she screamed from the intensity until it subsided.

"Don't ask for a third time," he rolled over onto his back, "I don't have it in me." Gendry panted, making little wheezing sounds with each breath.

"No, I'm good." Arya patted his chest before she curled into his side for warmth. "Gendry," she groaned, "we can't fall asleep - I have to go home." Gendry sat up and started to put on his clothes so she crawled away to do the same. "I want to stay longer but if my dad catches me... Personally, I'd prefer a psycho killer out there watching us lose our virginities." When he didn't laugh she tugged on
her pants and turned around to see him staring at her.

"It's all going to work out," he assured her with resolute determination. "I promise."

"You really love me, don't you?" Arya tugged her shirt on before returning to his side. "I love you too, I mean it." She pulled his face close to see him more clearly in the dark. "I don't care who believes it, as long as you do."

"I believe you," he pulled her hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss to it. And just like that, to add to the growing list of impossible things happening that night - she fell more in love with him.

Chapter End Notes

Ugh, I messed up. I ended up writing a Dany chapter and then realizing I didn't like the timeline so I ended up burning the midnight oil to pound this out. Upside, tomorrow I can waste all my time on making collages. Like a BOSS!
Sorry's and Secrets

Chapter Notes

WARNING: discussion about sexual assault in last POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sorry's and Secrets

DANY

She waited nervously outside the empty room, greeting the group members with a forced smile as they entered. Drogo stopped when he saw her, keeping his eyes locked on hers as he approached at a steady controlled pace. Everything about him was calm, like a predator considering the worth of its prey. Her nervousness subsided, replaced with the rising tug of yearning he always inspired. He did not greet her as he stood before her, just stared and waited.

"Can we talk?" Dany held her breath as he maintained his silence for a few more moments and then nodded his head once in affirmative. Conscious of their lack of privacy, she glanced up and down the hall, seeing Rick and Hot Pie strolling towards them with smiles. She open the door for them, waiting for them to step inside before she shut the door and rushed into an apology. "The other day, it was wrong of me to run away. I'm really sorry!" Her eyes refused to meet his no matter how much she tried to force them up. "It was just... all very sudden. When you said... What you said, did you mean it?"

"I only say things I mean," he replied stoically. Dany's stomach dropped, unsure if she would be less disappointed if he claimed he didn't mean it.

"I'm honored, really," she whispered, "it just surprised me." Dany realized she had never been in a situation when the other person said 'I love you' first. That thought made her feel worse because she hated empathizing with her exes. "I really like you, Khal." Then she did look up at him, attempting to see some emotion lingering in his unreadable expression.

"Like..." Drogo repeated the one word, his eyes shifting to the door as if he wanted to walk past her. She shifted from one foot to the other, clenching her fists to keep herself from trying to stop him if he suddenly left. Everyone leaves, there's no point in trying to force them to stay if they didn't want to.

"I think you're handsome and good and fun..." Dany's traitorous hand reached out to touch him but stopped halfway and she let it drop to her side. "Really, I do. After the way I treated you," she swallowed the lump in her throat, "I would understand if you didn't want to see me anymore. But I hope you can forgive me and stay my friend."

"Friend..." If he kept repeating what she said then Dany was just going to fall on the ground and throw proper tantrum like a toddler. She could not tell what he was thinking at all and he refused to say anything! It was driving her mad!

"Or more," she offered hopefully. "If you want.' Dany's heart thundered in her chest as she told herself: whatever he answered wouldn't make her fall apart. She wasn't already attached to him: only liked him and thought him handsome... no more and no less.
"More..." His cryptic one word replies were worse than any accusations of leading him on could be. Drogo could demonstrate a little more emotion if he actually 'loved' her. Would showing a little anger or sadness kill him?! Or was he intentionally torturing her so she would abandon her attempt to make up?

"Is that an answer or a question?" Dany expected her voice to sound irritated but it just sounded defeated. "You are killing me! I know," she hung her head, "I deserve it... I hurt your feelings and I'm a terrible person." She turned her eyes up at his to give him a pleading look. "At least, Drogo, let's stay friends."

"No." That one word hurt more than she thought it could. But it didn't surprise her, of course he didn't want to have anything to do with her anymore... "Let's be 'more'."

"Really?!" Dany stared at him in shock as he nodded again. "Oh, you won't regret it," she promised, "I'm an excellent girlfriend! Or I think so, at least. So," she put her hand on his arm, "that means you are not upset with me?"

"No," he clenched his jaw, "I said too much."

"Not at all!" Dany argued immediately, unwilling to let the injured party take responsibility. "I reacted badly. You said a nice thing, I just... Those words scare me." She sighed a sad laugh and patted her forehead. "I think we just went a bit out of order. We forgot to go on a date! Usually that comes first, then confessions of love, then amazing sex."

"Amazing?" Just the very corner of his lip curled up, breaking his usual stoic expression. Dany fought the urge to do a victory dance at that miniscule show of emotion.

"You didn't think so?" She let about an exaggerated sigh and put her hand over her heart. "I'll just have to make more of an effort next time. I promise," she teased, "I can do better." The other side of his mouth move just a fraction of the centimeter. That she got any reaction at all felt like a reason to celebrate. "But first, we should go on a date, like a normal couple."

"Where?" Drogo's one-word question threw her off, not having considered their conversation going this well. If only Missa would answer her calls so they could make up as well!

"You pick the first one." Dany had no idea what he like to do for fun besides play DnD. Also, it was a bad habit of hers to take over dates and plan everything: which is fun at first but then quickly goes unappreciated. The tiny smile on his lips disappeared, causing her nervousness to return in full force. "Khal? I really like you," she tried to reassure him. "I'll be so good to you if you let me."

"Dany..." The way Drogo said her name should be illegal, or at least extremely fattening. "You still want to speak Dothraki?"

"Why," she teased, "you think I should give up?" When he did not answer, Dany tapped him on the shoulder in mock offense. "I'm not that bad! Of course," she stepped closer to him, "I still want to learn. Will you still teach me?"

"Yes," he agreed. "And I will take you on a date."

"Thank you, Khal." Dany did not wait for an invitation and wrapped her arms around him. "I promise, everything will be great from here on out." His hand trailed through her loose hair as he returned her embrace. A bit of a rocky start, her own fault, but she would not mess up again. There was no reason to fear his feelings for her: love was a wonderful thing to receive... Until it goes away.

YGRITTE
She stormed into the room, making everyone jump in their seats but she ignored them all - intent on kicking Sam's ass! Ygritte walked right up to him and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt to yank him out of his seat.

"You tubby fuck!" She shook the fucking idiot as hard as she could, his head bobbing back-and-forth like... well like a bobble head.

"Ygritte!" Jon stood up and tried to protect his friend but she just shoved him out of her way.

"Don't interfere Jon," she warned, "he has it coming!" This fat rich boy thought he could just fuck her cousin and not care at all about the consequences!

"Gritt!" Gill's voice came from behind her and froze Ygritte mid-shake. "Stop, please!" For her cousin sake alone, she released Sam and stepped back from him.

"Gilly?" Sam stared at Gill with wide-eyed confusion and Ygritte stepped in between them to glare of the stupid asshole.

"My cousin?!" Ygritte was practically frothing at the mouth stared his dopey face. "My sixteen-year-old cousin!" He needed an ass whipping and she intended to provide it once he wasn't surrounded by all these people trying to protect him. "I SHOULD KILL YOU!" She was going to put his face in the dirt!

"Ygritte, I came to you for help!" Gill was whispering and taking shuddering breaths between her words. Her cousin pulled on Ygritte's arm trying to move her out of the room. "You're doing the opposite! I don't know what to do..." Then she just started sobbing in earnest and turned around to flee out of the room.

"Gill!" Ygritte called after her before turning around to point a finger at Sam. "I'm not finished with you." She took off down the hall after her cousin, wishing her mind could work half as fast as her body. "Gill, don't run - it's dangerous!"

**JON**

"What...?" Sam fell back in the seat, shaking his head and staring at the door with the dazed expression.

"Sam..." Jon felt sick, knowing his own worst nightmare was coming true for his best friend. "You should go after her."

"But..." Sam just gazed at the doorway. "Why...? Oh, no," he whispered in horror. "Nonononono..."

"Saying that won't fix anything," Gendry snapped. Sam blinked and turn around in his seat to start shuffling his stuff together. "Forget your shit, man. Go!" Jon stepped forward and held out a hand to help his shocked friend rise from his seat.

"I'll handle Ygritte," he assured Sam as he helped him up. They raced towards the nearest exit, hoping that that's where the girls headed. His friend moved faster than Jon had ever seen. Gilly sat on the ground just outside the door and Ygritte was trying to comfort her with the stricken expression.

"Gilly," Sam called softly. Ygritte was the one who looked up, rising to her feet and clenching her fists as she stared at Sam. Jon approach her with his hands held up and tilted his head into her focus.

"I can guess what's going on," he jerked his head towards the pitiful couple, "this is between them." She relented with the nod and stalked off, brushing past him and she walked around the side of the
building. Jon caught up to her just as she stumbled against the wall and called her and she say to the ground.

"You know nothing..." Ygritte was breathing hard and unblinking as she stared off past him. "Oh, fuck! How could this happen? How could I not...?"

"Ygritte," he pulled on her shoulders to gain her attention. "You can't feel responsible for something you have no control over."

"You don't understand - Gill depends on me." Her voice was tight and her eyes glassy but she refused to cry. "I'm supposed to protect her."

"I understand that, I have younger cousins too." Jon thought of Bran, how he hadn't been to visit him since the accident. A fresh wave of guilt washed over him. "If anything ever happened to any of them, I would be devastated."

"I can't..." She made a pitiful high pitched sound and gripped her legs so hard that her knuckles turned white. "Oh gods! I just have to fucking kill something!"

"Why don't you try letting those tears fall?" Jon rubbed his hands over her shoulders, brushing her wild hair back. "I enjoy a good cry when the occasion calls for it."

"You're so different from other boys, Jon." Ygritte turned her sorrowful eyes up at him, shining with unshed tears. "Why don't you ever...? Never mind." Then she moved her hands to his head and pulled his lips down against hers. Tears fell from her eyes as she moved her mouth over his, kissing him with raw desperation. For a moment, he couldn't believe he was actually kissing her, or that it was better than anything he ever dreamed.

Her face was wet with tears but her lips were soft and warm against his as her hands wrapped around his shoulders. She pulled herself closer and he lightly held onto her waist, almost afraid to touch her. Ygritte broke away as quickly as she pulled him in and nearly knocked him over in her haste to get up. Jon pushed off the ground and stood up as she turned away from him.

"Ygritte..." He didn't know what to say, he imagined their first kiss more times than he could count, this scenario had never once entered his mind.

"I gotta go," she murmured, taking a few halted steps away from him before she broke into a run.

"Wait," he called after her, "Ygritte!" Jon felt paralyzed by indecision, if he chased after her he didn't know if it would actually make her feel better. So he just stood there and watched her get smaller and smaller until she rounded a corner and disappeared.

SAM

He finally got her up off of the cold cement and helped her to take a seat on a nearby bench. Then he waited for a good long while she still cried and he might've shed a few tears too. So far, no one had specifically said anything yet, it was pretty clear what was wrong. There are only so many things that can go wrong in a teenager's life. This was the wrongest one of them all. Parenthood. That night, when she called him... Sam never dreamed they would end up making love but now his lack of preparation seemed horribly stupid.

"Gilly," Sam waited until she was not crying before he had to ask. "What happened?" Gilly was quiet for a time and he couldn't press her, even if he needed to hear it said out loud so he could start to cope.
"I'm having a baby," she stared at her hands. "I went to the clinic and found out for sure yesterday."

"Oh, Gilly." Sam knew what she was going to say but it was still hard to hear. "I'm sorry-"

"Don't be." Gilly leaned forward and wrapped her arms around herself, squeezing her eyes shut. "I don't know... if it's your baby."

"Oh." If he thought the news couldn't get any worse, clearly it could. It would've been better if she took a knife and stabbed him straight in the heart.

"I only ever had sex with you, Sam." Gilly's voice was so quiet he could barely hear her. "I swear."

"Then..." He was confused, that was putting it mildly. "How could you not know?"

"Before we were together..." Gilly looked up but not at him, staring off into the distance with a pained expression. "Something bad happened to me." Her whole body shuddered as she clenched her fingers around her arms. "I don't want to talk about it." The memory of their night together came flooding back, her sudden call and request to meet. That night, he thought she seemed desperate...

"Oh my gods." Sam's hands gripped the bench and felt like he might be sick and pass out. She meant... somebody hurt her. How could that happen to such a sweet girl? He looked back at Gilly, wishing this was all a nightmare so we can wake up and call to hear her laughing again. How could he have not known she was hurting on the inside just because she smiled? Part of him wanted to demand to know exactly what happened and then drive her to the police station. But those weren't his choices to make so he held it in.

"For a long time, I thought about asking you out and having my first time with you..." Her eyes just gazed out into the distance as she whispered softly. "You know, after dating proper for a few months. But I was too scared 'cause you're so much smarter than me and..." Gilly shivered and hugged her arms tighter around herself. "After what happened... I thought if we were together, it would erase what happened. I know it was selfish, but I just couldn't face it."

"No-"

"I just needed," she kept going, not even hearing him. "To feel wanted in a normal way, by someone I loved and trusted. Then I found out about the baby and... I told Ygritte everything but she just wanted to blame you." Gilly's face screwed up and more tears spilled over her cheeks. "She says I should end the pregnancy right away but I just already feel like... I love this baby and I think of it as yours. I know that is stupid-"

"It's not," Sam lifted his shirt to wipe his eyes before he moved closer and placed his hand over hers. "I would never call you stupid, Gilly. You're the bravest person I've ever known," his voice broke as a fresh wave of tears streamed down his face as well. "I don't know how you've survived something so horrible."

"People are always surprised by how much they can take..." Gilly unwrapped her arms and braced her hands against the bench. She closed her eyes as she inhaled and exhaled slowly before turning to face him. "If they have something to look forward to."

"I love you, Gilly." Sam gently placed his hand over hers. "No matter what anyone says, it's my baby."

"Little Sam," she put her other hand over her stomach and smiled for the first time.

"Perfect!" He smiled through his sadness and fear. "Even good for a girl's name."
"I love you, Sam." Another tear rolled down her pale cheek as she gazed at him. "You're the only one for me."

"Then let's get married," the words rushed out of his mouth but he meant it. His family would argue but they had no right to interfere. He was eighteen now and the law allowed pregnant teens marry without parental permission. Sam would go to the courtroom right now if she'd have him.

"Okay," she whispered as her smile widened. Sam vowed then and there he would only let Gilly smile and he would protect her and little Sam. All of a sudden, he finally knew exactly what it meant to be a man... Responsibility wasn't a burden but a choice he had to make for himself to be strong for his family.

Chapter End Notes

DRAMA! OMG! Quad-POV! I totally went crazy yesterday and I might have broken my brain. What if I used up all of my creativity?!
"So, Sansa." Jeyne approached her with a shy smile and sat on the same bench. "What's the hound like as a boyfriend?" Sansa looked around the locker room to see more than a few members of the team perked up at the question.

"You really want to know?" Sansa still felt wary of talking about Sandor because it seemed the whole school loved to gossip about him. "He's sweet, kind, thoughtful," she answered honestly. "Everything a boyfriend should be. Also, very tall," she smiled, "that's important."

"We know he's tall, you're holding out on us." Irri sat down next to Jeyne and put her head on the other girl's shoulder with an exaggerated forlorn expression. "Some of us don't have boyfriends so we need to live through those that do."

"He likes to surprise me," Sansa pulled on her shoes as she reminisced. "Our first date we went to play with a bunch of puppies. Are those the kind of details you wanted?" Irri's pout turned into a mischievous smile and shrugged.

"Puppies?" Jeyne covered her mouth with both hands as she giggled. "Really?! I can't imagine the hound playing with puppies." Sansa smiled at the memory of his big hands holding the tiny baby animals with such carefulness.

"Everything cute he does is made that much more adorable because he's so..." A sudden shiver of longing ran through her and Sansa turned away to hide her blush. "Intimidating."

"More please!" Jeyne sat forward eagerly before she blushed and looked away sheepishly. "I've never had a boyfriend."

"Our second date was the best," she recounted. "He took me to get ice cream. I don't remember the name of the shop but it had groves of citrus behind it."

"Oh, I love that place to death," Talisa chimed in, "it's called 'Peel and Scoop'."

"I've never been there," Jeyne commented.

"We should go together sometime," Sansa suggested, "as a team!" Irri nodded enthusiastically as did Jeyne.

"Alright, girls!" Ygritte scowled at them all sitting around gossiping. "Enough chitchat, we've got a game coming up." She stormed out of the locker room and a few of the girls murmured about her acting strangely. Sansa felt a tightening in her gut as she remembered the familiar way Ygritte behaved around Sandor. Was she jealous or hurt by their idle talk? Coach waited for them in the gym and the team gathered around.

"Gilly?" Coach gave Gilly a questioning look as she approached, not dressed out for practice.
"Coach," Gilly smiled brightly, "I have something to say to the team, if I could."

"Go ahead," coach Tarth nodded he permission.

"Girls," Gilly faced the team, "playing with you has been some of the most fun of my life." Her happy expression slipped a bit but her smile stayed firmly in place. "I have to quit now because I'm having a baby." Murmurs rose from the team but Sansa was too stunned to say anything. "Don't worry about me or feel sad for me, because I don't. This Saturday, my boyfriend and I are getting married and I hope you can join us if you are free."

"Gilly," coach's voice sounded thick with emotion, "I'm sorry to see you go."

"I'll come visit you coach," Gilly promised, still smiling her happy toothy grin. "And I'll be cheering from the stands every game, you best believe." Then she moved to sit on the sidelines, watching the team practice. Gilly's announcement that she was getting married and having a baby seemed to distract everyone. Instead of pitying the girl, Sansa felt almost jealous of her for the happy way Gilly smiled when she announced her wedding. None of the girls seemed to be able to put their hearts into playing and coach called it a day earlier than usual.

After practice was over, Sansa approached Gilly and asked for the details to attend the wedding. She promised to come and congratulated the other girl before hurrying to get changed so she could meet Sandor. Her mind was still in a fog when she found him waiting outside the changing room for her. When she saw him, her heart fluttered as usual but it also squeezed a bit, it grew harder every day to keep her feelings bottled up.

"Hey," she attempted a smile but it felt forced.

"What's wrong?" Sandor grabbed her bag and slung it over his shoulder as they walked beside each other to the parking lot.

"A girl on the team quit today," she explained, "because she is pregnant."

"Shit," he made a sympathetic grunt, "rotten luck."

"Actually," Sansa shook her head, "she seemed happy. I don't know whether to pity her or envy her." She looked up to see the most terrified expression on Sandor's face and she quickly rephrased. "I don't want any babies for at least ten years!" He exhaled a relieved sigh and his whole body visibly relaxed. "She is getting married this weekend, I could see she is really in love and that's enviable... I guess that's what I meant."

"You wanna go?" Sandor's question stopped Sansa dead in her tracks and she actually thought for a moment she might pass out.

"You're offering..." She stared at him as he stopped and turned around to face her with a confused expression. "To take me... to a wedding?" That did it, if nothing else confirmed that he loved her, Sandor asking her to a wedding proved everything she needed to know.

"Sure," he shrugged, "never been to a wedding before - might be fun." Sansa could not help it; the situation was too miraculous to hold it in any longer... She did her point victory dance in all its gangly-limbed awkward glory! As soon as she stepped up on her toes to do the twirl, he doubled over in laughter that boomed loud across the parking lot. "You look fucking ridiculous, little bird."

"I don't care," she sang, "and neither do you!" Sansa ran up to his side to hang onto his arm. "I can act as ridiculous as I want and you will still like me!" She felt unburdened, any lingering doubts about his feelings completely washed away. "Sandor! Let's have a Disney movie marathon!" All the
things she was too afraid to ask for suddenly seemed possible! "And then, sit with me while I pick out my dress for the Winter Formal. And then... oh what else? OH! Let's... go shopping for new clothes for you!"

"You've lost it, girl," he chuckled at her as she tugged him towards his usual parking space.

"Nope!" Sansa hugged his arm and rested her head against his shoulder. "I've got you all figured out, Sandor Clegane." He loved her, or else he would never do so many things he disliked just to make her happy. If only he was not too shy to say it out loud! Those words from his lips would make her happy for eternity.

"I'll watch every shitty movie you want," he relented as he opened the Skylark's trunk and tossed her bag inside. "You can buy me a few new shirts..." They got in the car and Sandor eyed her sideways with a sulking sneer. "I'm not fucking helping you pick prom dresses."

"Lover," she leaned close to him and kept her voice low, "that dress..." Sansa peeked up at him; he always swallowed hard when she did that. "You will be the one taking it off." She smiled as his eyes darkened and glanced down at her mouth. "Shouldn't you help me decide?" Her eyes begged him what her mouth was too afraid to ask, 'say you love me, please'.

"Fuck," he growled then crossed the short distance between them and captured her lips for a passionate, yet all too brief kiss. "You win." Close enough, her mind compromised; someday he would say it and she could wait for him until then.

"How did I know?" Sansa could tell by the look in his eyes that she was going to pay later for her teasing... Which suited her just fine.

POD

After school, he used the empty room to finish all of his homework before heading over to the gym to help coach Tarth. Being the coaches' assistant looked good on his college resumes but he never tried to kid himself that's why he did it. He walked down the hall to her office and heard the distinct sound of someone crying. Her office door was slightly cracked open and Pod could see her sitting at her desk with her face in her hands.

"Coach?" Pod pushed the door open without thinking, only wanting to comfort her.

"Oh, Rick." Her beautiful blue eyes turned up to look at him before she wiped her face and starting sorting through some paperwork on her desk. "Sorry you have to see me all a mess... hard day." Coach sighed and forced a bright smile to her pretty face. "But there's work to be done."

"Can you tell me about it?" He set his bag down and sat down on the other side of the desk.

"I suppose it's no secret," she dropped the papers and sat back in her chair with a sad expression. "One of my volleyball team members quit today because she's pregnant." Coach squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed a hand over her forehead. "I wish there was something I could do to help her." She always cared so much about her students, one of the many reasons he loved her.

"Gilly, right?" Pod nodded his head in commiseration. "Her boyfriend is my good friend, he's a stand-up guy." He gave her a reassuring smile. "For what it's worth, I think they will be okay."

"It actually makes me feel better to hear that from you." Coach gave him a genuine smile that made his heart race. "Thank you, Rick."

"No problem, coach." He caught himself staring at her and quickly turned his eyes down to the desk
at the mess of paperwork she had piled up. Coach was a genius when it came to sports, a natural athlete, but her filing skills were dismal to say the least. Even though he knew she would never look at him the way he looked at her, it made him feel good to help her when he could.

"Let's get to work," she clapped her hands together with a grimace on her face as she stared down at the mess on her desk.

"How about a game of one-on-one first?" He jerked his head towards the court, grinning as he made the challenge.

"You feel like being humiliated today, Payne?" She rose to her impressive height, looking like a great woman warrior of days long past. Except wearing gym shorts, a baggy tee shirt, and a shiny whistle. Coach still looked like a goddess, no matter what she wore.

"I'm feeling lucky," he stood up and walked toward the office door, "today is the day I finally beat you." Coach laughed as she followed him out, clapping a hand on his shoulder and setting his heart racing.

"We'll see about that," she teased. Pod would give anything for time to stop right then, it would take an eternity for him to fully appreciate the warm weight of her hand on him. All these years he'd pined after her and she never saw him as anything more than her student. He tried to stop, he really did, but he just couldn't help but be in love with her... beautiful blue-eyed Brienne.

**SANDOR**

The little bird didn't ask for a date so he drove straight to the abandoned supermarket and chased her into the backseat. She crawled eagerly into his lap and kissed him like her life depended on it, smiling the whole time. Who knew offering to take her to a wedding would get her so hot? Part of Sansa's appeal, when he first met her, was how demure and shy she acted but seeing her all fired up was so much sexier. Sandor forgot to ask permission, forgot to take it slow, and just shoved his hands everywhere.

She didn't seem to mind at all, just pulled away to remove her top and continued kissing him, definitely less shy than she had been. Her eyes were bluer than he'd ever seen them, glassy and filled with desire. Sansa wanted him, that much was clear, and it making his ability to keep control of himself fucking difficult - in the best way. He kissed her until her lips were swollen and red, which only made him want to kiss her some more. Some roaring voice in his head demanded he pin her down against the seat and drive into her until she screamed him name.

Sansa hands cupped both sides of his face as his arms slid around her body to pull her closer. It was so fucking good - too good since she was arching against him and writhing around in his lap. His arms tightened around her slim and soft body as she made these little noises against his mouth that drove him crazy. All the blood in his body was rushing to his cock as she pulled on his shirt impatiently like she wanted him as much as he wanted her. That was impossible, nobody ever wanted anything as much as he wanted her.

Her long red hair tumbled around her face and shoulders as her skirt bunched around her knees but she made no move to tug it back down. Sandor broke their kiss to reach behind him and tug off his shirt and she smiled like he just gave her a present. Gods, it fucking did indescribable things to have her looking at him like that. It was easy to keep himself in check when she was gasping and flinching every time he touched her. Her eagerness turned every time they touched into a test of wills. She melted against him, her soft hands sliding up over his chest and shoulders as she made a happy humming sound.
His hand found her chin and turned her face up to take her mouth again, delving into the hot sweetness without hesitation. Her fingers flexed and kneaded his chest while her other hand gripped his arm. Her lips accepted his greedy kiss with equal eagerness. Sansa let her tongue slide along his and he locked his arms tighter around her, trying to remember not to crush her. She didn't seem to mind being crushed, just pushed her body closer to his as her hands explored him.

He was so stiff he could cut a fucking diamond and her weight on him only made him harder. Sandor shifted just to get a little more comfortable but she made this heart-stopping sound... Like a whimper caught in a moan - as she ground down against him. That motion almost make him lose control so he pulled her back by her shoulders to catch his breath. His pulse rushed in his ears as he took in the sight of her panting, pink-cheeked, and looking back at him with heavy-lidded eyes. Sansa had no idea how gorgeous she looked with her hair all mussed.

Sandor trailed a hand down her arm to rest it on her leg, pushing the hem of her skirt a little higher. The soft skin of her thigh was warm and smooth, just touching her made his thoughts sluggish. Maybe that's why he didn't want to drink much anymore - because he was so fucking wasted on his little bird. She had no idea how much he really wanted to fuck her senseless, or else she would run away and never let him touch her again.

"I don't want to let you go yet," she pouted and moved her hands over him again to pull him closer.

"It's not really up to me," he ground out. "You feel too fucking good." He brushed his hand higher along her thigh under her skirt, watching her lips part as she gazed at him. Sansa leaned forward to kiss him softly as his hand slid a little bit further up her smooth leg. Her breath hitched as his fingers grazed over her panties.

"Wait," she panted, pressing a hand to his chest. "I want..." She glanced down and then back up to him. "I want..." Sansa lowered her hand to the waist of his jeans, her face turned redder than her hair. "To make you..." Oh, shit! Sandor grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand away from his painfully hard erection.

"You first," his voice was too rough and he forced himself to speak more gently. "If you still want to help me out after, fine." He uncurled his fingers from around her wrist and wrapped his hand around her waist to shift her position so she laid back on the seat. Sandor sat between her bent legs and braced a hand on the seat to lean over her. She didn't even seem like 'Sansa' when he touched her - not the sweet innocent girl who lived her life in the clouds. This Sansa was a goddess, sexier than any porn he'd seen and more beautiful than any model or actress.

As his fingers stroked her through the panties, Sandor listened to the sounds she made while watching her face. The best sign he was doing his job was her sharp little nails biting into his arm and making him throb with wanting her. He would and should have been intimidated by her incredible transformation. Except Sandor just felt so fucking grateful that she showed this side of herself to him. That he was the only one who ever got to see her or touch her like this. It was the only reason he could turn her down when she lost her pretty little head - over him - and basically begged him to fuck her.

Oh, he was going to give it to her - that's just a fact - but it was going down exactly like she wanted. Fucking flower petals and all, because a no-good piece of shit like him could do that for her at least. He didn't deserve her but now that she was his, he'd do anything to keep her. Part of him felt like the universe owed him one good thing, like all the shit he took up to this point in his life was what 'earned' Sansa. Then the rest of him wanted to kick that part's ass for being so fucking ungrateful.

The universe owed nobody shit, she was the one who came along and turned his life into something worth living. The thin fabric soaked through as she twisted and writhed under his touch. Her panting
moans grew louder and he focused on making her come. That was a sight to behold - like a sunrise framed by a double rainbow, only really fucking sexy. Sansa sang one high note, throwing her head back and twisting it from side-to-side as she gripped his arm. Then she slumped back, breathing hard and weakly thanking him - such a polite little bird

"Please," she whimpered, holding out her arms and he smirked as he pulled her up into his arms. Sansa was warm but still trembling as she turned her face up against his and put her arms around his neck. After a moment he realized she was nuzzling his face - his bad side - like she didn't even notice. And the most mind-blowing part about it was that he didn't notice. At some point, he stopped directing her touch away from his bad side. Because she didn't seem to notice, it somehow made him forget too.

One shaky hand slipped down over his chest and stomach to tug at the button of his jeans and he thought - fuck it. He opened his jeans, hooked his thumb under the waistband of his briefs, and stretched them down to free his erection. Sansa gasped prettily and she likely blushed but he couldn't see. She was still tucked against his side and looking down at him. Her hand moved so slowly he almost started begging her to touch him already. When her fingers curled timidly around him, it was too much to take.

He wrapped his hand around hers and guided her motions, stroking the length of his cock as his other arm pulled her tight to his side. Her soft hand around him felt better than he could have imagined and he'd been close since she took her shirt off. Sandor let go of her hand to fumble around for his shirt, nearly coming undone as she continued pumping without his guidance. The second his fingers found his shirt and he covered his cock. His restraint snapped and intense pleasure ripped through his body.

"Fuck!" Every muscle in his body tensed and twitched as his release pulsed in her hand. "Sansa," he groaned her name against her hair that smelled like flowers, crushing her to his side. As his heart slowed its racing pace, he unclenched his hand and unlocked his arm to release her. She didn't move away from his side, only pulled her hand up to his chest over his heart.

"I have to go home early today..." Sansa hummed against his chest. "Or I would stay with you." He didn't tell her that he'd stay like this forever if she'd let him.

"One of these days," he warned, "I'm just gonna to just steal you away."

"I look forward to it," she murmured sleepily and he could feel her lips smiling against his skin.

Chapter End Notes

So... My A/C died again, after just spending $100 for a repair. Apparently my ducts are all fucked up - like held together by cobwebs. So I need a whole new system. I guess it had to happen sometime but DAMN its been muggy! I debated posting this chapter but my pride won't let me stop at the 'big 30'. Even Mother Nature can't stop me now! MWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!! I think the heat's getting to me...

I feel so alone sometimes with my Podenne OTP. They are so perfect for each other!!!! I will go down with this ship...
Wishes Do Come True

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ARYA

"Girls," dad gave them an apologetic smile, "I can't tell you how sorry I am to spring this on you." She and her sister stood next to each other as dad packed up some paperwork in his office. Arya was almost certain that she was dreaming - things like this just don't happen, at least not her. "I will be back Sunday night, only six days." He walked past them out of his office to his bedroom and she and Sansa hung off his door frame as he packed up a suitcase of clothing for his trip. The wheels were already turned in her mind as she plotted and schemed.

"Robert suddenly had a 'feeling' that visiting your mother and brothers would help the merger..." Dad rubbed a hand over his eyes as he groaned a pained sigh. "Synergize." Arya never felt more grateful in her life that Robert Baratheon was a brainless buffoon. Though personally, she thought the merger was a ridiculously bad idea. "In truth, I'm worried about how things are getting along with me." He sighed as he zipped the suitcase closed and then walked up to Sansa. "Sansa, I am counting on you to be the responsible one."

"Don't worry, daddy." Sansa smiled brightly at him, always 'daddy's little princess'. "It's only a week and I'm glad you will get to visit home."

"Arya," He turned to her with a stern expression. "Your punishment is still in effect and I expect you to obey your sister in my absence." Arya did her best to keep her expression respectful, fighting the urge to sneer at Sansa. Her stupid sister always made her look bad in comparison. If Little Miss Perfect wasn't so damned well-behaved it wouldn't make her seem so troublesome.

"Of course, dad." Arya must not have been hiding her true feelings well enough because his eyes narrowed at her suspiciously. "I'm only thinking..." Her mind scrambled to think of a way to bolster his faith in her. "Maybe I could go with you." Oh, crap! Why did she say that?! Please say no! Thankfully, dad shook his head to deny her and she bit the inside of her cheek to hold in her sigh of relief.

"I don't want to leave either of you," he sighed, "but I would feel better if you were together." His grey eyes turned serious. "No need to miss school at the end of the quarter when exams are right around the corner." Dad crossed his arms, keeping the suspicious expression on his face. "Call me: every day at exactly 4 o'clock, I want to hear the sound of you setting our alarm." His brows knitted together as he eyed her carefully. "Even if I don't answer, leave me a message."

"Dad," she whined, "can't you trust me?" She knew the answer to that question was a resounding 'no' but a guilt trip sometimes did the trick.

"I am trusting you here, kiddo." His expression softened as he put a hand on her shoulder.

"You worry too much, old man." She gave him her most reassuring and trustworthy smile. "I won't let you down again." Arya moved in for the hug, his biggest weakness. "Love you, dad."

"Love you too," he squeezed Arya before letting her go and leaned over to kiss Sansa on the
forehead. "I have to turn in early to catch my flight, goodnight girls." He smiled at them both as he reached out to close his bedroom door on them. As soon as his door was closed... the 'Mission Impossible' theme song started playing in her head. She ambled down the hallway as her brain worked and turned. She thought of all the possible scenarios for how to pull off this grift - without getting caught. Like the pieces of a puzzle, everything came together in her mind and she grinned to herself.

Arya flew into action, getting together everything she would need to pull off her plan. First, she found her old tape recorder in the bottom drawer of her dresser. It was quickly tossed in her school bag along with several changes of clothing. What else? She quickly and quietly hurried to the bathroom to gather the toiletries she would need and added them to her satchel. Even though she was buzzing with anticipation, she fell asleep the second her head hit the pillow. Her dream was about him, pounding away at the forge.

A tinkling sound from her phone under her pillow announce morning too soon. In her dream, she was still watching him fashion some weapon - a small rapier. As she crawled out of bed, her sleepy mind completely blanked out as she trudged to the coffee machine. Only when she found it unused she realized dad must have grabbed coffee on the way to the airport... Arya's eyes flew open wide as everything came flooding back - she was wasting time! She turned brewing coffee into an Olympic sport, racing to her bedroom to get ready as the coffee trickled into the pot.

"Arya!" Sansa's sleepy voice hissed from her bed. "School isn't for another three hours! What are you doing?!"

"I'm not going to school," she informed her sister. "And you know I'm not staying here right?"

"Arya," she groaned, "is there anything I can say to stop you?"

"Nope." She stripped off her nightshirt and pulled on a T-shirt and jeans.

"Then, be safe." Sansa propped up on her elbows to give Arya a worried look. "Like, really-really-really safe. You know what I mean right?"

"Condoms?" Arya laughed at her sister's shocked expression. "He got like a thousand, don't worry." Sansa flopped back on the bed with a groan.

"Oh, now I definitely not worried," she grumbled and turned over to pull a pillow over her head. Everything ready to make her great escape, Arya retrieved her phone to text Gendry. She moved to the coffee maker to pour some in a mug, adding three heaping tablespoons of sugar.

'Let's skip school,' she texted him, 'and spend the next five days and nights in bed.' Gendry did not reply for a time so Arya sat down on the couch to sip her cooling coffee. As more time passed, she grew impatient and just decided to wake his ass up. The phone rang twice before it picked up, sounding like he was fumbling and whispering curses.

"Arya, what's wrong?" His sleepy voice was so incredibly sexy.

"Check your texts, dumbass." Arya waited a few minutes before she heard him laughing.

"Did you get a fairy godmother last night?" His throaty morning voice made her impatient to wake up beside him and hear him like that in person - and then make him naked. Lots and lots of nakedness.

"Dad went out of town for the week," she grinned she said it, still disbelieving her own good luck. "He left early this morning and won't be back until Sunday night."
"No way," Gendry sounded wide awake then. "Six days..." He sounded in awe, clearly imagining the same possibilities she was.

"I know!!" Arya struggled to keep her voice down. "It's a sign from the gods," she insisted.

"Should I come right now?" He really could be really smart when he wanted to be.

"I'll be waiting downstairs," she told him. "Love ya!"

"Love ya, see you in a few." Gendry hung up and Arya quickly finished her coffee and grabbed her bag to set it by the door. She dug out her tape recorder and quickly set the alarm while recording the sound. With that essential step accomplished, she disabled the alarm and strode out the door to victory. All her life, nothing this good ever happened, she was never the lucky one to be born attractive or charming. Nobody liked a pushy, loud, troublesome, opinionated, bossy girl - nobody except for Gendry.

She rode the elevator down, hugging her bag to her chest and her heart started racing at the thought of spending a whole week with Gendry. They would eat together, sleep together, and get naked together... Six days and five nights would not nearly be enough for her but it would be so much better than lying in bed pining for him. It was still dark outside but she did not have to wait long before his clunky old Lincoln pulled up in front of her building. She yanked open the door and slid inside, throwing her bag in the back.

"Are you totally sure," Gendry glanced past her to the building, "that he is definitely gone?" Arya snorted a laugh, thinking about acting like she saw her dad coming to freak him out. She held it in though because he looked so damned nervous.

"Trust me," she snapped her fingers to gain his attention, "we've been handed the opportunity of a lifetime." Arya leaned across the distance between them and smirked at his furrowed brow. "Don't question it." She grabbed his shirt in her fist and pulled him down for a kiss hello before pushing him away so she could take her somewhere they could do more. "Dive," she pointed forward.

"As milady commands," he put the car into dive, pulled around out of the parking lot, and headed towards Flea Bottom. The bright and shining city faded into a sea of rundown and crumbling buildings. Arya paid close attention to the route in case she ever had to find her way back to his place again. He prattled on about all the precautions they should take to avoid being caught, but nothing she hadn't already thought of.

Gendry pulled the Lincoln into the parking lot of an apartment complex just inside the city limits. He led her up three flights of stairs, because there was no elevator, and into a small but clean apartment. Arya looked around as she stepped inside - nothing matched but everything still seemed to go together. It looked like a real home, where people actually lived, instead of the magazine-perfect house her mother kept.

"Welcome," he waved a hand at the space before he closed the door behind them. "Make yourself at home." She set her bag down by the door and took a seat on the small brown sofa in the middle of the room.

"It's cozy," she slumped down with a sigh.

"What do you want to do first?" He sat down beside her and stretched out his legs as he covered a yawn with his hand. Arya went a little overboard waking him up so early and making him drive all around the city. Gendry really did love her...
"I was thinking about getting you naked," she quirked her eyebrows at him.

"Great minds..." Gendry started leaning towards her but that's when Arya noticed there were pictures hanging on the wall. She jumped up just as he was closing in on kissing her and ran over to look at them.

"Aw!" The biggest picture in the middle was of Gendry's mom, younger and even more beautiful. Ms. Waters was beaming with happiness while holding a tiny bundle in her arms. "Dude, you were so cute." She knew his mom had to be at least a decade younger than her parents. But seeing the picture of her, a teenager and already a single parent, drove home what it must've been like. "Your mom... so young. Poor Sam and Gilly." Arya shuddered and turned away from the picture. "Makes me glad I've got a whole boxful of condoms."

"Ah, sorry," he was still sitting on the couch, giving her a lopsided smile. "I used the rest of them with my other girlfriend."

"Gendry..." She strode to stand in front of him, placing one leg on either side of his. "You have offended my honor this day." Arya glared down at his smirking face. "Now you must pay," she moved forward to brace a hand on his chest and straddled his lap. "With your life."

"Milady, spare me." He tried to assume a pleading expression, fighting not to smile. "I'm only a poor stupid blacksmith who knows nothing of your highborn ways."

"You are rather attractive," she paused as if considering sparing him. "It would be a waste to kill you," but his insolence could not go unpunished. "How should I punish you?"

"Displeasing milady is a grievous offense." His hands raised to grasp her hips. "How can I please you once more, milady? Give me your commands."

"Take this off," she tugged on his shirt and he obeyed immediately. Gendry reached to hold onto her again but she caught his wrists and forced them back down by his sides. "Be still - don't move an inch." Arya pulled her top off and smiled when he made a hungry sound as he saw she wore nothing underneath. His hand moved back up to touch her but she snatched his wrist and pinned it against the couch. "Ah! No moving," she insisted, "no touching, just watch me." He gulped and nodded slowly as she let his hand fall down.

Her hands cupped the sides of his face and tilted his head back over the couch as she rose up on her knees over him. Arya's heart raced as he watched her slowly lower her face to his, stopping to hover over his mouth and waited. His shallow breath whispered over her lips, tempting her as she tempted him and she waited. Gendry was so good - he listened to even her most challenging demands and followed her lead. She dipped her head a bit lower to traced his upper lip with the tip of her tongue then pulled away as he lifted his head slightly.

"Arya..." The sound of his voice begging made it too difficult to tease him.

"Be quiet," she ordered, enjoying tormenting him a little too much. Then - finally - he snapped and dug his fingers into her thighs as he stood up, carrying her with him. He strode across the apartment with single-minded determination and kicked open a door to drop her on his bed. "Please Gendry!" Arya couldn't wait a second longer but he didn't fall down on top of her for some stupid reason. He lunged at his dresser, ripping the top drawer open and digging around until he pulled out - oh right, condom. "Please hurry, please," she begged as she kicked off her shoes and pants, "gods, Gendry, please!"

"Bloody hells!" Gendry's fingers fumbled with the small package until he put it up to his mouth and
ripped it open with his teeth. Arya ripped off her already soaked panties and bunched them up to throw them at him for being so fucking slow! He dared to waste a precious second to glare at her but it made her even hotter for him so she slumped back on the bed with a loud whine. He was on her in an instant, naked and in between her legs and then - after a bit of a fumble - slipped inside her. This time there was no pain, only intense urgency.

"Don't stop!" She jerked her hips up because he wasn't moving, spurring him into thrusting deeper inside her. They had all the time in the world but didn't bother to kiss or touch. Their hands were busy clinging to each as they fucked like the apocalypse was drawing near. The first time they had sex was like the first time driving a car, stop-and-go and terrifying the whole time. The second time was like driving a race car, going around and around - speeding towards the finish line. Faster and faster - feeling like you're about to crash but having too much fun to stop or even slow down.

Pressure built up into a pinpoint that she latched onto and sought with driven determination. Arya wanted to start screaming, it was so intense, but she couldn't really even breathe so she had only the one method of release. She was just on the verge of a precipice of pleasure when Gendry's hips shook erratically and his motions slowed.

"Don't - fucking - stop!" Arya locked her legs around him and dug her fingers into his hips to urge him on... just a little more. Her whole body turned into rigid steel, every muscle in her body locked up, and then she shattered like overheated glass. As if from a great distance, she could the scream that came from her own throat - it didn't even sound human. As she came down from the high peak she loosened her death grip on him. They were still entwined together - their only movement and sound were ragged panting breaths. She pushed him off so she could get more air and he rolled over with a groan.

"Gods..." Gendry rubbed his face and exhaled a slow shaky breath. "Well, that's out of the way," he chuckled and turned his head to face her. "You hungry?"

"Starved," she patted her hand on his chest and then turned over to grab the blankets. "Go make me something to eat while I nap." He groaned but started to get up to obey her but she caught a shoulder and pushed him back down on the mattress. "Stay for a minute first." Arya snuggled up by Gendry side and covered him with the blanket. "Love you," she turned her head up to smile at him.

"Love you," he lifted his head to kiss her forehead. Then Gendry turned his body to face her and slid an arm under her body to pull her into his embrace. This was what she missed out on after her first time and she cursed her stupid grounding for always forcing them apart. Not for the next six day, she pulled him tighter - he was all hers until then.

Chapter End Notes

The gods were kind today, it was rainy so even though the humidity turned my hair into a lion's mane - it wasn't too bad. My hair is really long and thick so I wear it up in a Janeway (where my Trekkies at whoop-whoop) you know, before she cut her hair into the bob. Mm-mm... Chakotay... What was I talking about? Oh yeah, so everyone who comes to the door sees me looking like a sweaty mushroom with a giant ball of hair on my head. I've gotten some weird looks... DON'T JUDGE ME FEDEX MAN - DELIVER MY PACKAGE AND AVOID EYE-CONTACT!

My man Gendry gets the next POV <3
He finally tore himself out of bed to get some food into Arya, before she decided they needed another round. Before the sun was up, she had him three times and was still trying to wheedle a fourth as she fell fast asleep. Gendry let himself watch her sleeping face and listened to cute snores before he disentangled himself. She needed breakfast after being so worn-out, as did he, so he started scrambling up a batch of eggs and threw some bread in the toaster.

"I missed you," she came up behind him to wrap her arms around his waist as he stood over the stove. He pushed the eggs around in the pan as they started to scramble.

"I've been gone five minutes," he patted her hand for her to let go. It was dangerous for her little hands to be so close to the burner and hot pan. But Arry just squeezed him tighter and rested her face against his back. It felt nice so he gave up trying to stop her and just focused on keeping her hands a safe distance from the heat.

"It's cold in the bed without you," she complained. "I'm not hungry anymore... for food."

"Arry," he was incredulous, "we've been at it for hours!" Gendry shook his head, should've known she'd be insatiable. "You need to rest and eat or we'll both die." That last time nearly killed him!

"Psh," she lightly traced her fingers down his stomach. "You mean you need to rest." That wasn't strictly true: though most of his body was bone tired, his cock was waking up again. Just then, the toast popped up and he couldn't help but feel like the appliance was mocking him.

"That's exactly what I mean," he ground out as the tips of her fingers slid inside the waistband of his shorts. "Arry, I'm trying to feed you, let me focus." Gendry stretched to pull the hot toast out of the toaster and dropped the slices on a plate.

"But I can't focus," she whined as she released him. "How did I not know how sexy your back is?" Arya ran her hands down from his shoulders to his waist. "Look at all these muscles! It's ridiculous!"

"That tickles!" Gendry tried to shrug her off but she just wrapped her arms around him again and rested her warm cheek against his skin.

"This is fine, right?" She was warm and her arms were soft around him as her hair tickled his back. It was more than 'fine', Gendry doubted he ever felt more comfortable than when she was holding onto him.

"Feels good," he admitted. Having her all to himself and her having him as many times as he could stand, was like an unbelievable dream. Gendry couldn't help but think this week was like a preview of what their married life would be like. "Arry?"

"Hmm?" She pressed little soft kisses against his skin as the eggs firmed up, almost ready to eat.

"Do you really want to stay here the whole time?" He wanted nothing more but he knew, if they got
caught, it would make everything go from really-really hard to impossible.

"Is that okay?" Her voice sounded small and unsure and it made Gendry smile every time Arry let her tough act slip around him.

"It's a dream come true," he admitted without shame. "But we have to go to school." Gendry braced himself for her argument.

"Gendry," she groaned his name. "This is a sign from the gods! We were meant to have this week." He doubted the gods used their godly power to arrange time for star-crossed teenage lovers to fuck each other. Although, he couldn't tell if they were doing anything else.

"If we're both absent, that's going to raise all kinds of flags." Gendry knew she was already well aware of what he was saying; she hoped he wouldn't figure it out. "Even taking today off is a big risk, though I've been forging mom's signature for close to a decade now."

"You're too smart sometimes," she grumbled. Arya always did know how to give a compliment. "And I know how to forge a sick note too, buddy."

"You're too troublesome," he countered, "all the time."

"You like it," her fingers slipped under his waistband. Arya released a smug chuckle as her hand wrapped around his full erection. No rest for the weary...

"I do," he relented and turned around to find Arya already expectantly awaiting his kiss. "I love everything about you." She moved up on her tip-toes to reach his mouth and curled her arms around his neck to slide her body against his. "Shit," he remembered, "the burner..." He twisted and reached back to flip the burner knob to off and moved the pan off the hot coil. Gendry returned his attention to her, lifting her off the ground to whisper in her ear. "I love you, Arya." The way she trembled when he professed his love was addicting.

"I can't wait anymore," she begged pitifully, "please Gendry." His eyes darted to the bedroom as he tried to calculate how fast he could run and grab a condom when she produced one from thin air. Where was she even keeping it?! Arya was only wearing one of his t-shirts and nothing else! The little minx came out of the bedroom intending to seduce him! Well, can't turn down a request from his lady, can he? He started to worry that he couldn't keep up with her demand but so far, he'd risen to the occasion without a problem.

The table was conveniently located just ahead so he lifted her up and she wrapped her legs around him. He could hear the package tear open and when he set her down, Arya impatiently shoved the ripped packet at him. Her predatory stare, and murmuring 'hurry' repeatedly, made him nervous as he rolled the latex in place. As soon as he was covered, she braced a hand behind her and used the other to position his cock. They were both getting pretty good at fitting together but she was better.

Every time they had sex was less fumbly and awkward, but no less frantic or overwhelming. He wanted to treat Arya gently, touch her everywhere and make her feel beautiful... but she and his cock outvoted him every time. She whipped off her shirt and clutched his hips. Whimpered commands poured from her mouth: 'harder, faster, now, more, stupid'. Hard and fast it is then, gotta give the lady what she wants, not that he was suffering any.

Gendry tried to focus on anything other than the love of his life growing ever louder from how much she enjoyed being fucked by him. Shit! The neighbors must be getting an earful, these cheap apartments had thin walls. She was practically screaming, begging him and writhing against him... Bloody hells! She wasn't there yet, he knew: they whole neighborhood would know when she came.
The thought struck him that in this position: he could just slip a hand between their bodies...

"Oh, fuck - YES!" Arya slumped back on the table. "Keep doing that!" Gendry lightly swiped his fingers over her slick flesh and couldn't tear his eyes away from the sight of her spread over the table. Arya braced her hands on the table and arched her back, sobbing one piercing scream as she clenched around his cock. It felt amazing and there was no reason to hold back anymore, he slumped forward as he released with a whimper drowned out by her screams.

"Now that's out of the way..." She panted as she turned his earlier joke back on him, since then one of them said it after each time they had sex. Gendry was starting to think they could stay locked together all day and still not get enough. That 100-count box wasn't going to last nearly as long as he thought it would: not the worst thing that could happen. The world was filled with prophylactics and they were sold on every street corner. Arya had a tendency to get a bit carried away and impatient but he was never-ever going to 'forget' to use protection.

"Eventually," he tugged on her legs around his waist, "we have to eat." Arya smirked as she sat up and leaned forward to hold onto his shoulders and press her lips to his chest.

"I think I can sustain myself this way," she raised her head to brush her lips over his neck and then nipped the skin. He didn't know what to expect after having sex with Arya, he worried about his inexperience and hers. Gendry never once considered she would turn into a ravenous demon temptress of lust. Sure, he liked it: just surprised him is all.

"I can't," he had to stand up for himself at some point. "I have all these muscles you like so much." He tugged on her arms but she did not release him. "Takes food to maintain."

"Mmm... muscles," she looked down at his torso and licked her lips. "Let's do it just one more time, real quick!" Did she not realize it took longer every time? And that it was irresponsible to use the same condom twice: a mistake he wouldn't make again. Well, no, clearly, she didn't understand and he'd have to explain it to her... after they ate.

"Food first," he narrowed his eyes at her seriously, "I mean it." Arya pouted as she unlocked her limbs and pulled his shirt back on. He tossed out the condom, pulled up his pants, and started to fix them some plates. "You better eat every last scrap I put on your plate, even if it's cold!"

"Yes, master," she replied, sweet and obedient, as she hopped off the table and it made his shoulders tense. "Oh," she chuckled, "you like that, don't you?" Arya walked up behind him as he dished the two platefuls of eggs and topped the piles with toast. Her hand trailed up his spine, ticking his skin.

"We can eat in just a little bit..."

"Sit down!" He pointed at the seat and her shoulders slumped as she turned around and sunk into the seat. Gendry dropped the plate of food in front of her and pointed at it. "Eat!" Arya grumbled something as she took her first bite, then her eyes widened and she scarfed down a few more bites. With a weary sigh he joined her and was pleasantly surprised to find the eggs still warm, they really needed to slow down. "Good?"

"Yeah," she gulped her food down and grinned at him. "Guess I was hungry." Arya looked down at her plate and stared at the food without taking another bite. "Hey, Gendry?" Her eyes turned up to him with a soft expression. "Someday... if we ever, you know..." She shrugged and pushed her food around with her fork. "If we ever live together..." His heart skipped a beat. How could she be thinking the exact same thing as him? Well, she said 'live together' and he thought 'get married': same difference. 'You think your mom would give us this table?"

"I think that can be arranged," he laughed as he scooped up another bite of food. "Where do you
"Wanna live?"

"Not in Kings Landing," she answered immediately.

"That's a good start." Gendry had no thoughts in particular about where he wanted to live: he would follow Arya wherever she wanted to go. "What do you want to do after breakfast?"

"I like to shower in the morning if I can..." Arya's eyes popped open as a smile tugged at her parted lips. "You could come with."

"It's a small shower," he warned. "Like: tiny."

"Even better," she grinned. "It would be all slippery and wet and hot and steamy..."

"You talked me into it," he started eating faster and she followed suit.

"Come along then." She threw her fork down like she won, having already cleared her plate and got up to strip off her shirt again. Gendry scooped the rest of his eggs into his toast, folded it over to cram it all into his mouth, and followed her to the bathroom. "You were not kidding - this is the smallest shower I've ever seen." Arya stared at the shower stall with her hands on her hips and her nose scrunched up.

"If you changed your mind-"

"Hardly," she reached forward to turn on the hot water, "get naked." Gendry let his shorts fall on the ground and she turned around to face him but got distracted by the mirror. She stared at his reflection as she stepped closer to him with an odd expression.

"What?" Gendry waved a hand in front of her face to get her attention and she snapped back out of her daze.

"Nothing," she turned away, stepped into the shower, and held open the curtain for him to follow. He stepped inside and closed the curtain before seeing Arya still wore that odd look on her face. "Gendry, tell me." The hot water poured over her, flattening her slicked-back hair and turning her fair skin pink.

"I love you," he reached for her as he said it but stopped when she shook her head and looked away. "Tell me I'm..." Arya never had a problem telling him what she wanted so it was a little unnerving to see her so flustered. "Tell me you think I'm..." Her words trailed off as she hung her head in defeat and Gendry had no idea what was wrong. "You're so..." She waved a hand at him but didn't raise her head. And that's when it sunk in: she though he wasn't as attracted to her as she was to him.

"Arya," he cupped her face with both hands and pulled her eyes up, "you're so beautiful." Gendry nodded down to his hard cock poking her in the stomach. "I want you so much, can't you tell?"

"But - why?" Arya shook her head and tilted her head back further. "No, don't answer, just kiss me." He slid his hands down over her warm shoulders and stepped closer to that the hot water rushing over her spilled onto him.

"You're gonna hate me for this..." Gendry looked up at the ceiling and braced himself for the inevitable backlash. "You look like an elfin fairy princess."

"What?" Arya did not sound amused.
"You're only missing the little wings," he smiled sheepishly as he looked back down to see her scowling. "Even that little expression you make, you look like you're about to use pixy magic on me." Gendry couldn't help it; he just started laughing as she looked even more disgusted by his comparison. She's the one that asked!

"You're right," she glared at him so prettily, "I hate you." Arya gave him a disbelieving look, and groaned. "So, you really think I look like a little fairy - that you wanna fuck?"

"Basically," he shrugged, "yeah." Other guys can have their preferences for tall girls or curvy girls. He liked cute girls with heart-shaped faces and stormy grey eyes. Or at least, he did after he met Arya: before that, he spent most of his time avoiding girls.

"I can live with that." Arya licked her lips and ran her hands over his arms. "You look like a really hot guy with big muscles - that I want to fuck."

"Good to know," he loved how easy it was to solve whatever issues rose between them. All they had to do was talk it out and everything would be okay. After the worry eased, his stomach unknotted and he started to notice how nice her skin felt, all warm and wet. Her hands were sliding over him and making him shiver though the water was hot, too hot for his taste but she liked everything too hot. He pulled her flush against him, groaning as her overheated skin slipped against his.

"Gendry," she murmured against his chest, "go get a condom."

"No," he turned his face into her wet hair and grinned.

"What did you just say to me?" Arya broke out of his embrace to glower at him once more. "You're getting brave," she scoffed. "Do I have to sprinkle some magic sparkly dust all over your fabulous ass?" She tilted her head to the side as if trying to catch a peek.

"Let me get you clean..." Gendry picked up a bar of soap, feeling pretty pleased with himself for coming up with a way to slow Arya down. "Before I make you dirty again." Her annoyed expression turned eager as she watched him lather the soap in his hands. She grabbed it from him and stole his idea with a delighted expression, predictably moving to wash his chest and stomach. It was kind of her to mention she liked his ass: he was starting to think she only loved him for his torso. They made each other soapy without really cleaning, stealing the bar from each other.

Gendry touched her everywhere, fascinated by the smoothness of her skin and the soft curves of her body. His fingers traced the sloped of her shoulders and over her collarbone. He flattened his hands to slide down over her breasts as she arched into his palms. Ever impatient, Arya quickly turned her attention to making his cock cleaner than it'd ever been. To stop the sudsy torture, he grabbed her wrists but she easily broke his hold and reversed it.

"Take me to bed," she demanded, "now." Unwilling to argue, Gendry shut off the water and hoisted her up. He gripped her tightly because she was slippery and didn't want to drop her, for once thankful the apartment was tiny. The bathroom door was only a few steps to his bed and they fell onto the mattress, soaking the sheets with their wet bodies. The chill of his damp skin and the sheets contrasted with the warmth radiating from her. Time before last, Arya moved the box into bed and he had to admit it was convenient. He was getting pretty good at putting on condoms due to her impatience.

She was so untamed, like a wildfire that thawed his frozen life; that's what he was before he met her. He built up a wall of ice around himself that nobody could climb. He lived his life in fear of being proven a 'mistake', but she just melted that ice wall. After meeting Arya, it was clear he was supposed to be born so he could meet her and fall in love with her. Gendry thought he would look
his whole life for a girl like her but she fell into his arms that day and their fates were sealed.

They fit together perfectly: mind, body, and soul. It proved to him that everyone who said they didn't belong together were just wrong. Gendry tried to live without Arya for a few days, it literally drove him insane, and she didn't look to be in much better shape. For better or worse, she was his and he was hers to the end of days and maybe even longer. Too soon, it was over because he couldn't hold back when he started thinking about being together with her forever. Even though it hurt to stay inside her, he used propped up on one arm and used his hand to make her come.

He rolled off her to collapse on the soaked bed and decided he never worked this hard in his life. Gendry thought about asking her to be on top and do all the work but figured Arya would tell him if that's what she wanted. Somehow, completely against his will, the visual image of Arya riding his cock made it revive once more. Inwardly cursing his body's betrayal he decided to put some distance between them before they went at it again.

"We're just going to end up here again," she held onto his arm as he sat up. "There's no point in leaving."

"Your cold and dehydrated." Gendry leaned over to brush her wet hair out of her eyes and kissed her forehead before covering her with a mostly dry blanket. "Stay, I'll be back in two seconds."

"I hate to see you leave," she called after him, "but I love watching you walk away!" The air chilled his skin as he hurried to the tiny linen cupboard to grab a few of towels. Gendry tossed two towels at Arya and wrapped the third around his waist as he walked into the kitchen. He filled two glasses of water and carried them back to the bedroom to hand one to Arya. "Oh my gods," she gulped down half the glass, "I was dying of thirst."

"See?" Gendry leaned back on the bed and raised his cup to her. "I'm not completely useless."

"Thank you, Gendry." Arya twisted to set her cup on his dresser. "However can I repay you?"

"Again?" He wanted to cry, but first he wanted to have sex with her again and then possibly another time. It was like she was draining his life-force, every time they fucked she got a bit stronger and he grew ever weaker. "We have all week."

"But then," she leaned back on her elbow, "who knows how long." Arya sulked and lowered her thick lashes to veil her eyes. "It could be weeks before we can be together again after this."

"Don't think about that now," he chided before he drained his cup. In truth, he was the one who didn't want to think about it.

"It's all I ever think about," she whispered. Gendry set his empty cup next to hers and laid down beside her to pull her against his chest. The sheets were cold and wet but she was warm and comfortable to hold.

"Trust me," he rubbed his hand over her back, "after you are done being grounded, I'll think of a way to convince your father to let us be together."

"No," she sat up in a panic, "we need to hide it from him for at least the next two years and then beg his permission." Arya gripped him by his shoulders and stared into his eyes, unblinking and stone-cold serious. "You don't know what my family is like."

"I'll follow you, Arry," he eased her back down against his chest, using his most soothing voice. "No matter what it takes, as long as we stay together." Soon she would start wriggling around and making demands but for the moment, she was still and let him hold her. Someday, they would spent every
night for the rest of their lives like this... Gendry could wait for that day with as much patience as he could muster, as long as he could steal a few moments like in the meantime.

Chapter End Notes

Here's a life tip everyone should know: if you have to start a comment with 'don't take this the wrong way' or something similar, you should just stop.

"Oh pardon, I don't mean to offend - but you don't seem to realize that you're a disgusting pervert - bless your heart."

I write porn about teenagers, I'm not trying to pretty that up and neither am I ashamed. Arya is 14 and Gendry turns 18 in a few days: their ages are intrinsically entwined with the plot and 100% intentional. I beg and plead, do not throw off my *groove* with pointless discouraging comments! I know I make look easy... But it's reeeeeeally fucking hard. That is all.
DANY

She was on her way to see Drogo after school, they promised to meet at the weight lifting room inside the gym. After opening the door, she smiled at Khal and but then her eyes slid to his 'friend', her mouth fell open in shock. Her heart, once flying so high, fell into the pit of her stomach as it always did whenever she saw... him. The hulking walking reminder of the worst day of her life glared at her from across the room. Against her will her feet walked up to him, eyes locked on his hideous face wearing an even uglier expression.

"This," she gaped in disbelief at Drogo, "is your weight lifting friend?" Khal nodded impassively, shifting his dark eyes between them. The hound snorted and even had the nerve to laugh at her as he dismissed her.

"Do I know you?" His sneer made her want to be sick, she hated him, wished his whole family burned and dead!

"You know who I am," she refused to let him forget what happened to her family just because the world moved on! Her world stopped spinning that day and never restarted! Dany only pretended like she moved on so everyone would stop asking 'are you okay?' No one ever meant it! Everyone wanted her to answer 'yes' or they started to resent her if she disappointed them...

"What the fuck," he scowled at her, "you want from me?" All the Cleganes only knew how to threaten and use violence to get what they wanted: they were all rabid mad dogs. Dany forgot her response when Sansa stepped in between them. She did not even see the girl standing off to the side... How could such a sweet and quiet girl be so unafraid of that brute? Her knees were literally shaking in fear, she wanted to run away, but she could not move.

"Sandor," Sansa looked confused as she glanced back at Dany "what...?"

"You didn't even tell her?" Dany assumed at some point he couldn't keep Sansa ignorant of the truth.

"Why the FUCK would I do that?!" The hound looked like he wanted to strike her and Dany stumbled backward in fear. "What?" He had the nerve to look annoyed by her reaction. "Think I'll do something?" Sansa tried to murmur something to him but he shrugged her off to walk past them both. "Don't follow me." As soon as the door closed behind him all the strength in her body seeped away as she sunk onto a bench.

"I don't even understand..." Sansa stared at the door in complete shock before rounding on Dany. "Why did Sandor get so angry? What were you two talking about?"

"No," Dany covered her face with one hand, "I tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen. I can't now..." She waved her other hand at the door, no longer capable of pitying Sansa's naivety when she envied and despised her for it. "Ask him, if he's capable of telling the truth."

"Dany Targaryen," Sansa's sharp voice made Dany look up to see the other girl frowning down at her. "I'm not entirely sure, but I think you just bullied my boyfriend." She crossed her arms and tilted
her chin up. "If that's the case, I'm not going to forgive you. Good day!" Then she spun on her heel and rushed out of the room, presumably to chase that horrible boyfriend of hers. What was wrong with all the girls she knew?! Why were they all dating these monsters?!

"How am I the bad one?" Dany couldn't help the tears that spilled from her eyes. "He's the one..." She looked up to see Khal's usual impassive expression. He just stood there and observed everything and had no reaction at all. "Go away," she buried her face in her hands as her voice cracked, not wanting him to witness her weakness. He would hate her for being so weak: everyone needed her to be strong all the time. "Go away."

"No," he sat down next to her and put his arm around her shoulder. "I'll stay."

"I hate him!" The memories of the trial came flooding back, how... Gregor Clegane, her stomach turned to think his name, stared at her the whole time as she testified. With a sick grin on his face, proud that he destroyed her family. "Why can't he just go to some other school?!" The hound had to know how his very presence offended her and yet he did not have the compassion to leave quietly. "Why should I leave?" She and her family were the victims while his family were the perpetrators, but they always get away with everything! "I shouldn't have to see him!"

"Tell me," Drogo's hand slid over her shoulder in a soothing motion and Dany twisted her body to wrap her arms around his waist. It did not shock her he didn't know: he didn't seem like the type to keep up with long-past scandals.

"I can't," Dany had told her story too many times to lawyers, doctors, and psychiatrists. "Today was supposed to be a good day, a 'normal' day." Her date with Drogo was clearly ruined: she didn't feel like doing anything but sleeping for a week. "Everything gets ruined when I see him." Usually she could handle catching a glimpse of the hound. But after she overheard her mother talking and crying on the phone last night... Just seeing him made her want to react with violence at the news she heard. It just couldn't be true!

SANSA

"Sandor!" Sansa ran as fast as she could to catch up with him as he was ambling away from the gym towards the parking lot with his hands in his pockets. "Wait, please!"

"Didn't I say not to follow me?" Sandor didn't even turn to look at her, just keep walking until she jogged ahead and stood in his path.

"You're upset, you might not mean it." Sansa knew she was babbling but could not stop the words pouring from her mouth. "I say things I don't mean all the time when I'm upset. I mean, I try not to..."

"Decided to shut up?" He sneered down at her, such a cold expression on his face that she barely recognized him. "Good - about time."

"That's mean," she whispered, shocked by his clear attempt to drive her away. It made her want to latch onto him and beg him to stay with her. Sandor even forgot he was supposed to give her a ride home and her bag was already in his car... "I don't have to know, if you don't want to tell me." He ignored her once more and turned to walk away but Sansa grabbed onto his arm, turning desperate. "I'll hate Dany if you want! Just don't be like this to me... I can pretend it didn't happen if you can."

"It's just that easy for you, isn't it?" He laughed at her but it wasn't anything like his usual teasing, it was harsh and cruel.

"No, it's not easy." She hated how her voice trembled but felt encouraged when his expression
softened slightly. "I'm trying really hard to be strong." Sansa knew that Sandor used anger to hide his real feelings but she thought they were long past that. He used to do it quite often, although less and less frequently with her. It scared her to see him that furious, not of him obviously. She feared whatever secrets he carried that made him so upset. "You've helped me so much and I never did anything for you. Tell me, how can I make you feel better?"

"When you say it like that..." The tension in his shoulders relaxed, as did his angry expression. He glanced down at her with a disbelieving eyebrow raised. "If I tell you what I'm thinking - you'll slap me."

"Try me." Sansa felt relieved that her teasing flirtatious boyfriend was still just under the surface.

"Put on your cheer uniform." The corner of his lips turned up into a half-smile.

"For what?" She regarded him warily, all sorts of lascivious visions popping up in her mind, some of which she would not mind...

"Cheer something - just for me." He crossed his arms as he made his demand, wearing the barest hint of a smile on his lips.

"Really?" A number of things he might ask of her passed through Sansa's head without even considering that simple request. The naughtiest part of her mind was somewhat disappointed. "That's what you want?"

"Knew that offer was full of shit." He stalked off without another word and Sansa ran to catch up with him, grabbing onto his arm.

"I'll do it!" She quickly agreed when his attention turned back to her and she pointed at the gym. "My uniform is in my locker."

"Ponytail too," he demanded as his half-smile returned. Just that small expression eased her heart considerably.

"You just like making embarrassed," she accused as she tugged on his arm to lead him towards the girl's changing room. "That's what this is," Sansa narrowed her eyes at his smug expression, "you don't actually even care about the uniform." He shrugged and just smiled even wider and it lifted about a million tons off her shoulders. "I'll do anything to make you happy, Sandor."

"Don't say that, little bird." Sandor stopped to put both hands on her shoulders and turning her to face him. "Don't put anyone before yourself - not me or anyone."

"You say things like that and then expect me not to want to treat you even better..." Sansa leaned forward and rock her arms around him, resting her face against his warm chest. "It makes me happy to make you happy."

"Chirp-chirp-chirp," he mocked.

"I'm being serious," she insisted.

"You need to get cheering." He pulled her back by her shoulders, turned her towards the changing room, and gave her a light push.

"Okay," she sighed and pointed towards the indoor court. "Go sit and I'll be right there."

"Ponytail!" He called after her as she hurried into the changing room. Sansa moved quickly to her
locker to retrieve her uniform and changed in a flash. A nervous fluttery feeling settled in her stomach as she grabbed a set of pom-poms and walked into the gym. She moved in front of where Sandor sat and waited awkwardly for him to make a request. "Go on," he waved a hand

"This is so embarrassing," she protested quietly. He crossed his arms and looked at her expectantly in response. "What kind of cheer do you want?"

"Anything you like." His answer was a relief because she could only think of one cheer at the moment. She took her position and inhaled deeply to calm her nervousness.

"Ok, don't laugh..." Sansa turned all of her focus onto the cheer, if she was going to embarrass herself and she might as well do it correctly. "I LOVE L!" All those years of vocal lessons paid off because her projection was really good. "I LOVE L-E-M!" After each chant, she ruffled her pom-poms together and lifted one arm into the air. "I LOVE L-E-M-O-N-S... I LOVE LEMONS!" For the big finish, she spun the pom-poms around each other. "Sour, makes me pucker up! LEMONS, LA-LA-LEMONS!" She raised the pom-poms in the air and took a knee... and that was it!

Sandor threw his head back and roared with laughter, stomping a foot on the ground. His shoe colliding with the floor made an echoing booming sound throughout the gym. Sansa rushed to sit beside him and threw down the pom-poms, shaking his shoulder to make him stop.

"You said you wouldn't laugh," she protested as he continued to shake with laughter.

"No, I didn't." He snorted as he tried to hold back his amusement and she realized that he was right, he never did agree to not laugh at her. Well, at least he was laughing instead of scowling. Sandor suddenly pulled her against his chest and held her tight in his embrace. They stayed like that for a while neither of them saying anything. "About earlier... I'm sorry, okay?"

"I thought..." It was stupid of her to think all opposition to the relationship disappeared because of one phone call with Margaery. "It's okay." She was dying to know what exactly happened between Sandor and Dany but he didn't seem in the right mood for her to press the subject. "You want to go get some hot chocolate this weekend at the mall?" Sansa felt that a change in topic was in order and steamy cups of hot sweet goodness always made everything seem brighter. "It is starting to feel cold enough... And we could get you some new shirts."

"Sounds good," he released as he responded and they stood up to leave the gym. "I'll take you anywhere you want to go, little bird." Her Sandor was back and as relieved as she felt, it was scary to know he could suddenly turn so cold towards her. In an attempt to bridge the gap that settled between them, Sansa took ahold of his hand and laced her fingers with his.

"Winter has finally come to the south," she commented as they walked, trying to ease the lingering tension. "In Winterfell, the snow is falling down in sheets."

"I'd like to see that." He held her hand tightly as they started walking towards the parking lot. She decided not to change her uniform, since it seemed to be helping improve Sandor's mood.

"We could build a snowman together," she sighed dreamily, imagining them playing in the snow. Sansa always thought winter was so romantic and never realized how much she would miss it in the south.

"Or have a snowball fight," he sounded almost wistful.

"I'll leave that to Arya and the boys," Sansa laughed as she imagined her siblings going to war with Sandor. No doubt, he would still win against all of them, even Arya. "It doesn't feel like 'winter'
"I just got a fucking awesome idea," he grinned. "Aw, this is too good!"

"What?" Sansa looked up as they approached the Skylark and Sandor let go of her to walk to the driver's side. "What?"

"It's a surprise," he winked at her.

"I already took back my affection for surprises!" Sansa opened the car door to get in as she protested. "I changed my mind! I clearly do not like them anymore." Sandor's grin only widened as he turned over the engine. "Tell me," Sansa begged, "tell me, please, tell me!"

"Nope," he waited for her to put on her seatbelt before putting the car in reverse. "It's gonna be perfect - you'll love it." Sandor enjoyed torturing her far too much!

"Sandor!" She pouted even more when he laughed at her impatience. "When?! Now?!"

"Eager as always," he shook his head in response to her question. "I'm gonna take you to where it feels like winter - for your birthday."

"Is that a hint?!" Sansa racked her brain thinking... thinking... "Ice cream again?" He just chuckled at her as he pulled out of the parking lot. "Sandor!"

"You'll just have to wait and see." Sandor relaxed in his seat and there was no trace left of the anger caused by his strange conversation with Dany. "I guess you want me to take you straight home." His words were somewhere between a question and an accusal, revealing he was not quiet as pacified as he acted.

"Yes," she sighed with reluctance. Sandor nodded as his jaw tensed up but he shrugged like he didn't care. In these weeks together, Sansa learned to read him well enough to know he was hurt by her 'rejection'. "Not because of earlier... I told you, daddy went out of town."

"Usually," he scoffed, "that's a good thing."

"Arya ruined it!" Sansa swore eternal revenge against her selfish little brat sister. "She thinks because she has a boyfriend now she can just do whatever she wants and leave me holding the bag!"

"I think your sister is alright," he commented before turning to see the look she was giving him. "But I totally fucking hate her if she's the reason we can't go make out right now."

"I'm worried about her," Sansa groaned and rubbed a palm against her forehead. "She practically moved out yesterday, I'm responsible for her and don't even know where she is." Just saying it out loud was making her feel even guiltier. Daddy trusted her to watch Arya and she didn't even try to stop her... Oh, but there was no point in even trying! "I haven't even met the boy yet but I can only imagine what kind of guy she would choose."

"Isn't she dating one of the nerds?" Sandor knew Arya's boyfriend?!

"Nerds?" Sansa twisted her whole body to face him, desperate for details.

"From that stupid game," he waved his hand like she was supposed to know what he was talking about.

"Game?" Sansa was totally clueless.
"Do you and your sister even talk?" Sandor never said a word about his family but she didn't dare bring up that fact.

"Not really," she fought the urge to be defensive, "we get along well enough I suppose, but we are not close."

"Look," he always started that way, just before he said something he truly believed. "I've only met your sister a few times but she seems like a tough kid." Anyone might say that about Arya but coming from Sandor made it sound like a real compliment. It was surprising how happy it made her that he liked the only family member he met so far. One down, five to go.

"You're right," she felt a tiny bit better, "I just feel so bad for daddy..." Sansa sank back down under the waves of guilt. "We're both betraying him."

"Hey, 'betray' is a fuck of a strong word," he objected. "All kids sneak around behind their parent's back - that's normal." When he spoke in that assured tone, everything he said just made perfect sense.

"I'll make it up to you when daddy gets back," she promised. "By taking you on a really special date."

"Oh good," he deadpanned, "a date."

"It can be a backseat date," she offered casually, "if that's what you want."

"Shut up," he eyed her sideways, "before I turn this car around and never take you home."

"You keep threatening to steal me..." Sansa sighed with exaggerated disappointment. "But so far, you're all talk."

"Girl," he growled, "don't test the hound."

"Oh him?" Sansa made a disgusted sound. "That guy is so not my type." She tilted her head back against the seat and smiled at him. "I like sweet guys, like you Sandor."

"Not thinking such 'sweet' thoughts right now, little bird." Sandor was having a hard time keeping his eyes on the road so she had to point out to turn to her apartment when he almost missed it.

"How about this," she sat up straight in her seat and kept her seductive smiles to herself. "If today daddy doesn't call me to check up on Arya..." The mere thought of having to decide between protecting her sister or obeying her father turned her stomach in knots. "Then we'll spend time together tomorrow... and all night if you want." If her younger sister was brave enough to break a few rules then so could she. Sansa rationalized that she was only breaking daddy's no-dating rule by a matter of weeks.

"I'll clear my fucking schedule," he pulled up and parked in front of the building. Sandor turned to face her but did not lean in for a kiss and she worried that he was still upset. "Call me tonight or I'll be up all night wondering if I can see you tomorrow."

"Aw," she put her hand over her racing heart, "you would stay awake thinking about me?" Sansa loved the way he said the dreamiest things in such a casual way. Like he didn't even know he was being romantic, just thought he was saying the simple truth. That made it sound that much more stunning and authentic, instead of some cheesy line.

"Little bird," he lifted a hand to trace his fingers gently along her jaw as his eyes locked with hers. "You're my favorite reason to lose sleep." Sansa's heart stopped beating for a few seconds before she
launched herself at him. Her arms flew around his neck as their lips collided and he caught her, curling his arms around her. Sandor accepted and returned her kiss but let her take the lead. She used her lips to express what she could not say; 'I love you, stay by my side always'.

Chapter End Notes

So much foreshadowing! I hope I'm not laying it on too thick. I am like FREAKING out about the next chapter... Like, whoa! Things are about to get super dramatic! I'm probably building it up to much. MEH!

Sansa's lover gets the next POV!!!
SANDOR

He should've known something was wrong by the heavy way the air stifled the little house his father was so proud of. The day he turned eighteen, he should've left and never come back, but he was so obsessed with saving every last penny. There were times when he even felt grateful that his father let him stay after he legally became an adult. The moment Sandor stepped inside and saw his brother's grinning face, it felt like someone punched him in the gut. Greg should still be locked up behind bars, away from innocent people he could hurt.

Sandor froze in the doorway, staring into the living room where his nightmare lay sprawled on the couch watching a game with dad. It did feel like a nightmare - one that he had many times - but then it made perfect sense. Dad must've done something for Robert Baratheon, who then greased some palms to get Greg paroled. Money can buy anything - even people. The old man didn't even have the guts to look up away from the TV while Greg just grinned in that scary fucking way. Then the phone rang and he knew by the ringtone who it was - exactly who he needed.

"Hey, lover," she purred, "I have good news." Sansa was the light in the darkness, the one good and pure thing in this world tainted by greed and corruption.

"I need to see you," he was already walking - stumbling back out the door. Later he'd come back for his shit, when that fucker was off torturing little animals or whatever he did for fun. Sandor's heart thundered erratically and the sun nearly blinded him even though it was sinking into the horizon. His feet somehow kept walking at a normal pace to the Skylark. He wondered for a minute if he could drive, it didn't even feel like he could breathe. Two more years, he was supposed to have plenty of time to finish high school and leave this city before Greg's sentence was up.

"Right now?" Worry crept into Sansa's voice and it filled him with guilt - but he didn't have anywhere else to go... Just this once he would lean on her, just this one time.

"Right now," he pulled open the car door and fell inside. His hand was shaking as he pulled out the keys to put them in the ignition.

"I'll wait downstairs," she answered hurriedly. "Bye-" He hung up and put the car in drive to race his own demons to the only heaven he's ever known. How could Dad let him back? It was one thing to cover up what Greg did to him - he was still young then. Though, fucking counseling might not have been the worst idea. But, oh no, we can't have a 'crazy person' tarnishing the good Clegane name! Apparently, the brutal rape and attempted murder of an innocent woman didn’t shame the family name too badly.

It was almost two years ago, a national scandal that everyone obsessed about. Then everyone forgot as new scandals stole the spotlight. Robert Baratheon - Sandor tightened his hands on the wheel - got Greg the best lawyer money could buy and already owned the papers. The hot-shot lawyer spun the whole thing into some kind of affair gone wrong. A tawdry 'lover's quarrel', the news called it - between a politician's wife and a star basketball player. He was young and dumb enough to believe his brother was out of their lives but everything just got worse.
People couldn't seem to understand he wasn't his brother. They were terrified of him, especially girls. Eventually the dumbass sheep couldn't even remember why they were so scared of him. But the reputation for being violent persisted and he encouraged it. By that point, he had already become what they expected, he fought and drank and barely kept his grades up. The only people who would even come around him were the basketball team. They obviously loved being considered 'brave' for hanging with him. He never considered them 'friends' - but who needs them?

Sansa came along and pulled him into her fantasy world where everything was made up of fucking rainbows. All along, he thought she needed someone to look out for her, because she was such a naive little bird and knew nothing of the world. Then he realized that she didn't live in a dream world, she tried to make it real by making the people she cared about happy. Other people stepped back in fear when he got mad but she held onto him and asked to help make him feel better. Sandor almost smiled at the memory of her little cheer-up cheer.

The drive to her apartment took forever but his heart felt lighter as soon as he saw her, standing outside the building. Sansa's hair was wet and she hugged her arms, making him realize it had gotten colder since it was getting later. He reached across the seat to open her door and she quickly jumped in a closed the door against the chilled air. The nights really cooled off now that winter had finally come.

"Is everything alright?" Sansa rubbed her hands over her arms as she looked expectantly at him. He tried to open his mouth to speak but no words came out so he pulled the Skylark into a parking space and turned off the car. "What's wrong?" Sandor thought about that question - how to answer it without lying or shocking her too badly. Oh, fuck... what if she just couldn't handle it? "Sandor!" At her shocked tone, he turned to see her covering her mouth with her hand and he realized his face felt cold. Was he... crying?

"Shit," he wiped his face with the back of his hand and stared at the wetness in disbelief.

"Oh no," she reached a shaky hand to his face where he felt more tears falling down. Sandor wanted to make it stop but he didn't know how. "It's alright." Sansa scooted across the distance between them and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "It's okay." It was strange to have her holding him in comfort, running a hand over his hair. "Tell me what I can do."

"Sansa," he turned his face into her hair and smelled that flowery sent she always smelled like. "I can't go home."

"Something happened at home?" Sansa pulled back but held onto his shoulders as she gazed at his face in worry. "You can't tell me?" He wanted to but the words just wouldn't come out. She nodded her head decisively as she gripped his shirt in her fists. "Then come home with me," she pleaded, "I'll be too worried if you leave like this."

"If you'll have me." He understood Sansa well enough to know her offer wasn't made easily but he came to her expecting she would ask him to stay. Her father wasn't like his dad - hers earned his daughter's respect and protected her. Sandor knew he should just handle his shit and go work out or have a drink and scream at the sea... None of that actually made him feel better the way being with her did.

"Gladly," she tried to smile brightly - for his benefit - through her obvious worry. "You'll see... it will be fun." It was lightly raining when they got out of the car and hurried into the apartment building. The elevator ride was awkwardly quiet - Sansa looked about a million miles away as she stared at the numbered buttons. She jumped when the doors slid open and then smiled tightly at him again before leading him to her apartment. Inside was really nice, everything high-end and brand new, reminding him just how much higher up she was.
"I'll find something of daddy's for you to wear," she led him up the hallway and opened the bathroom door to flick on the light. "You'll feel better after a shower, I always do." Sansa tried to smile again but it fell flat before she opened a cupboard to hand him two towels. "Um, shampoo and soap are all in there and I'm sure I can find you a razor if you want to shave, but you don't have to—"

"Little bird, I don't need your help to shower - but you're more than welcome." Sandor didn't always know how to make her smile but turning her cheeks red was easy.

"I'll go find you something to wear," she murmured at the ground as she brushed past him. Sandor watched her retreat, wondering what she was thinking but too afraid to ask. The shower was quick and painless, probably the biggest shower he'd ever been in, but it still felt small. Sansa had snuck in quietly and placed the change of clothes on the countertop. The fit was a bit snug but nothing uncomfortable - the shirt would be better without sleeves though. A cloth sack was set next to the change of clothes and he put his stuff into it and set it by the door.

"I'm in here!" Her voice called from the kitchen, wearing the most ridiculous pink flannel pajamas and fixing something up to eat. She seemed jumpy as he approached so he kept his distance and leaned against the countertop.

"I'll sleep on the couch," it seemed like he should say it out loud to assure her he wasn't trying to take advantage of her pity.

"You don't have to..." Sansa spun away from the sandwiches she was fixing. "I mean, I would like it if we slept together." Sandor stared at her, waiting for her to clarify. "Just sleeping," she added in a high pitch, "if that's aright with you."

"I never slept with anyone before," he told her honestly, "I probably snore and move around a lot."

"Arya says I sleep like the dead," she smiled sheepishly - but genuine this time. "Completely still and barely breathing."

"It's your house," he shrugged, "I'll sleep wherever you tell me to." Sansa nodded her head then spun around to focus on the sandwiches. "I'm kidding, little bird." Sandor moved to her side and turned her to face him. "I'd kill to sleep with you - even just sleeping."

"Okay," she blushed and smiled. "Um... I made something to eat; sorry I don't have much to work with-"

"You are literally the first person in over a decade who's made me a sandwich without my having to pay for it." Sandor thought it was kinda funny but her eyes suddenly turned glassy and she launched herself at him to in a tight hug.

"Tell me anything you want and I'll make it for you," she sounded so damn heartbroken over a stupid sandwich. Sometimes she cared about the weirdest shit. "I wish I didn't miss your birthday so I could make you a cake. Next year I'll make the best cake ever, I promise." Sandor didn't say it out loud but he wouldn't count on them still be together in a year. He wasn't staying here any longer than it took to graduate and she needed to finish school. Damn, he sure wished he could taste the cake she would make him...

"I don't want to wait that long," he complained. "Make me a cake for... what's that day with all the fucking hearts and chocolates?" Sansa pulled back with the silliest happy expression on her face.

"Maiden's Day?" Her eyes - at last free of tears - shone with uncontrolled eagerness. "I am going to make you the most amazing Maiden's Day cake!"
"Good - can we eat those now?" Sandor stared at the plate of sandwiches longingly.

"Oh sorry," she laughed as she picked up the plate and he followed her to the couch. They ate in silence for a few moments - it was nothing special but actually tasted really good. "So... You still cannot tell me what happened?"

"If I tell you," he paused to take another bite and chew it, "you'll have nightmares tonight."

"If you don't tell me..." Sansa stared at her sandwich with a frown before turning her eyes up at him. "Will you have nightmares?"

"Maybe," he finished off the last few bites and sat back to stare up at the ceiling. "My brother got out of prison. Dad just let him come back into the house without even telling me." Sandor waved at his face, not even knowing if she was looking at him. "He's the one who gave me this."

"On purpose?!" Sansa made a few sputtering sounds like she couldn't get any words out and he just nodded in reply. "Oh my gods," she whispered. "Is that why he was in prison? For hurting you?"

"No," it surprised him how much he still cared when he should've gotten over it long ago. "He never got in trouble for that - my father covered it up." Sansa was quiet for a long time so he forced his focus on her and then he wished he didn't. Pity - that was the one thing he never wanted to see from her but it was streaming down her face like a fucking river. "That's so horrible..." Sansa was trembling - he scared her so bad that she actually was shaking. "I'm so sorry, Sandor."

"See?" Sandor wished he could take it all back. "I knew you would be too upset."

"I'm only upset because," she quickly wiped her face on her sleeve and scooted closer to him. "I can't do anything for you. I can't go back and protect you and I don't know how to comfort you now." Sansa groaned and tapped her forehead while squeezing her eyes shut. "I'm sorry, I'm being so selfish."

"You are helping," he reached out to take the hand punishing her forehead, "right now - just being with me."

"I would do anything for you, Sandor." The more she said that the more it scared him but he didn't have the heart to say so when she looked so upset. "Don't tell me I'm wrong for saying that." Her face scrunched up with confusion. "So, the reason Dany doesn't like you has to do with your... brother?"

"You don't want to know." Sandor wished he could keep everything hidden from her. Just hide himself inside her dream world where everything happened for a reason. "Greg beat and raped Dany's aunt then left her for dead - he served just under eighteen months." Now that he thought about it, the cheerleader must've found out about the parole and that's why she tweaked on him. Like she fucking hated Greg more than him...

"Oh my gods," she looked like she wanted to start crying again but was too shocked. "That's so horrible, I feel sorry for Dany and her family." Sansa wrapped both of her hands around his and peered into his eyes. "But that has nothing to do with you..." He just shook his head - she couldn't understand what it was like even if he explained it. "How could he get sentenced so little time?"

"Robert Baratheon," he spit the name out like it tasted like shit. Sansa just stared at him with a blank expression. "You just don't get it, little bird - Greg was ordered to do it."
"Ordered?" She was so innocent - had no fucking clue how corrupt everyone in this city was.

"Paid," he waved a hand. "Whatever you want to call it."

"Why would Mr. Baratheon," she shook her head in disbelief, "want such a horrific thing to happen?"

"Money." he snorted the obvious answer. "Who knows exactly what he told Greg to do - but I know it was him who gave the order." Sandor pulled his hands from hers and stood up - he needed to move around because he was getting twitchy. "Back then the Targaryens were in competition with the Baratheons for some big development deal." He paced the small room as she watched him. "Then everything happened at once, it was like a media shit-storm and turned what should've been an open-and-shut case into a circus."

"How did I not hear about this?" Sansa looked away like she was trying to remember. To someone unrelated it probably just seemed like commonplace sensationalist gossip news. There were stories like that every day - everyone forgets that there are actual people whose lives are affected.

"There's always some new scandal." Those TV personalities sit on their high horses judging everyone else for 'entertainment'. "The newly elected mayor's wife was rushed to the hospital. On the same day her father-in-law set his own office on fire and supposedly killed himself. With the competition out of the way - big fucking surprise - Robert Baratheon got what he wanted." It was all anyone could talk about at the time but he still went to school like it was nothing and so did the Targaryen girl. Guess she had more grit than he gave her credit for. "That girl can hate me, it doesn't hurt me any."

"I don't believe that," she got up and moved to stand in front of him. "Nobody has the right to hate you."

"I might not be as bad as some say," he shook his head and looked away. "But I'm an asshole - even you can't argue with that." Sandor could understand why Dany and everyone feared and hated him. That's exactly the kind of reputation he carefully cultivated for himself. Then nobody would try to 'talk' to him about his 'feelings'... It was easier just to pretend he didn't have any, that's what everyone expected anyway.

"Sometimes you can be... grumpy." Sansa always liked to pretty things up to fit into her neat little understanding of the world. "But I like you the way you are," she took his hand again. "Don't tell me I never get on your nerves."

"You only ever made me happy," it was the plain truth. "If I ever made you feel like I was annoyed by you..." Sandor let his head hang forward, thinking of all the times he acted like an asshole to her just because she was getting under his skin. Sansa saw something in him that he wished he saw in himself but deep down he knew he couldn't live up to her idealization. "I didn't mean it, it was all on me."

"Come to bed with me," she didn't wait for an answer, just tugged his hand as she led him down the hall. Half of her bedroom was exactly as he thought it would be - pretty, pink, and tidy. The other half... looked like his room but with smaller clothes. Sansa let go of his hand to crawl into the bed to lay down and pat the space beside her. The mattress dipped under his weight as he lay beside her and she rolled against him. "I'll never sleep well in this bed again," she snuggled up to his side as he put an arm under her head, "knowing how comfortable it is with you."

"Sansa," he rubbed a hand over her face, "you can't just fucking see things the way you want them to be. You should be scared of the shit I told you!" Sandor didn't want to 'pretend' everything was
going to be okay because they cuddled a bit! "I can't protect you - not from Greg and not from the Baratheons... Your father would do well to take you back to wherever you came from."

"You are protecting me," she propped up on her elbow to look down at him. "By telling me the truth now I won't be so ignorant." Sansa just didn't get it - she didn't understand anything!

"I helped you out with Littlefucker and Joff because I wanted to fuck you," he regretted how harsh that sounded but it was true. "You like me because you see me as some kind of hero but that's not me at all."

"I see you as the boy I like," she whispered, "nothing more and nothing less." Sansa pulled away and sat up to wrap her arms around her knees. "It was sweet that you helped me and it was thrilling when you flirted with me, so I started to like you more every time we met." She shook her head, making her loose hair shimmer in the low lamplight. "I never had to courage to ask a boy out but I liked you so much that I discovered my own bravery. You have taught me a lot about being my own person and trying things I'm scared to do."

"None of that actually explained why you like me." It killed him that no matter how much he tried to figure it out - her attraction to him didn't make any fucking sense. From the first time they met, she even talked to him when no one else did. "You backed into me - looked scared shitless - then you let me walk you to class... Why?"

"We are well-suited, I think." Sansa got the smug little smile on her face - like she knew some secret that he would never guess. "Is that not rather obvious," she raised an eyebrow. "I'm attracted to you, like every other girl who ever liked a boy." He turned his eyes up at the ceiling but could feel her looking at his face.

"Why?" Sandor felt frustrated by her replies, they only confused him more.

"I like you for your..." Sansa rested her chin on her knees as she peered at nothing. "Charisma."

"Charisma? That's bullshit," he laughed at her vague answer. "Just say what you really mean."

"I really mean that I find you charismatic," she insisted. "You're fascinating and I feel... pulled by you. I want to follow you when you walk away." Sansa crawled up the bed to sit beside his head and leaned over into his vision. "I like everything about you."

"I don't know how you ignore it," he kept his eyes on hers, trying to see any trace of dishonesty. Sansa didn't lie but she also needed to be polite - it was almost a sickness.

"I don't," she kept her eyes locked with his. "When you smile, it makes my heart race. When you frown then all I want is to make you happy," Sansa dipped her lips to brush them briefly against his. "Yours are the only lips I want to kiss," she smiled in that dazzling way that made his heart stop. "Maybe I do build you up in my mind but you do the exact same thing to me."

"No, you are exactly as pretty, good, and smart as I think you are." Sandor lifted his hand to run his fingers along her perfect jaw, feeling her impossibly soft skin. "I don't have to build you up."

"Right there," she narrowed her eyes, "that's too much to live up to. Wait till you see me in the morning, all puffy and bedraggled." Sansa rolled her stunning eyes at him. "Then we will see how 'pretty' you find me." She always was a little dense about how gorgeous she really was. Sandor was always grateful for that - though he knew it was a shit thing to appreciate. He wouldn't stand a chance of ever coming close to her if she knew...

"I should go sleep on the couch," he groaned as he sat up. "Neither of us will get any sleep like this."
"Please," she held onto his arm, "stay." She used those blue eyes on him - knowing exactly what she was doing to him. Sansa could be downright cruel sometimes! There was no way he would get any sleep next to her - no matter how ridiculous and childish her sleepwear was.

"Fine," he relented - it would be torture to stay beside her all night but it would also be the best night of his life. He pulled her into his arms and they lay facing each other as he tried to prevent his cock from poking her. Sansa propped up on her elbow and looked down at him with a strange expression he couldn't puzzle out. "What?"

"I'm sorry today was so hard for you," she lowered her eyes, "but I'm really happy that you are here with me." Sansa peeked back up at him with a worried grimace. "Is that terrible?" He gripped the collar of her top and pulled her close to kiss her goodnight before pushing her away - before he couldn't.

"Quit your chirping and go to sleep." Sandor turned her over so she lay on her side away from him and pulled her back against his chest. "Don't ever change, little bird."

"Goodnight, Sandor." Sansa covered a yawn with her hand before lowering it to link her fingers with his.

"Dream sweet," he suddenly remembered that was what his mother used to tell him and it felt right to say it to Sansa.

"I hope I dream of you," she mumbled, already drifting off without a worry in her pretty head. Sandor felt like every moment with Sansa was some long coma dream. Seriously, he considered the possibility once. He was drained from everything that happened that day, in both good ways and bad, but he couldn't give up this rare chance. She really was perfect, even her sleeping face looked so innocent. The guilt about keeping her for himself was eating away at him a little more each day but he wanted to keep her too much. Sandor meant it every time when he threatened to steal her away.

He tucked his hand around her narrow waist and felt like a dog guarding its most precious bone. Before today, his biggest worry was keeping that shit-stain Joff away from Sansa. So far, the ass-hat was too chicken-shit to do anything. Greg... was a different story - nobody around him was safe anymore. Sandor knew he should just get up, leave a shitty note breaking up with her, and walk out the door never to bother her again. That's what a good guy would do... but he never claimed to be any fucking kind of 'good guy'.

She was his - she belonged to him now - anybody who tried to take or hurt her would die by his hand.

Chapter End Notes

I wish I spent a lot more time on this chapter today but I... I'm not going to lie - I spent all day watching the new season of "New Girl" on Netflix. *_* * My Xbox was like: "seriously, are you STILL watching 'New Girl'? GET A LIFE!" And I'm like: "all of my ships are sinking! But it's still really funny! DON'T JUDGE ME XBOX - I'll wear pajamas and watch sitcoms all day if I want!"
The Gods are Cruel

SANSA

After her alarm went off, she quickly reached out to silence it before allowing herself to stay in bed for a few moments longer. He held her tightly against his body with his hand curled around her waist and face buried in her hair. To wake in Sandor's arms was like a glorious dream but then reality set in and she had to wriggle out of his strong hold. He didn't even budge, just scrunched up his face a bit before continuing to snore softly.

"Hey," she gently coaxed Sandor awake, "do you feel up to going to school today?"

"No," he groaned but started to sit up anyway.

"Then stay," she pushed him back down and pressed a kiss to his forehead, "we can skip today."

"You - skipping?" Sandor snorted in disbelief. "I'm dreaming - and if that's the case." He tugged her into his arms and pulled her to his side to bury his face in her messy hair.

"Sandor, I have to use the bathroom," she patted his arm and he released her. "Rest a bit more."

Sansa crept out of the room and closed the door quietly behind her to hurry into the bathroom with a change of clothes. It was like a sign from the gods when she got her monthly yesterday, they were clearly watching out for her precious first time. Last night, having Sandor in her bed would have been too much of a temptation otherwise.

If she pushed him into going too fast, she would never have forgiven herself. Besides, he was in such a vulnerable state last night; he probably did not feel much like doing anything anyway. The things he said... Sansa could not process it this early in the morning. So she turned her attention to showering and getting dressed in comfy lounge-wear. Afterward she set about making breakfast for him as quietly as she could. Time passed as she hummed happily, cooking up a storm, and feeling pretty good despite some mild cramping.

"Holy fuck," he shuffled into the room, rubbing his eyes as he stared in surprise at the spread of food she cooked up. Sansa turned her back on him and blushed as she realized she might have gotten a bit carried away. "I didn't go back to sleep for that long."

"You were tired, it's totally understandable." Sansa moved the last of the bacon she just finished frying up onto a plate with a few paper towels to catch the grease. "You didn't sleep well last night."

"I kept you up," he sounded guilty as he moved beside her to lean against the counter.

"I... liked watching you sleep," it felt embarrassing to admit but Sandor smiled at her. "Sit, sit!" She waved a hand at the table and he moved to follow her order. "I made every breakfast thing that I am capable of making." Sansa pointed at each plate as she listed the options available. "Pancakes, French toast, regular toast, bacon, eggs, and coffee." His disbeliefing stare made her face feel hot again. "I didn't know what you liked."

"I like it all," he grinned as he started piling some food on his plate before he looked around the
kitchen. "Where's the coffee pot?"

"I'll get it!" Sansa rushed to the cabinet to get a mug for him. "How do you take it?"

"How like my girls - hot and sweet," Sandor teased and she turned around to roll her eyes at his childish flirting. "Three huge spoonfuls of sugar."

"In one cup?" Sansa hesitated to add that much sugar to his beverage first thing in the morning... The urge to lecture was tugging so strongly!

"You always say I'm sweet," he chuckled. "I like sweet things."

"I guess I should have known from that mountain of ice cream you ate." Sansa complied with his request and stirred the coffee as she walked over to hand it to him. "So I assume you'll need syrup?" She moved the bottle into his reach and sat down beside him to watch him eat.

"Oh nice," he looked at the bottle, "this is the good stuff." Sandor drizzled the sticky amber liquid all over his pile of pancakes and then over his bacon! He forked a slice of bacon into a pancake and rolled it up like a taco before shoving the whole thing in his mouth. "Oh my fucking gods..." His eyes closed as he chewed and swallowed a gulp of his coffee. "I mean it this time, I'm stealing you."

"I'll cook for you whenever you want," she offered shyly, more than pleased by his reaction. At the same time, Sansa was deeply disturbed by his table manners... but it was sort of cute.

"You aren't eating?" Sandor shoved another mouthful of food into his mouth and hummed with pleasure. "It's so good!"

"No... I, um," Sansa did not want to discuss her monthly at the breakfast table... or ever. "I don't have much of an appetite right now."

"Cause I kept you up," he dropped his fork, "fuck."

"No!" Sansa held her hands up, scrambling for a reply to assure him it wasn't his fault. "It's... just... I'm not feeling well."

"Should you go to the doctor," he looked suddenly worried. "Is that why you wanted to take the day off?"

"Sandor," she rubbed a hand over her burning cheek, "it's that time... of the month." Sandor just stared at her blankly. "For me."

"Oh," understanding finally dawned on his face but it only made her more embarrassed. "And you can't even eat?"

"I get queasy in the morning," she took an anxious sip of her creamy coffee.

"Every time?" Sandor did not seem to get that she was not comfortable discussing such a personal thing.

"I feel weird talking about this," she just said it directly... while staring into her mug.

"Oh, sorry." Sandor resumed eating like he did not care one way or the other. "I guess I just don't know much about it." He gave her another worried look before washing down his mouthful of food with the rest of his coffee. "Let me know if there's anything I can do."

"Sandor, never change," she turned his sweet words from last night back on him as she picked up his
mug to refill it. "Will you watch movies you will definitely hate," she called from the kitchen. "While cuddling with me on the couch?" Sansa returned to the table and set his mug beside him once more.

"Sure thing, little bird." Sandor lifted the cup to his lips but stopped to stare at it with an oddly serious expression. "Nobody ever did things like this for me before," he did not look up at her as he spoke, "thanks."

"Thank you, for letting me do this for you." Sansa never felt happier than when she was with Sandor and prayed that someday they could spend every morning together. "I wish..." She cast off her fear of rejection, reminding herself that she was the person he came to for help. "We could do this every day."

"If I woke up in bed with you every morning," he narrowed his eyes at her, "and didn't get to have you, I'd go fucking insane."

"I keep counting down the days to the Winter Formal," she ran her hand over his forearm, "but it still seems forever away." Though it was hard to wait, looking forward to the occasion made her smile every day. It was going to be most special and memorable night of her life! In the meantime, everything they did was like practice so they would be ready.

"I'm looking forward to it," he smirked as he leaned on the table towards her.

"Sandor," she moved closer as well, "I never realized you were a lover of formal dances."

"I'm dying to see you all pretty in your dress," his voice lowered as he tilted his head down, "and I'd love to see you out of it too."

"And so you shall," she closed the small gap between their lips. Sandor was sweet and a little sticky from the syrup, he pulled her up as he stood and led her to the couch. He forgot all about breakfast and she could not care less if they watched a movie.

ARYA

"Oh shit," Gendry bounded out of bed, "Arry, wake up." She just groaned and rolled over to pull the blanket over her shoulder. "What the fuck happened to the alarm?!"

"I turned it off," she grumbled, "I was tired."

"Arry!" Gendry sure was acting brave - yelling at her so early in the morning. "You don't get to decide everything for me as well." He tore through his drawers to find some clothes to pull on. "I actually wanted to go to school today."

"Then go," she groaned and covered her head with the blanket, feeling sore all over. "Ugh, I feel like shit." She lowered her hand to her stomach and felt the familiar tight sensation... "Oh no," Arya jumped up to run to the bathroom to discover in fact, she had started her period - fucking lovely. "NO! Godsdamnit!"

"What's wrong?" Gendry knocked on the door, Arya quickly took care of the situation as best she could, and opened the door to his worried expression.

"I forgot... my period." Arya leaned against the doorframe, more irritated than she'd ever been before. "The gods are cruel."

"Sounds like good news to me." Gendry's easy smile slipped as she glared at him - seriously considering beating the shit out of him. "I'm sorry, is there anything you need?"
"Yeah," she sighed heavily as she brushed past him, "we have to go to my house to get it."

"Can't I just buy you something at the store?" Was he seriously questioning her?

"Stupid," she sneered at his ignorance. "The tampon and sanitary napkin industries are slowly poisoning women and the planet." Gendry gaped at her, clearly not knowing how to respond to that much truth laid on him. "I use reusable organic cotton ones, is basically what I'm saying." Arya ripped a hand through her hair in frustration. "I can't believe I forgot!"

"It's no big deal," he walked up to her and put his arms around her shoulders. "I didn't just bring you here to have sex." Gendry kissed the top of her hair while she scowled into his chest. "We can still spend all our time together: that's all that matters."

"Whatever," she pulled away - pissed to be the only one even slightly upset their week was ruined!

"Arry," he followed after her, "please don't be mad."

"Just get ready to go," she grumbled, already regretting her bad attitude. Arya pulled on something half-way decent and walked up to Gendry with her head hung. "Sorry, I was half-asleep when I turned off the alarm." She put her arms around his waist and hid her face against his chest. "I didn't mean to."

"Sorry I yelled at you when you don't feel well," he stroked her hair and heaved a sigh. "Let's go get what you need and we'll take the day off." Arya couldn't believe he gave in just like that and didn't argue - even though she knew he'd beat himself up about it later... All day yesterday was torture, sitting through school and then waiting around for Gendry to get off work. He passed out early last night and then this mess happened! Just this one more day and then she'd go to school again like he wanted.

"Okay," she nodded against his chest before letting go and heading for the door. She didn't feel much like talking on the ride to her father's apartment - it's weird how it didn't feel like 'home' anymore. If Arya had to say where she felt at home, it would be 'with Gendry' every time. Even when he annoyed the daylights out of her, she still wanted to be with him. Because fighting with him was better than the best thing without him. "Stay in the car," she ordered as he pulled up in front of the building.

All the way up the elevator she wished, hoped, and prayed she could keep her temper in check for the rest of the day. It wasn't Gendry's fault that she felt like shit and their god-given sex week was put on hold due to Mother Nature's jealous wrath. As soon as she walked into the apartment, she knew Sansa was home but wondered why she made so much breakfast... Oh my gods!!!

"Oh good-ness gra-cious!" Arya laughed her ass off at the scene she found - her sister all tangled up with her beastly boyfriend in the living room. "Big sister, I didn't think you had it in you." She applauded as her sister leapt up off the couch faster than a speeding bullet. "Well done!"

"Great timing, kid." The beast sulked like Arya just took away his favorite candy - she probably did! Good, if she was getting any... Oh, right.

"So," she grinned at her sister, "I'm guessing Mother Nature wrecked your week too?"

"That's none of your business!" Sansa's face turned beet red and she pointed at the door. "Hurry and get what need and get out if you're leaving!"

"I'm not staying," she held up her hands, still grinning as she turned towards their bedroom to get what she needed. "Gendry is waiting downstairs." Arya hurried into the bathroom to take the fastest
shower ever and grab what she needed to not keep him waiting too long.

**GENDRY**

When the door opened, he didn't look up because he was digging through his wallet. He couldn't find the number for the guy who traded shifts with him sometimes. The feminine throat clearing clued him in pretty quick and Gendry whipped his head to see an attractive girl with bright red hair.

"You're Arya's sister, right?" He started to sweat under her cool gaze as Sansa nodded once to confirm her identity. "I'm Gendry," he held out his hand, "the boyfriend... ah, her boyfriend... your sister's-"

"Do you love my sister?" She flicked her eyes to his hand and pointedly crossed her arms.

"Yes," he answered immediately. "More than anything." Sansa nodded again, her eyes never wavering. Though they were blue, she still had the Stark-family death stare down.

"Most people say I'm a nice girl." She narrowed her eyes and uncrossed her arms to straighten her shoulders and look down her nose at him. "If you ever hurt my little sister, you'll see exactly how nice I can be."

"I would never-"

"Furthermore," Sansa sighed, "she has the tendency to get people into trouble." Her cool expression tightened with worry and Gendry actually thought it was sweet that she cared so much. "She lives for trouble," she turned a pleading look at him. "Arya needs someone who can bring her back down."

"I try my best," he promised. Today he fucked up by letting them miss school again but tomorrow he would set every alarm in the house and drag her out if he had to. They could not get caught this time or there would be hells to pay.

"That's all I can ask," the frostiness melted completely as a warm smile stretched her lips. "Nice to meet you, Gendry." Sansa finally stretched out her hand and gave him a soft handshake.

"Same here," he felt like he passed a test that he was sure he'd fail. Abruptly the car door wrenched open and Arya scowled at her sister.

"Beat it!" Arya jerked a thumb and stood to the side as Sansa rolled her eyes and gave him a quick wave goodbye. "Bye, San-sa!"

"Nice talking to you," he called after her.

"What did she want?" Arya narrowed her eyes at him as she slid into the car and slammed the door shut.

"Big sister stuff, I guess." Gendry shrugged before he pulled the car around to head back to Flea Bottom.

"From her?" Arya laughed like it was ridiculous that her sister cared about her. For such a smart girl she really could be clueless sometimes. "She's so weird."

"Wish I had an older sister," he admitted: possibly sulking a bit. By this point, every family member he met of Arya's made it clear she was precious to them. His mom didn't even know he was dating Arya because he didn't want to disappoint her that he didn't listen to her warnings.
"Your mom is basically like an older sister but a lot cooler," she was busy envying him while he was jealous of her. The grass is always greener... "My mother is more like a warden, I thought dad would ease up once we lived without her but it's only made him even tenser."

"Being a single parent is really hard," he asserted, "cut your dad some slack."

"You're right," she spoke the words he never thought to hear pass through her lips. "I just hate having to sneak around."

"It's kinda fun," he teased but she only gave him a tight smile and turned her head to rest against the window. Gendry was starting to worry when she pressed her hand against her stomach and pulled her legs up to curl into a little ball. He kept quiet to let her rest until they pulled up in front of his apartment building and made the slow climb up. "Now," he shut the door behind him, "this time I'm serious... What do you want to do?"

"Ugh..." Arya collapsed onto the couch and curled up into that little ball position. "Wanna pig out on the couch, watch old shitty movies, and make pithy arrogant criticisms?"

"I thought you'd never ask," he walked to the kitchen to get some snacks going: popcorn seemed appropriate. As the food popped in the microwave Gendry put in a MST3K DVD and handed Arya the remote to choose what she wanted to watch. He got together the popcorn and some drinks to bring them out for her. She curled up by his side and munched on the popcorn while they watched one of his favorites: 'Cave Dwellers'.

"It was worth getting grounded," she said out of the blue. "You totally fell in love with me that day in the pool."

"It was way before that," he laughed. "Why?" Gendry tilted his head to look at her. "Is that when you fell for me?"

"No," she munched a big handful of popcorn, "after that - well, when you dumped me I realized I loved you." Gendry looked back to the movie, avoiding her eyes at the mention of his pathetic attempt to drive her away. "I guess it happened so slowly that I just didn't notice, but I always wanted you, since I first saw you." Arya put the mostly emptied bowl of popcorn aside and leaned into his vision. "So?"

"That first day," he smiled at how bent-out-of-shape she made him since the first second their worlds collided. "I never met anyone like you." Falling for Arya was the best thing he ever did completely against his will. "You stole my heart like it was nothing."

"Wasn't even trying," her teasing smile slipped as her eyes glanced away. Arya settled down on the couch, laying her head in his lap and pulling his arm around her. "If you already loved me... how could you dump me like that?" Gendry had been waiting for her to question that day: he deserved whatever she said. "It really sucked." That's it, where were the accurate accusations of cowardice?

"I didn't think I was brave enough to do this," he knew it was a weak reason but it was the truth. The thought of disappointing his mother and getting lost in some ill-fated teen romance terrified him. "I'm not the type who disobeys their parent or gets in trouble at school." Arya rolled over on her back to turn her big grey eyes up at him and pushed her arm around her. "At least, I wasn't before I met you." Gendry sighed as he admitted the last part, knowing it was the stupidest reason of them all. "Also, I didn't think you liked me that much."

"I threw myself at you," she scoffed, raising both eyebrows at him in disbelief. What did he know? Gendry still could hardly believe how that day went down: a blur of chlorinated water and
unrestrained lust.

"But you were so cool about it!" For all he knew then, she seduced guys all the time and was just lucky enough to be in her path. "I was freaking out the whole time."

"I wasn't even thinking straight that day," she grinned like it was a happy memory instead of the most embarrassing day of his life. "Varys' face..." Arya chuckled evilly and he had to admit the situation was a bit humorous if he forgot it happened to him. "What was he even doing there?"

"Maybe he wanted to take a swim," he shrugged before he raised a hand over Arry's face and tapped her on the nose. "Guess you didn't figure the principal into your little plan."

"Did you really believe I planned that?" She moved his hand out of the way and gave him a 'you're a dumbass' look.

"You didn't?" Gendry clearly remembered her whole speech about leaving the window open and everything. "But you said-

"Hells no," she held onto her stomach as she snorted with laughter, "I was just trying to take the heat off you." Arya put a hand to her chest and beamed with pride. "I'm an excellent liar."

"Huh," he didn't know how to feel about that. Gendry couldn't tell at all when she was lying and it would kill him if she didn't mean the things she said.

"I'll never lie to you," her expression grew serious, "never." Arya sat up to stare hard at him, her hair falling over her darkened eyes. "Let's only have the truth between us from now on - even if it's hard to say."

"I promise," he agreed immediately and bent forward to kiss the tip of her nose. Arya tilted her chin up to kiss him with such softness he had to pull back to see it was really her. "Gods," he breathed, "I love you so much, Arya."

"You can't ever dump me again," she ordered. "I'll never love anyone else so neither can you."

"Never," he swore, "even if the whole world turns against us: I'll never let you go." She stared at him for a few seconds before returning to rest her head on his lap and watched the movie. Every so often, she would add a witty comment until she drifted off to sleep and he turned off the TV to watch her. Sometimes she said things in her sleep, usually it was just nonsense, but lately he heard her calling him.

"Stupid," she murmured. Gendry shrugged and figured that counted as her calling to him. He wondered what dreams were going on inside her head and figured she was on some great adventure: probably busy saving his ass.

Chapter End Notes

So... I'm freaking crazy tired, so just pretend I wrote something personal and witty that stole your heart and made your day a little brighter.
ARYA

She woke up before the alarm and resisted the overwhelming temptation to turn everything off and go back to sleep. Gendry's sleeping face had to be the cutest thing Arya had ever seen. She grabbed her phone and tilted her head beside his to take a few pictures and then after that she started getting bored as all hells. Sitting up beside him, with her legs crossed, her fingers pinched the top of the sheet covering his chest. Slowly, to avoid waking him, she slid it downward to reveal his gloriously sculpted body. Not for the first time, she wondered if she saved the kingdom in a past life.

Arya pondered where a citizen might file a petition to have it made into law that Gendry could not wear a shirt of any kind - ever. This kind of beauty should never be covered! His abs could lead to world peace... okay maybe that was a bit much. He didn't wake up as she moved the sheet lower with a victorious grin to uncover the bulge hidden in his shorts. She loathed that he was always awake before her so she never got a chance to wake him up. Her fingers lightly traced over his hardness as she watched to see if his eyes stayed closed.

She slid her hand under the waistband to wrap her fingers around him, suppressing a whine as she felt how hard he was was. Arya had big plans for how to make up for the time lost due to her period, Gendry didn't stand a chance. It wasn't like her to pray but she prayed like crazy that she would be off her period for his birthday. He suddenly grasped her wrist to stop her from absentmindedly stroking him awake.

"We're going to school today, Arry," his husky morning voice was so torturous. "Even if you keep-" She cut his words off with a firm tug and he relaxed his hold on her wrist. "Fuck... Okay, but after this," he groaned as she moved her other hand over his chest. "I'm getting up, I swear."

"I just wanted to make you happy before school," She smirked as he made a low whining sound in his throat - Gendry made the cutest noises. Arya never got a chance to enjoy the sounds he made because she was always screaming her head off. "We'll go today," she promised. "Does it feel good?"

"So good," he nodded with his eyes squeezed shut as he curled a hand over her thigh to hold it tightly. It was strange to Arya - how she could enjoy something so much while feeling tortured. But it was nice to be able to focus on him and see his body reacting to her touch. Usually she was so obsessed with getting the good stuff that she forgot to enjoy the experience. There was so much she never noticed before, like the adorable way his face scrunched up.

"I've been thinking..." Arya continued to stroke him in a slow steady rhythm. "We shouldn't be in such a hurry all the time - next time, I want to try being on top."

"Sounds great," he groaned in the sexiest voice that she ever heard. Arya shivered from overwhelming - almost unbearable - longing and tried maintain her to focus on him.

"Tell me what it's like," she wanted to hear his voice even though it drove her crazy.
"Really-really good," he wheezed as his hips flexed and his stomach tightened. Every part of her body ached with desperate yearning that she tried to channel into pleasing him.

"Am I doing it right?" She tugged down his waistband to see better and stroked more firmly. "Like this?" He just nodded and panted for breath. "Should I shut up?"

"No," he gasped, "keep telling me." Gendry's fingers tightened around her thigh. "What you want to do.

"I want you to lie back just like this while I have you." Arya swept her free hand over his chest to feel his heart thundering within. "I want to watch you and I want you to watch me." He opened his eyes to focus on her and she smiled at him. "We can take it slow, just like this." Her hand continued to pump his cock - slow and steady - until he squeezed his eyes shut again and released one soft cry. His release rushed through her fingers and erupted onto his stomach. "No way," she never actually saw it happen before since it was always inside her, "that's amazing."

"It's not so amazing," he laughed breathlessly. "I've been doing it without any help for years." Gendry pointed to his cast-off shirt and she handed it to him so he could clean up. He balled the shirt up and tossed it into the laundry basket by his door before collapsing back on the bed. "Can you wake me up that way every morning?"

"I will," she laughed at the ridiculously happy expression he made, "on the days we can't have sex - if..."

"If?" Gendry's smile fell.

"You return the favor," she grinned, "every morning I'm not perioding."

"I don't think that's very fair," he grumbled.

"Tough," she grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head and grinned at his hungry gaze. The boy had stamina for days, every girl should get a blacksmith of their own.

"Ah," he sighed, "you make a good argument." Gendry sat up as he reached out for her, curling a hand around her waist. The rasp of his calloused fingertips against her skin was the single most wonderful feeling she'd ever known. "I think we have an agreement," he lowered his lips to murmur - really low and sexy... "Let's go to school now."

"Aw," she moaned, "I don't wanna!"

"You're going," he tightened his hand around her waist, "and that's that."

"I love when you try to order me around," she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pressed her chest against his.

"Really?" Gendry sounded like he didn't believe her.

"No," she admitted, "it makes me want to kick your ass." Arya groaned as he dipped his head to brush his lips down her neck. "Then have sex with you."

"I'll gladly take the beating," he murmured against her skin, "if I can have you after."

"Stop torturing me!" Arya groaned and pushed him back on the bed to hop up to make some stupid coffee and find some stupid clothes. "Let's go to stupid school!" His mocking laughter chased her out of the room and though she was seven hells of sexually frustrated - she felt happy.
"There you are!" Margaery waved to get her attention as Sansa was walking to sit down with Jayne for lunch. "I looked for you yesterday," she smiled brightly, "have lunch with me." Her invitation sounded like a very polite command but Sansa saw the opportunity to get some answers.

"Okay." Sansa nodded and waved apologetically at Jayne before following Margaery to a table to sit by themselves.

"Dany told me about her little blow-up," Margaery held both hands up in a sign of surrender. "This is not interfering - I just want to offer myself as a wellspring of information." She beamed cheerfully as she opened her bento box to reveal a beautiful array of sushi. "Ask me anything." Well, that did not require much convincing.

"Sandor told me about his brother," Sansa ignored her lunchbox, not having much of an appetite. "The only thing I cannot understand is..." All along, she wanted Sandor to tell her the truth but now that she heard it, part of her wished she was still ignorant. Knowing the truth only made her want to ask more questions but she was afraid that would push him away. Margaery enjoyed her lunch while she waited for Sansa to get her question out. "Why would you all hate him for something his brother did?"

"Oh..." Margaery covered her mouth as she chewed, her brow furrowed in concentration. "Honey, 'hate' is such a strong word." She set her chopsticks down and looked Sansa straight in the eye. "We're 'cautious' about him, if you can see the difference."

"I heard you are dating Joffrey Baratheon again." Sansa thought that boy was much scarier than Sandor ever could be. "Why are you not equally 'cautious' of him?" Margaery's brows knitted together at the comparison and Sansa quickly continued. "Sandor thinks that Mr. Baratheon is the one who ordered the attack on Dany's aunt. I don't think you should hold Joffrey responsible for his father's actions but Sandor is in the same position."

"Mr. Baratheon is an idiot who surrounds himself with dangerous people to feel important." Margaery sneered as she spoke of her boyfriend's father. "Gregor Clegane is actually a dangerous person."

"But Sandor is not!" Sansa thought it was ridiculous that she even had to point that out. How can they hold someone responsible for something he was completely uninvolved in?

"Have you ever seen the hound beat someone unconscious?" Margaery crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows. Sansa just shook her head no, having a hard time believing he would do something like that. "I have, last year and on campus. You know what the consequences were? Nothing, he didn't even get suspended. Nobody deserves that kind of impunity." Sandor admitted that he had a past but even her brothers got into fights from time to time. It had to be an exaggeration, he was not that violent!

"That was last year," Sansa argued, "he's changed..."

"For your sake, I hope you're right." Margaery uncrossed her arms and shrugged with the heavy side. "I don't know, maybe to you he is the nicest person but to everyone else he's crude, rude, and arrogant. He solves his problems with threats, intimidation, and finally violence. If that is alright with you - there's nothing I can say."

"I want to give Sandor the chance that no one else gives him." Sansa wished that other people could see him the way she did.
"That's noble, I understand better than you think." Margaery turned to put her half-eaten lunch away and leaned against the table, staring down at her hands. "It's not my place to tell Dany's story to anyone but I will make this one exception if you swear on your life not to say anything to anyone."

"I swear," Sansa whispered the promise. She was both impatient and terrified to better understand what really happened two years ago to affect so many lives.

"Dany's uncle ran for mayor of King's Landing and her entire family moved here to support his campaign." Margaery spoke about any emotional inflection at all, as if she were reading off a grocery list. But her eyes were haunted as if she were looking directly into the past. "Her uncle ran against the incumbent, Mr. Baratheon's father-in-law, and won." She turned to face Sansa. "Do you understand what that meant for his business?"

"I can imagine it was not good." Sansa knew enough about her father's business to understand that connections where everything.

"When I first met Dany, she was exactly like you - sweet and innocent." Margaery smiled as she reminisced. "I befriended her immediately because I wanted to help her." She smirked wryly at Sansa. "Sound familiar? I have a bad habit of trying to fix everyone else before myself. Admitting the problem is the first step." Her teasing expression slipped as she looked back at her hands.

"Mere weeks after the election Dany went home from school early because she wasn't feeling well..." Margaery squeezed her eyes closed and shook her head. "She found her aunt in a condition you cannot possibly imagine. She was fifteen and every scrap of innocence was torn away that day."

"Oh..." Sansa could not think of a word to describe how horribly sorry she felt for Dany.

"If Dany had stuck it out at school, she would have arrived home to find her aunt dead. But she sees it the other way - she thinks she should have gone home earlier." Margaery's face was mask of anguish and Sansa could tell it was difficult for her to continue. "I've watched the guilt eat away at her for years now. She thinks she has to take care of everyone but never herself..." She stopped and quickly swiped her eyes and sniffled before turning back with a well-practiced smile. "I'm sorry - I know you must have questions."

"Is it true that her father killed himself?" The more Sansa heard of the sad tale the more horrible it became.

"Her family had been hiding his mental illness for years." Margaery shrugged as if she didn't know what to believe. "Dany blames Gregor Clegane and Robert Baratheon for his death." She turned her sad gaze to Sansa with a weary smile. "I'm not stupid, Sansa, I know the hound had nothing to do with what happened. Dany knows that as well but she still has to see him getting away with his violent behavior, just like his brother." Her face tightened with anger and Sansa struggled with the urge to argue. "I assume you know he's out of prison?"

"I heard." Sansa resisted the urge to shudder, thinking about a monster like that on the loose. "I can understand Dany's feelings." She didn't say that though she understood, she still thought no one had the right to judge Sandor based on another's actions. "It's almost funny... if it weren't so sad. Dany and Sandor both hate the same people but they can't lean on each other." Margaery blinked in shock at her comment, clearly never even considered what was obvious to Sansa.

A tragedy happened that should have given them common ground; instead, they both hide in their anger and pain. Sansa did not know how but somehow, some way, she would find a way to make peace between Dany and Sandor.
"What are we doing here?" Missa slipped hand underneath Torgo's textbook and closed it with a thump.

"To study... literature." His dark eyes looked at her with a confused and slightly alarmed expression.

"You already know this." Missa waved to hand over the tabletop full of notes and gave him a pointed look, daring him to tell her she was wrong. She wasn't wrong; he was pretending not to understand. Did he think she was stupid? Did he like her or not?!

"Missa..." Torgo trailed off after he said her name, apparently unable to argue or explain himself.

"Why am I wasting my time?" Missa gave him a hard look, crossing her arms and waiting.

"I'm sorry." Those two words were easy for anyone to say, and certainly didn't satisfy her in any way.

"That's it?" She stood up to gather her belongings. "As your tutor, I feel it's vital to point out this is the part when you stop me from leaving."

"Missa, please don't leave." He stood up to block her path, ringing his hands and glancing way.

"Whatever I did to make you upset-"

"You did nothing!" She wanted to shout at him but they were in the library so she was keeping her voice to a high-pitched hiss. "Nothing, not once! Why don't you ask me out?!

"Oh." His mouth hung open surprise.

"How embarrassing... you don't like me." Missa sank back down into her seat and braced an elbow against the table to hold her face, burning with shame. "I'll text you some numbers of a few good tutors I know. I'm very sorry, I thought-"

"I do like you." He quickly took the seat beside her and leaned forward on the table.

"I've been tutoring you so long you could practically teach a literature class." Missa felt happy about his confession but also annoyed and confused that she had to drag it out of him. "Why have you never asked me out?"

"You're really... intimidating." Torgo gulped and looked down at the table.

"You're a junior, I'm a sophomore." He waved a hand back-and-forth between them as if needing to emphasize that a distance existed. "You are a genius and stunningly beautiful. I'm just... Torgo." His hand rested on his chest as he frowned down at the table.

"I like you." These sorts of things need to be said out loud so that further miscommunication could be avoided. They wasted all this time already studying something they both already knew when they could have been dating! Missa realized he was just staring at her; he didn't even look like he was breathing. "Torgo?" She waved her hand in front of his unblinking eyes. "You okay?"

"Go-out-with-me!" The run-on sentence came out in a strangled high pitch. Torgo cleared his throat and lowered his tone. "Please, go out on a date with me."

"Finally," she breathed, raising her eyes to the ceiling. "I will go out with you, Torgo." Missa felt
like this burden was lifted off of her. She spent an embarrassing amount of time wondering if her crush was one-sided. "Where should we go?"

"Uh..." He looked somewhat panicked by her question. "Can I get back to you on that?"

"This weekend is free for me," she offered hopefully.

"Great," he smiled and Missa's heart melted. Was there ever a more beautiful smile? "Oh wait... Would you like to go to a wedding tomorrow?"

"A wedding?" She thought that was a strange setting for a first date.

"Sorry," he waved his hands, "forget I asked-"

"A wedding could be fun," she smiled encouragingly. At this point Missa was so desperate for a date she would pretty much go anywhere and do anything. "I guess, technically," she tried for a lighthearted tone. "I'll be the one driving so call me tonight to let me know when to pick you up."

"Right," he laughed nervously, "I will."

"Great," she returned his anxious smile. "I have to meet the girls now... it's important." Torgo nodded understandingly. "You will call me later?"

"Of course," he promised, "so we can go on a date... to a wedding." He laughed again, like he could not believe it.

"Bye, Torgo." Missa's face was nearly splitting as she waved goodbye, happy and shocked that everything turned out so well. Her first date!

"Bye," he waved back as she started backing away towards the door. "Uh..." He pointed behind her. "You-" Missa turned around to see she was about to back into a bookshelf.

"Right," she laughed at herself, "okay bye." Missa turned to face the right direction and headed out the door to meet up with Dany and Margaery. They were both dealing with such heavy stuff all the time. Which made it impossible to complain about normal difficulties. How could she express her fear of never having a boyfriend when Marge was dating the devil himself? How could she complain about her shyness when Dany had PTSD-induced panic attacks?

"Missa!" Margery called, sitting in front of the weirwood with Dany. Missa ran up to them with a huge smile, just happy to have some good news to share. "What in the world has gotten into you?"

"I'm sorry," she looked to both of them as she knelt on the ground, "for blowing you off for a few days. Lately, I've been really frustrated... But something really good happened today!"

"We noticed," Marge gave her a curious look. "Why are you grinning like a fool?"

"You got asked out!" Dany's mouth hung open as Missa nodded in affirmation. "Oh my gods! Who?!"

"Torgo, the boy I'm tutoring." Missa looked down to pick up a fallen leaf and spun the stem between her fingers. "Is it too weird?"

"No! It's great!" Dany clapped her hands and looked upward as if thanking the gods before grinning at Missa. "I'm sorry too. I can be patronizing at times, and I don't even realize it. Just slap me whenever I start doing it."
"Then I'll never stop slapping you," Missa teased.

"Hey!" Dany narrowed her brows and fought not to smile. Just then, Marge's phone buzzed and ruined the good mood.

"Oh, um," she checked her phone as she stood up. "I'll just go... and I'll be right back!" Margaery dashed away without a backward glance.

"Marge!" Dany called after their friend with a completely defeated expression. It's not like they hadn't been in this situation dozens of times before. Joff calls and Margery goes running like a good little girlfriend. "What are we going to do about her?"

"There's nothing we can do, you need to stop trying to fix people." Missa gave Dany a hard look, unwilling to keep silent just to spare her friend's feelings. "Both of you need to focus on yourselves."

"That's why we need you, Missa." Dany crawled to her side to rest her blonde head on Missa's shoulder. "You are the brains of this whole operation. Please, no matter what, don't go this long not talking to me again. I'm so sorry for the way I've been behaving, it's just..."

"Want to talk about it?" Missa shared her good news; she felt good enough to bear some of her friend's burdens.

"What's to tell?" Dany laughed without humor and put her arms around Missa. "Marge is back with that shit-stain. I had a really weird 'fight' with the hound and Sansa. I cried in front of Drogo: that was fun. Oh, and the man who destroyed my family is out of prison."

"So," Missa returned Dany's hug with a sigh, "a typical week then?"

"Basically," Dany laughed again but wiped away a few tears. "I'm so glad you aren't mad at me anymore."

"I can't afford to stay mad at you two..." Missa broke out of Dany's hug and took ahold of her shoulders. "I'm going on a date!" She shook her friend in exaggerated desperation. "I need a whole new outfit."

"What are we waiting around here for?" Dany pushed off the ground to stand and offered a hand to Missa. "Let's go drag Marge away from her phone and get to the mall."

"We should figure out a way to block Joff's number." Missa took Dany's hand to stand up and grabbed her backpack off the ground.

"You are brilliant!" Dany grabbed her own bag and whipped around in excitement to start walking in the direction Margaery took off in.

"I know," Missa smirked but then grimaced when she thought about getting caught. "She would kill us though. Literally, death for us both."

"Oh," Dany's eyes grew wide, "right."

"But..." Missa shrugged and pursed her lips. "There's a chance he might dump her before she realizes what we did."

"That's an exceptional point," Dany grinned once more, "I'm in if you are."

"Operation: Bleach Shit-stain is underway." Missa stood up straight and saluted Dany who laughed
and mirrored the gesture.

"I love it when we team up," she giggled, "I always feel like such a badass. Oh, there she is," she hissed. "Marge, darling!" Dany lifted both hands up in the air. "We're going shopping!"

"Oh, thank the gods." Margaery did not look happy as she approached them, even though she was smiling. Missa knew her forced smile better than anyone excepting Dany. "Let's make you so damn gorgeous, poor Toto won't be able to breathe."

"It's 'Torgo'." Missa scowled at her friend, who never remembered any boy's name except Joffrey's.

"Whatever!" Marge sang as she stepped between them so all three could link arms. "He's going to lose his damn mind!"

"This sounds less appealing with every passing minute." Missa did not think she could stand it if Torgo got even more nervous around her.

"Trust us!" Margery beamed, never happier than when she was dressing someone up. Missa would play along, of course, to make her friends happy. These carefree moments were so few and far between it seemed. There was always some disaster waiting around the corner but for the moment, they were just a trio of girlfriends going to the mall.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter Gendry had a 'good morning'.

Next up: Sandor POV chapter entitled: "Good Night". It's gonna be pretty steamy. I don't know if you can handle it. :P
They lay in the dark under her sheets, pulling and tugging at one another. Their mouths melded together until they were forced to come up for air. Sandor never considered what it would be like when Sansa finally let go of any remaining shyness - it was an eighth hell. She wore only a little pair of shorts and a tank top and he could swear she was wearing the outfit to torture him.

"Tonight," it physically pained him to pull his hands away from her body. "I have to sleep on the couch."

"Is it really too hard," she panted, "for you to stay here with me?" Her breathless voice was making it was difficult to form an answer. Sansa's arms still clung to his neck and his well-placed knee was the only thing keeping his cock from pressing against her.

"Really," he ground out, "really fucking hard." Sandor lowered his knee and shifted his hips forward as she wriggled closer.

"Oh I see," she pulled back, slipping and hand between their bodies to brush the tips of her fingers over the length of his cock. "If it's okay, can I touch you... with all of your clothes off?" Sandor didn't even hear the request before he started nodding but then it sunk in. Naked - she wanted him to be naked in her bed - and she wanted to make him come. He didn't see any reason to argue with that request so he sat up to follow through and she leaned on her arm to watch him.

"Okay," he exhaled slowly. Sandor tried not to let on how nervous he was as he rose to stand in the middle of the room and quickly stripped off his clothes. He paused when he got to the briefs to look up at her - she was biting her knuckle and running her eyes over him. "Everything?" Her eyes snapped to his and she nodded her head quickly, her whole face turning red but her expression was eager. After shedding every scrap of cloth, he stood naked as his nameday and awkwardly waited for her to invite him back into bed.

"Wow," she murmured, holding her hand just under her mouth. Sansa was staring at his erection so hard it was actually making him weak in the knees. "Sit next to me please," she flushed even more, looking away as she patted the bed. He avoided her eyes as he sat down on the bed - fucking bare-assed naked - and tried to act cool about it.

The dark helped, Sandor thought it was silly of her to leave the light off while they made out but it did make things less overwhelming. A small reading lamp on her bedside table was the only light in the room. She kept glancing away, flushing with embarrassment. After a moment she focused on him with a determined unwavering gaze. Sansa's expression held no trace of embarrassment, seeming to forget - he was fucking naked.

"Lay back," she softly ordered and he stretched out beside her. Her hand hovered over his chest as she asked for permission. "Is it okay if I..."

"Little bird," he didn't know how to make it any clearer. "I have no fucking doubt that my sexual
limits far surpass your. Do - whatever - you want.” If he had to lie there any longer, with her just looking at him, he would have to take matters into his own hand.

"You might be surprised," she gave him a naughty look that made his mouth go dry. "Oh my gods, your expression..." She broke into a fit of giggles and covered her mouth. "I'm kidding!" Sandor rolled his eyes and moved his arms back to link his hands behind his head. "Then," she looked distracted by his new position, "I'll just help myself..." He closed his eyes as her hands smoothed over his chest and stomach, moving lower slowly before trailing back up. "I think I might just be torturing myself." Sandor thought she was the one being tortured?!

"You really are cruel," he groaned as his cock throbbed, "at least-" His words cut off when her hand wrapped around him.

"You were saying?" She leaned down to press a kiss to his chest as her hand gently stroked him - it was still torture but the best kind. "Can I confess something to you, lover?" Sandor nodded his head, not really listening since all of his focus was on her hand. "I never thought I would do something like this..." Her voice was low and wicked. "A naked boy in my bed and my hands all over him. I almost wish that I felt ashamed because all I feel is... wanting you." Sansa leaned closer to whisper in his ear. "You won't think less of me, will you?"

Sandor removed his hands from behind his head and pulled her down to him, cutting off her surprised gasp with a kiss. He rolled her back, pressing her into the mattress, indulging in the feel of her skin against his. Before he moved fully on top of her he stopped himself, groaning as he forced himself to pull back. She surprised him by locking an arm around his neck and returning the other to his wrap firmly around his cock. Her bare legs were unbelievably soft as he slipped his knee between hers.

"You have no idea," she panted against his mouth, "how much I want you." Sandor tightened his arm around her waist to pull her closer, tucking Sansa’s head under his chin. Her lips pressed to the bare skin above his collarbone and her clean sent overwhelmed his senses, surrounding him.

"I think I have some fucking clue," he growled, thrusting into her hand as his body curved against hers. Sansa's soft and warm fingers curled tighter, tensing and contracting every muscle in his body. He trapped her between himself and the mattress, his body trembling from the sensation of her bare arms and legs against his. Sandor couldn't imagine how he would do this with her fully unclothed - he'd probably just pass out. Her short whining pants were breaking his control so he captured her mouth to silence her.

Sandor braced up on his arm and tugged her hand out from between their bodies to wrap it around his neck before sinking back down. He held her eyes, glazed with lust that made him throb from wanting her, as his cock pressed against Sansa’s stomach. She writhed beneath him, running her free hand down his back. Her nails scraped lightly down his ribs. Fucking gods, he wasn't even moving but if she didn’t stop squirming, he was going to come too soon.

"You're distracting me again," she whined. "Last time... I didn't get to see." Damn, her curiosity was sexy as fuck! He wasn't nearly ready to be done yet but just the thought of watching her - watching him - was making it hard to hold back. Sandor's whole body tried to fight him as he pushed away from her to roll onto his back. She swept her mussed hair out of her face as she sat up, facing his cock with a resolute expression. Her hesitation disappeared as she reached out to curl her fingers around his shaft and then looked to him.

He lifted a hand to guide her like last time but she smacked it away and focused with studious concentration as she slowly stroked him. It was soft and gentle but since it was her hand, the sensation was more intense than anything he felt. The last time she touched him was so rushed he
barely had time to enjoy it. His control faded with every tug of her small hand, urging his hips to
move in rhythm with her inexperienced pumping. Sansa tightened her grip - it drove him over the
dge and he fisted the sheets as he came with a low groan.

"Wow," she let out a breathy chuckle as he struggled to catch his breath. Her hair fell into his face
when she leaned over him to grab a box of tissues next to her bed. Sandor seized the box out of her
hand to cleaned up and Sansa fell back on the bed beside him. She turned on her side to face him,
pressing kisses to his shoulder. "Thank you," she whispered, her soft breath cooling his skin.

"I think I'm supposed to say that," he chuckled as he wiped up the mess tossed the tissues into the
little pink wastebasket. Somehow, he felt he corrupted the innocence of her trash and felt pretty
satisfied about that.

"No, I mean..." Sansa ran her fingers through the hair on his chest and it was so soothing it nearly
put him to sleep. "You could have had me by now and I know you want me. But taking it slow like
this has been like... an adventure."

"You can romanticize anything," he teased.

"It is romantic," she grumbled, surprising him with her sudden sullen mood.

"What?" Sandor lightened his tone turned to face her, only to find her eyes closed tightly. "Suddenly
you can't take a little teasing?"

"You know, don't you?" Sansa opened her wide eyes at him with an expression he couldn't begin to
understand. "That I..." Her fingers curled into a fist against his chest and he wished she'd just blink
and stop staring at him like that. "I..." She squeezed her eyes shut just as he saw them start to
shimmer with tears. "I-love-you," she blurted out. Sandor expected her to start saying something like
that pretty soon but it didn't make it easier to hear. He sat up, got out of bed - pulled on some fucking
shorts - and then stretched out beside her again.

"Isn't it obvious," he stared up at the ceiling, "how much I care about you?" He wasn't naked
anymore but that didn't make him feel any less exposed. Sandor wished he had the courage to tell her
how much those words meant to him.

"You don't have to say it back," she couldn't keep the hurt out of her voice and it stabbed him
straight though the heart. Obviously, she expected him to say it - Sansa wouldn't go this far with
some random guy she didn't love. Everybody in love wants the other person to love them back. "I
could not keep it in anymore." From what he knew of love, as far as his comprehension of the word -
Sandor felt no doubt he loved her. Saying it out loud would change things, make the happy times a
little better and the inevitable hard times unbearable.

"Fine," he scratched his chin as he shrugged. "If you need to hear the fucking words, then I'll say it,
but only this once." There was no fooling her with his casual attitude because her hand was resting
over his pounding heart. "I love you, Sansa." There, he said it, and there was no taking it back. To
him, this meant more than it did to her. These words made him one of possibly dozens of people who
loved her - the last person who said they loved him killed herself right after.

"Is it alright if I still say it?" Sansa didn't sound happy at all with his gruff confession but she could
just stuck it up - no. He couldn't be mean to her anymore, not after he said he loved her, because it
would make his nastiness that much meaner. Fuck fucking fucker. Sandor unclenched his jaw and
turned on his side to face her. "I won't say it if you are uncomfortable," she murmured sadly.

"Honestly," he frowned, "it does make me uncomfortable."
"Oh..." The expression on her face should've made his feel bad for teasing her - but it was her own fault for being so damned gullible.

"It makes me hard," he smirked as her eyes opened wide before narrowing to glare at him.

"Sandor Clegane!" She rapped a fist against his arm, trying - and failing to hold back her smile. "You are so awful!"

"You just said you love me so you must like it," he wrapped a hand around her waist and tugged her close. "You pretend to be a good girl-"

"It's not pretend!" Sansa's pout curled into a slow smile as her smooth leg slid over his. "I only turn bad when I'm with you."

"See?" He shifted his hips forward and she gasped as his cock pressed into her stomach. "You enjoy making me uncomfortable." Sandor pushed her away and moved like he was getting up. "I'm going to the couch-"

"No!" Sansa grabbed his arm and pulled him back, scooting away to make some distance between then. "Please, how can I convince you to stay?"

"Got any more fucking ugly pajamas?" Sandor laughed at her narrowed eyes and pouting lips at the insult to her sleepwear. Then she smiled and nodded before turning to crawl off the bed - she had to know what those little shorts and her perfect ass were doing to him. She rummaged through a drawer to pull out something and turned to him.

"Turn away," she switched off the small lamp and waved a hand at him. Sandor grumbled under his breath about it being unfair and she quickly changed and jumped back into bed. Sansa looked more like herself in ugly flannel pajamas, silly, sweet, and innocent. He worried more every day that he was chipping away those qualities he loved most about her. She snuggled by his side and fell asleep in no time at all and he waited a while to make sure she was sleeping deeply.

"I love you," he whispered.

**GENDRY**

This had been the best day in his life: it was starting to be every day was topped by the last but he knew that couldn't go on. They were living in a dream world and soon they would have to wake up and go back to living apart. He and Arya lay awake in his bed, struggling not to fall asleep as they talked the night away, awaiting his birthday.

"And then we dressed up Rickon to look like a garden gnome..." She covered her yawn with her hand. "And we told him to hide in Sansa's closet..." Another yawn interrupted her story and Gendry pulled the blanket higher over her arms to tuck her in.

"You're too tired," he watched her eyelashes fluttering as she battled sleep. "We can talk more tomorrow."

"We'll be too busy," she shook her head and slapped her cheeks. "With the wedding and the fair."

"Even more reason to get a good night's sleep," he swept aside the hair falling into her eyes and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"I'll miss you too much," she wriggled loose of the blanket and pushed against the mattress to sit up. Arya leaned against the wall and crossed her arms in determination not to sleep so Gendry moved to
sit beside her.

"Don't you dream about me most of the time?" He pulled her crossed arms lose and took one of her hands into his. She linked their fingers and leaned her head against his shoulder.

"Allegedly," she mumbled, "I might have dreamt about you at some point in time."

"You talk in your sleep," he countered.

"Oh right," she chuckled, "it drives Sansa crazy." She stifled another yawn with her hand. "Sorry about that."

"I don't mind one bit," he rested his cheek on the top of her head, "it's adorable."

"Officially," she pointed at the clock on the wall opposite his bed, "it's your birthday right now." He just legally became an adult: surprise, he didn't feel any different. Or maybe nothing impressed him after how much he changed after meeting Arya.

"I'm eighteen," he spun a finger around in mock celebration, "I feel so free! I can vote in the next election. Do you know anything about our government?" She remained oddly quiet and he gently shrugged his shoulder. "Arry," he whispered, "fall asleep?"

"Three years, six months, and twelve days..." Arya's voice was quiet but wide awake. "My age doesn't bother you at all?" She lifted her head to face him, her brow scrunched up with worry and biting the inside of her lip.

"Why?" Gendry squeezed her hand still linked with his. "Does mine?"

"Why would it?" Arya shrugged but that worried expression stayed on her face.

"Same thoughts here," he assured her.

"People are going to look down on you," she insisted. "I'm not one of those lucky girls who look twenty-five from the neck down. Most people think I'm thirteen at most... and a boy."

"That's just because you have short hair," he waved his free hand in dismissal: only a fucking idiot would think she was a boy. "When mom had a pixie cut people mistook her for a boy sometimes." She didn't look convinced at all by his little anecdote so he tried harder to take her worries seriously. "Arya, I think about it this way: if the situations were reversed."

"Like," she waved a finger between them, "if you were fourteen, and I was eighteen?"

"Fourteen wasn't that long ago for me," he smiled, "if I had even a chance with eighteen-year-old you I would take it. Those few years won't make a difference before you know it." In just over three years, Arya would turn eighteen and he hoped they would marry that day. He thought about trying to convince her it would be more convenient to have her birthday and their anniversary on the same day.

"You'll be leaving to college in a year and I'll still have two more years of high school." Arya was clearly more upset about all these future plans than he was. It was good enough for him if they managed to make it through this year without her father finding out. "You'll be twenty-one by then... Your life is moving faster than mine."

"How can it?" Gendry glanced at the clock: eighteen for twenty minutes and caught in the most adult conversation of his life. He turned to face her and lifted his free hand to run his thumb over the space
where her eyebrows scrunched together. "I'm following you, remember? I won't go anywhere without you. I'll go to some community college for a couple of years." He smiled as her anxious expression eased. "That way I can keep up the forge."

"Oh, the forge," she smacked his hand aside and scowled. "Well, thank the gods I was so worried about the forge."

"You don't have to worry about anything," he smiled at her sulking. "When I say I love you: I mean for always." Gendry found her other hand clenched and held both of her hands in his. "Nothing," he shook his head to emphasize his words. "Especially not a few years gap in our ages will make any difference."

"How could you love me so much?" Brave, rebellious, fearless Arya: looking up at him with that vulnerable expression. That was why he loved her, because she was everything to him. Because she was everything.

"How could I not?" Gendry leaned forward to tilt his forehead against hers. "You're perfect for me in every way." He released her hands to hold the sides of her face. "I'm cautious and you're rebellious." His lips dipped to meet hers before pressing kisses to every part of her face: eyes, cheeks, brow, and finally her mouth again. "You need me to tame you and I need you to free me." The expected scoffing at his dramatics never came as Arya squeezed her eyes shut and swallowed hard.

"I never had something so important before," Arya's voice shook and her eyes stayed closed. "Sometimes I feel paralyzed by the thought of," she shuddered, "losing you."

"There's nothing I can promise you to make that fear go away," he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tight against his chest. "I feel it too." Gendry wished he'd known she felt this insecure. He reminded himself not to mistake her boldness for invincibility. "All I can say is we just can't give up, even if it gets hard."

"Never give up," she laughed as she nodded in approval of his words. "Just when I think I can't love you anymore."

"I love you more every day," he admitted without embarrassment.

"Then let's get to sleep so you can love me more tomorrow." Arya pushed his back on the bed and snuggled by his side, pulling the covers up over them. "Happy Birthday, Gendry."

"I love you, Arya." He hugged both arms around her and she slipped a leg between his. "See you tomorrow."

"Unless I see you tonight," she mumbled, the last word trailing off. A few minutes went by before her soft snoring started and Gendry was soon lulled to sleep by the familiar sound.

Chapter End Notes

The time has come... I am picking out shower tile and paint colors. May the gods prevent me from getting anything too sparkly or bright. I'm thinking cool tones, lots of blue-whites and soft greys with touches of *silver* as the accent color! <3 It's going to be so tranquil!!! I could live in Home Depot, I really could. In case any of you ever felt frisky to do some DIY, setting tile is much easier than you think. And cutting it SO
MUCH FUN. Wet-saws are like the water parks of power tools.
"WAKE UP!!" Arya cackled as Gendry jolted awake with a start to see her standing beside the bed: hands still cupped around her grinning mouth. Her hair was damp and recently fluffed with a towel and she wore one of his shirts.

"Bloody hells, Arry." Gendry glanced at the clock to see it was only five in the morning! He rubbed a hand over his face as he collapsed back on the bed with a groan.

"Happy coming out of your mom's vagina day!" She bounded it onto the bed excitedly, and crawled over him to sit astride his legs.

"Can we not talk about my mother's vagina?" Gendry grabbed a pillow and covered his face, muffling his words. "Don't most people sing 'happy birthday'?"

"I'm not 'most people'," she reminded him as she ripped the pillow away from his face and tossed it over her shoulder across the room. Arya crossed her arms and grinned down at him. "Don't you know why I'm so happy?"

"Because it's my birthday?" His answer earned him a mocking scoff and she leaned forward, bracing a hand on either side of his waist.

"As if!" She moved back and tug the waistband of his shorts down to free his hard cock. Arya wrapped her fingers around him with the beaming smile on her face. "Happy birthday to you my old friend," she greeted his cock warmly, "we meet again."

"So," his groggy mind finally put it together, "we can do it now?"

"Right now," she bit her tongue and quirked to brows in a greedy expression.

"I should shower-" He started to sit up but she roughly shoved him back onto the mattress.

"You should shut up." Arya whipped off her shirt and waved a metallic condom packet at him. "Stay put," she commanded. She concentrated like she was defusing a bomb as she ripped open the package and rolled the condom in place. He moved his hands to grab her thighs as she knelt over him and shifted to find the right position. Her eyes squinted, like she was thinking hard about something as she sank down to sheath him inside her. His hips moved of their own accord, thrusting to meet her, but she pushed against his chest.

"Be still," she scolded, "I want to stay just like this while you tell me everything you want today." He wanted to look at her and run his hands all over her body but that would make it too hard to stay still like she wanted. So he squeezed his eyes shut and raised his hands over his head to tuck them underneath his pillow.

"This is a good start," he twitched involuntarily and bunched the pillow in his hands. "We could hit the diner for breakfast." Somehow thinking of breakfast foods didn't distract him one bit. Maybe he
liked breakfast too much: nah, it's impossible to like breakfast too much. His mind went blank as her hands slid forward over his chest, shifting her hips as she leaned forward.

"That sounds good," she braced her hands on his shoulders and rocked her hips once slowly, drawing a deep groan from him. "Keep going," she ordered, "and watch me." Gendry opened his eyes to see her staring down at him. Her lashes were barely open and quick panting breaths were puffing through her parted lips. The best thing about being able to see her face was the soft blush that made her cheeks pink. Arya wasn't usually the blushing type and he knew she wasn't embarrassed.

She sat up straight and proud, not covering an inch of her body, though he knew she was not confident about her appearance. It was trust: she trusted in his love for her and believed him when he told her she was beautiful to him. Gendry would tell her as often as she let him until she saw what he did. He reached out to brush aside her dark falling over her eyes and let his hand trail down of her soft breasts and flat stomach to rest on her hip.

"Please," she panted, "don't stop talking - say anything."

"The fair is an hour drive so..." His words trailed off as she repeated the rocking motion, building up an unbearably slow rhythm. "We should get going after that. The wedding is at five-" Arya suddenly cried out and stilled her hips.

"Oh sorry," she panted a laugh, "didn't mean to interrupt you." He forced himself to concentrate on anything else as her hips resumed rolling and grinding. "Go on," she encouraged him in a strained voice.

"We should be back in time," he ground out, "if we change in the car." Gendry heaved a sigh when she stopped moving to pout down at him.

"That doesn't leave us any time," she puffed breathless and annoyed. "I need a lot more sex today."

"You can't complain about not having sex," he reasoned, "while having sex."

"Says who?" She pushed off his chest and crossed her arms under her breasts: her expression like a vengeful queen about to punish her subject.

"Says me," he launched up and wrapped his arms around her waist, dipping his head to capture her mouth. Her arms were trapped between their bodies but not for long, she wriggled loose of his hold and flung her arms around his neck. Arya forgot all about her intention to take it slow, and buried her face into his neck to muffle her screams as she writhed erratically. Gendry just held onto her, pulling her close and shuddering from the intensity she created. His whole body tensed as he felt her tightening and fluttering around his cock.

Arya threw her head back as she screamed, arching her back over his arms and his release quickly followed: as it should. In everything, following Arya was the best thing he could do. When her wailing quieting to a whimper and her writhing turned to shivers, Gendry fell back and pulled her with him. They stayed locked together until their breathing and racing hearts slowed and then she rolled off him with a groan.

"We'll have to work on that," he chuckled breathlessly. Gendry pulled off the condom and tossed it in the plastic bag hanging off his dresser knob, which he used for trash. It wasn't fancy but it got the job done: kinda like him.

"I did it perfectly," she scoffed, "you're the one who messed it up."

"It's my birthday," he protested: it had to count for something. "And sex can't be messed up." He
thought it went pretty much amazing...

"Says the one who messed it up." Arya slid her naked body over his and smiled mischievously. 
"Let's try it one more time - to get it right - before we go." She slid her fingers into his hair and 
tugged sharply. "This time," she smirked, "you - will - be still." Gendry sucked in a breath as his 
softening cock rose back to life.

"I'll put more effort into not doing anything," he promised with a grin. Arya reached behind his head 
to pull out another condom from the box wedged between their pillows. Was it weird they slept with 
their condoms? Nah, as far as he was concerned their attachment to the 100-count box was much 
healthier than not using any at all. "Can't we take just five minutes to cuddle?"

"Quit your complaining," she ordered as she rose up on her knees and scooted backward. "We have 
a schedule to keep."

"Of course, milady," he groaned as she grasped his cock. "Whatever you say, Arry."

"That's right," she smirked down at him. "Tell me."

"I love you," he kept his eyes locked on hers, "I need you, you're so beautiful." Arya didn't look 
satisfied yet, just raised her brow and waited. "Forever and always," he added and a smile curled 
over her lips.

"Forever," she repeated. Her expression softened and her eyes gazed at him with what only could be 
described as adoration. The next time, Gendry didn't need her to tell him to watch her because he 
couldn't look away.

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ARYA

It was a glorious crisp November morning and the sun was just coming up as they left the diner full 
and happy. The drive to the fair was filled with excited chatter between them. He talked about all the 
things they could do and Arya was bouncing in her seat by the time they pulled up. The parking lot 
was already packed even though they got there early but Gendry found a good spot to park the 
Lincoln. They jumped out of the car and raced to the entrance holding hands. It was like entering 
another world, full of color and wonders to behold.

"What do you want to do first?" Gendry grinned like a little kid and it nearly knocked her over how 
joyful his happiness made her. This whole 'love' thing was still new and seemed to grow stronger 
every day.

"Today," she squeezed his hand, "and only today - I'm following you." Arya smiled up at his 
beaming face before he tugged her in the direction of a nearby booth.

"The trick," he told her, "is to hit the souvenir booth first before all the good stuff is picked over. 
What do you want?" She was about to argue that it was his birthday and he shouldn't be buying her a 
gift when something caught her eye. He followed her sight and quickly moved forward to haggle 
with the shopkeeper. "How much for the wolf ring?"

"You have an eye for fine jewelry my lad," the graying woman with ribbons woven in her hair 
smiled at them both. They went back and forth on the price, both flirting a bit even though the 
woman was twice his mother's age. It was clear she wasn't the only person he charmed with those 
blue eyes and heart-melting smile. Arya laughed at their banter until they finally came to an 
agreement and Gendry immediately turned to put the ring on her finger.

"Like it?" He watched her admiring the ring and she smiled up at him. Arya always thought she was
the kind of girl who didn't care much for romantic stuff but really she was just waiting for Gendry.

"I love it," she never liked a gift so much. "I can't believe it fits." It was a unique item in a whole boxful of costume and vintage jewelry. Her fingers were like her - short and thin - but the ring slipped on like it belonged on her hand.

"I aim to please, milady," he lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles before tugging her to their next destination. Nearby a trio of bagpipers were playing a jaunty tune and some girls dressed up like sprites were frolicking in front of them. They watched and laughed for a while before he was pulling her along to the next activity. As they walked up the path Arya saw plenty of interesting things but let him take the lead. After a short trek, they ended up in front of a small bridge crossing a wide pond. "This is the 'Kissing Bridge'," he quirked his brows. "I've dreamed about kissing a girl here for a painfully long time."

"Finally," she dragged him under the covered bridge, "this whole thing was starting to bore me to death." Gendry laughed as he leaned against the rail and pulled her into his arms to kiss her as she raised on her toes to meet him. Neither could stop smiling as they kissed until a group walking by whispered loudly in a disapproving tone. She knew what they saw - her in her tunic and breeches with short hair. Even if she looked like a slightly older boy they might just seem like a gay couple, instead she made him look like a pervert.

"Arry," he pushed her hair back but she pulled away - the moment ruined. "What's the matter-"

"I have to do something," she interrupted and gave him her best reassuring smile. "I'll meet you...?"

"Okay," he looked really disappointed but she stayed strong - there was something she had to do - for him. "Do you remember where the archery contest will take place?"

"Yep," she put more effort into her forced smile, "I'll meet you there in a few." Then she turned on her heel and quickly walked to find a booth she saw earlier. It was her own personal nightmare - covered in frilly colorful things. A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do. "I'm a girl," she informed the pretty brunette running the stand.

"I can see that," she smiled.

"I want everyone to see it," she looked around at the dresses and ribbons fluttering in the wind. "I want to be..." Arya clenched her fist in determination. "A fairy princess." Fuck the gods for making her a girl so she had to go through this. No wait, then she wouldn't get to have sex with Gendry - she rescinded her blaspheming.

"You've come to the right place," the shopkeeper beamed. "What catches your eye?" She waved a hand at her wares but Arya just shrugged shook her head hopelessly. "Well then, I ask you to trust my judgment." The woman looked really beautiful in her green and teal corset and frayed white shift underneath.

"I trust you," Arya looked the woman straight in the eye. "Please, make me as close to pretty as you can."

"One fairy princess coming up," the shopkeeper guaranteed her. "Let's see... Ah!" She pulled a purple corset with flowers on it down off the rack and held it up for Arya to see. "This would look great on you."

"I don't think I have the chest for that," she tilted her head to the side as she tried not to cringe at the thought of how ridiculous she would look.
"You have a fundamental misunderstanding of how corsets work, my dear." The shopkeeper grinned as she looked down at her own generous bosom on display. "It's like magic, trust me." Arya shrugged and accepted the corset as the woman gathered a gossamer skirt, a pair of wings, and some shoes. "Go try this on in my wagon," she pointed at a round gypsy carriage behind her.

"How do I...?" Arya stared at the garments, feeling hopeless and helpless.

"I can help, if you want?" The shopkeeper was a lifesaver and Arya quickly nodded. "Sara," she called to a nearby merchant painting faces. "Can you watch my booth for a few minutes?" The other woman smiled and nodded. "Follow me," she beckoned. They squeezed into the cramped wagon and quickly changed her outfit, which was hard work to get into. Once it was done, the shopkeeper clapped her hands. "You look absolutely perfect!"

"Really?" Arya noticed a full-length mirror and was pleasantly surprised to see she didn't look half bad. But her messy hair threw the whole thing off. "It's pretty good." From that moment, she dubbed the shopkeeper her 'fairy godmother'. It seemed appropriate despite the high cheese factor. Today she could wear this stupid costume and later she would turn back into her normal self.

"Oh, we're not done yet," the woman clasped her hands. "Please, let Sara paint your face, it will finish the whole thing." Her godmother knew how to push a sale and Arya respected that.

"Is the archery contest starting soon?" Arya didn't want Gendry to think she'd abandoned him.

"You still have enough time," she promised as she opened the wagon door and hopped down. "Sara! We need a fairy mask and we need it fast!" Sara waved Arya over to sit on a bench in front of her and told her to close her eyes and stay still. As she worked, the other shopkeeper wove ribbons into her hair. All in all, it was the most torturous experience of her life but she would do anything to make Gendry happy. She wanted him to be proud to have her stand beside him - even just for one day.

"Thanks!" Arya jumped up as soon as the painting was finished, hearing the sound of horns announcing the contest. She quickly paid for everything, and ran as fast as she could and slowed her pace as she spotted him standing in the back of the crowd. He actually saw her walking towards him but didn't seem to recognize her at all as he looked around. Gendry's eyes fell back on her when she drew nearer and his jaw came unhinged as he looked her over head-to-toe.

"Arry...?" He gaped like an idiot until she poked him in the chest with her flower wand.

"Who else?" Arya raised an eyebrow at him and smirked, waving the wand casually over her costume. "I just bought a few things."

"You look..." Gendry shook his head and blinked a few times, his mouth opening and closing like he was trying to speak but couldn't. "You look-"

"Shut up, it's just some cloth and paint." Arya crossed her arms and scowled at him. "I don't even get this kind of reaction when I'm naked."

"Don't say 'naked',' he wheezed. "Don't say anything remotely sexy or I'll just... lose it."

"This is really working for you, huh?" Arya grinned as he nodded for way too long. "Good..." Gendry just kept nodding like a dumbass so she grabbed his hand and led him through the crowd to get a good spot. He wasn't paying any attention to the contest, just staring at her but she hollered for her favorite until she won. After the contest ended, they walked hand-in-hand to get some giant turkey legs which were delicious. They sat on the ground beneath a tree to relax and eat.

"I'm not complaining," he spoke with his mouth full, "but why did you get dressed up?"
"I thought it would make you happy," she shrugged and ripped a small chunk of meat with her teeth. Goddamn it was a pain in the ass to not mess up her dress and makeup. Arya gave up and dug into the meat like the gods intended - being pretty was hungry work.

"You look amazing," he wiped his mouth as he looked her over again. "But you don't have to change a thing: I like you the way you are."

"I'm not doing this every day," she snorted, "just when I think you deserve it." Arya held up her hand, wearing the ring he bought her. "You got me a gift," she waved her hand over the corset pushing her breasts up, "and I got you one - Happy Birthday."

"Best gift ever," he smiled like a contented idiot. "We still have a few hours before we have to leave but I almost want to just take you home." His words reminded her that tonight would be their last night together and she couldn't help her frown. "We can stay if you want-"

"It's not that," she held up her free hand, "I'll just miss you..."

"We still have the game Monday," he scooted closer to her, "and you can visit me at work." Arya nodded her head but couldn't fix her sad expression. "You're the cleverest person I've ever known," he bumped her arm with his elbow. "I know you'll think of some way for us to spend time together."

"You're right," she smile, "I am awfully clever. I need to channel this gloom into something productive." Arya swiped a thumb over her mouth and leaned forward to press a kiss on Gendry's cheek. "You always know what to say."

"With milady's permission," Gendry held out his hand for her turkey leg bone and got up to throw their trash away. And old pro - he used a water bottle to wet a few paper napkins so they could wipe the hands and faces. He grabbed her napkin out of her hand, held her face to clean it properly, and kissed her when he was done. Clean and full entirely on roasted protein, they both perked up when horns blew in the distance. "It would be my honor to escort you to the joust," he held out his arm.

"That depends," she crossed her arms. "Are you a lord?"

"Nah, milady," he gave her that smile that killed her and brought her back to live every time. "I'm just a poor blacksmith."

"Oh good," she wrapped her hand around his arm. "Then I'll go anywhere you want to take me."

Chapter End Notes

Every time, every chapter, every word - my stomach knots up when I push that 'Publish' button. I worry that I haven't lived up to expectations or I've just written poorly. I just want to thank everyone for riding along with me as my mind unpacks this story. Even when I get discouraged I feel stronger every time, like I can face all the critics and still crawl back to my laptop to push that button. I hope I made someone smile today: then it's all worth it.

Jon gets the next POV in a chapter simply entitled: 'The Wedding'
The Wedding

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Mentions of sexual assault in second POV.

Considerably less serious warning: I wrote a long personal angsty note at the end, feel free to skip it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Wedding

JON

The wedding was a disaster straight from the start: the worst day of his life and there had been plenty of bad ones. This topped the day he left Winterfell to move to Kings Landing, leaving behind his 'siblings' to live alone with his mom. So far, basically everyone he knew was in attendance. 'Everyone' included one particular redhead he just couldn't figure out. Jon hadn't talked to Ygritte since their kiss: she traded seats in the class they shared. Thanks to her, he gets moon-eyed the whole period by that Frey girl.

Nothing went right and as the best man, Jon took full responsibility. The small sept was double-booked so everyone had to wait for one wedding to end before Sam and Gilly's could start. The old blinded Master was a bit of a talker so it was like sitting through two long weddings: because it was. No matter what went wrong, the couple just grinned at each other blissfully. After the ceremony was done, they all loaded up in their cars and headed to the park but it started to drizzle. Their procession of cars turned to follow Ygritte.

She led them to her father's mechanic shop which had a big open floor and Jon ordered pizzas and drinks for the group. Someone found a radio and turned on some tunes and Jon collapsed in the corner, watching everyone else having a good time. Why couldn't he just relax and enjoy it too? Because it felt like a lie to be celebrating the beginning of something really hard for his best friend. At least Sam stepped up to do the right thing. To top it all off, standing together were the four reminders of why he couldn't sleep at night.

Jon assumed Sansa might make an appearance since she was on the team with Gilly. He was prepared to give her boyfriend a chance because she was nearly sixteen and more than mature enough to date if she wanted. He felt certain a sweet girl like her wouldn't be easily sweet-talked into something she would regret later. But it was the hound showed up to the wedding with on her on his arm. Somehow, he managed to overlook the fact that his beautiful cousin was bat-shit crazy! Losing out to his curiosity about what had them all laughing, he got up to join them.

"It hurts that you didn't tell your sister anything about me," Gendry sulked down at Arya's uncaring shrug.

"I can't get her to shut up about her giant boyfriend enough to get a word in." Arya stuck her tongue out at Sansa and the hound grinned in that twisted horrible way.

"I wouldn't have believed a word she said," Sansa smiled at Gendry. "I'm sure you are aware that
Arya is a horrible little liar."

"She's actually an excellent little liar," Gendry quipped and there were laughs all around. Jon found the whole thing unreasonably unsettling and couldn't care less they were all ignoring him...

"That's right," Arya popped Gendry in the stomach and then looked up at the hound. "Giant dude," she jerked a thumb towards the parking lot, "is that your Skylark out there?"

"Wouldn't drive anything else," he smirked and jerked his chin. "Wanna take a look?"

"Fuck yeah!" Arya poked Gendry in the chest. "Don't disappear anywhere." As the odd couple walked out together, their respective counterparts gazed after them longingly.

"Sansa," he resisted the urge to roll his eyes as she turned to him with a bright dreamy smile. "The 'boy' you asked me advice about... was the hound?" He couldn't believe the guy she liked but wouldn't date her was the hound.

"Sandor is my boyfriend now, all thanks to you." She moved in for a hug and squeezed him tightly. "If not for your advice, I might have given up."

"Glad I could help," he patted her back awkwardly.

"Oh," she released him and looked over his shoulder. "Gilly is waving me over. Bye!" Sansa waved at them, leaving him and Gendry alone.

"Man," he reached out to put a hand on his shoulder, "you okay?" Jon didn't know how to answer that question: he was pretty sure he was dreaming... or having a stroke. "You look like you're about to pass out."

"I'm just realizing," Jon shook his head, "how much I like you."

"Huh," Gendry looked up at Sansa, clearly getting why Jon suddenly liked him again. "I don't know how to feel about that... but I'll take it," he grinned. "You know, I was kinda shocked too when Arya told me Sansa was seeing the hound. But when you think about it, it makes sense."

"I don't even want to hear that fucked-up explanation," Jon shrugged off Gendry's hand and glared at him. "I don't like you anymore again."

"Can't win," Gendry shrugged and started walking towards the work bench filled up with food. "Hot Pie! Save me one of those!" Jon ran a hand over his face and when he looked up again Ygritte was walking in his direction.

"You look about as fucking happy as me," she stood beside him, scowling at nothing. "How's this a celebration?" She raised a cup in Gilly's direction. "It's a funeral for my cousin's future." To see someone else sulking when everyone was having a good time put his own foul mood into perspective. It wasn't his place to feel sorry for Sam and Gilly when they were so damned happy.

"Hey," he stepped beside her and took ahold of her shoulders to turn her to face Gilly, "look at her: she's glowing with joy." Jon let his hands fall and watched as Sansa and Gilly laughed at something Sansa said. "In the end, it's up to her what she wants. I hate how hard it's going to be for them but I'm also happy for them. I can't wait to get married someday."

"You saving it for that, then?" Her blunt question made this throat tighten and he choked. "Come on, everyone knows you're so proud of your virginity." Ygritte moved to stand right in front of him, so close that it started to make him sweat. "Isn't that why your friends call you 'Snow', because you are
"No," he took a step back and gulped at the fierce expression in her pale blue-grey eyes, "that's not why."

"You're faithful to the Maiden, then?" She stepped even closer, so close she was almost touching him. "Plan to live a holy like and devote yourself to the Seven as a Maester?"

"Why do you care so much?" Jon refused to back up anymore, he stood his ground.

"Why don't you want to fuck me?" Ygritte asked the question directly, like she was giving him a job interview. "Did you think I wasn't serious? I put myself out over-and-over and you keep acting interested! Why are you playing these games?" He could list a thousand reasons but all of them added up to one thing: he was afraid.

"I like you," he admitted but it wasn't an answer. Ygritte tossed her mostly emptied cup over her shoulder and grabbed his wrist.

"Then come with me," she led him to a back office area that contained only a desk and a couch. As soon as she turned the lock behind them, Jon's mind starting racing: outpaced only by his thundering heart. He didn't want to have sex yet, that was part of his identity. Jon chose to wait until he was eighteen to have sex, a conscious decision he made a long time ago. It was part of his personal code of honor not to risk having a child unless he was capable of raising it.

"Ygritte," he grabbed her upper arms and pulled her close. "I'm going to kiss you now."

"So do it-" She never did know when to shut up so Jon cut her off with a kiss. Ygritte didn't try to break out of the hold, just returned his kiss with untamed ferocity that made him dizzy. Her tongue slipped into his mouth, hot and smooth against his, as he slid his hands to hold her waist and pull her closer. Jon was trying to buy time to think but she stole any thoughts he had when she rolled her tongue over his. As she pulled back, she caught his bottom lip between her teeth and moaned.

"Oh gods, Jon," her voice was thick with yearning. "Just kissing you makes me so wet." She pushed her hips forward to press against his hardness. "I know you want me. Why fight it?" Jon's mind raced, arguing back and forth with himself about what he intended to do with Ygritte in this back office. He wanted her for such a long time and more than ever at that moment. She was grieving about Gilly and though she acted tough, he knew it was hard for her.

"Not like this," he managed to form words.

"But-"

"Let me kiss you," he begged.

"You're killing me, Snow," she groaned and closed her eyes to wait for him could kiss her again. Jon slid his hand down over her hip to press his fingertips between her thighs, feeling the damp warmth though the fabric of her dress.

"Here," he clarified, watching her gasp in response and press against his hand.

"Okay," she whispered. Then Ygritte snapped into action, lifting both hands to tangle her fingers in his hair and roughly pulled his lips to hers. His hands found their way around her waist as they stumbled towards the couch until she fell back onto it, pulling him on top of her. His hard cock was pressed against the inside her hip, nestled between her sharp hipbone and taut stomach. She bucked underneath him, panting as she broke their kiss. "Please Jon," she begged in a tight voice. "Do
whatever you want - just do something!"

Jon tore himself away from her tight body with a groan and sat back to see her flushed and panting, hair even more wild than usual. To regain his focus, he pulled one boot into his lap to unlace and pull it off while she whimpered impatiently. After both boots clunked to the floor, he slid his hands up her thighs and lifted the hem of her dress. He thanked the gods when he discovered she wore nothing underneath. His hand shook as he traced his fingers lightly down the wet slick flesh between her legs, drawing a needy whine from her throat.

He lifted his hand to admire the silky shining wetness on his fingers and gave into the sudden urge to taste it. She whimpered again and he looked up to see her staring at his mouth with desperate need. Jon wasted no time, hooking his hand around her knee and pulling it over his shoulder as he curled his body forward. The curls between her legs were darker red than her hair and felt soft and springy against his fingertips. Her hips jumped just at the gentle caressing of his fingertips so he braced one arm across her hips and pressed one soft kiss to her slick flesh.

Ygritte instantly cried out as her hips bucked in response, shoving one hand into his hair and grabbing the couch with the other. He held her more firmly and kissed her again, this time parting his lips to savor her sweet and salty taste. She squirmed and whimpered as his tongue explored her, trying to discover what she liked. His cock was harder than it ever had been, straining against his pants and battling to override his personal vow of celibacy. Her other leg slipped over his shoulder as she started to roll and rock against his mouth.

He didn't have to do much after that, she was grinding against his mouth and soaking his face with her wetness. His hands curled around her thighs and she moaned something like his name and increased the tempo of her rocking hips. Jon was overwhelmed by her scent, taste, and the feel of her soft skin under his hands. Her muscles tensed and flexed as her movements became more erratic and every breath moaned between her lips. Just when he thought he couldn't take any more, she arched against the couch and gave one breathless cry.

Her hips and legs shook from the force of her climax before she slumped back down and weakly pushed him away. Jon sat back to rest his head on the back of the couch, panting along with her, and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He turned his head to look at her, his cock still throbbing with wanting her. She lay boneless and whimpering, her legs still spread open, and it took every ounce of his resolve to resist the temptation.

"You still won't fuck me?" Ygritte opened her eyes to focus on him as she wriggled to straighten her skirt. Jon squeezed his eyes shut as he shook his head in denial. "Fine, but only because... that was amazing." She sat up and started tugging at the waist of his pants, making his eyes fly open in surprise.

"What are you-?" His words cut off as she pressed a kiss to his mouth and freed his cock while he was distracted. Ygritte pulled back and gave him a pleading look.

"Jon," she murmured, "let me return the favor please." He couldn't think of any reason to say no so he just nodded his head and watched a grin spread over her lips.

**YGRITTE**

She didn't particularly like sucking cock - it was a waste of time - but this wasn't any cock she held in her hand. Jon was the source of her sexual frustration for far too long, teasing her with his pretty smiles and serious grey eyes. Of course, his cock was as handsome as the boy himself, long and straight and everything proportional. Ygritte wanted to feel him in her mouth, taste him while imagining him inside her. Her head dipped to take the tip between her lips, rubbing her mouth over
the slick moisture coming from him.

Ygritte moved her hand, jerking him firm and slow as she licked up, down, and around his cock before taking it into her mouth. His hand stroked gently over her hair and it reminded her of the one and only time she tried this before. Jon touched her gently, unlike the asshole who pulled her hair so hard that she accidentally bit him - at least he cried. No other guy could compare with the one she really wanted.

"Ygritte," he moaned as his hand moved under her hair to stroke the back of her neck, sending shivers down her spine. "I'm gonna come." Well, that was fast - preferable because she still didn't think sucking a dick was all that enjoyable. It just made her want to fuck him even more.

"Mm-mm," she replied - a mouthful of cock made forming words out of the question. Her hum of agreement was followed quickly by a burst of bitterness rushing into her mouth as he moaned her name again. Then she remembered why she hated it so much - ugh, the taste! Ygritte leapt up as soon as she was sure he was totally finished and ran to the wastebasket to spit into it.

"Bitter," she shuddered, smacking her mouth as she moved to the desk and rifled through the drawers. "Where are the..." Then her hand found what she was looking for. "Here we go - mints!" Ygritte opened the box, pulled out two tablets, and popped them into her mouth - much, much better. Then she found a stash of napkins, mopped up between her legs before she moved back to the couch. She heaved a sigh as she collapsed next to him, exhausted and mostly sated.

"Want one?" Ygritte held up the box of mints to hand to him but he shook his head at her offer and stayed quiet, which made her nervous. "So, I would totally do this again - a bed would work better." Jon set himself to rights and zipped up his pants while ignoring her completely. "Any thoughts on that?"

"I need to think about it," he turned his serious eyes on her, seeming to be trying to figure her out. What's to figure out? She liked him and he liked her - but he always was fucking 'thinking' about shit. Ygritte wished he could just live a little and not worry about every little thing.

"Of course you do," she sighed and patted his leg. "Don't think too long - I'm not the type of girl who waits." It was a lie, she would wait if he gave her any indication he would eventually be hers. But the one thing she knew about all guys - they hated when a girl seemed desperate. They all wanted the 'cool girl' who could play some hoops, fuck all night, and still be friends in the morning. Damn it all, she was sick and tired of being the 'cool girl'. All she wanted to be was Jon's girl... "We better get back out there," she stood and tried to smooth her dress and hair.

"Ygritte," he rose and face her, still wearing his serious expression. "I want you to be my girlfriend..." She held her breath as his eyes darted away, seemingly making the most difficult decision of his life. "But I swore to myself I would wait to have sex until I turned eighteen."

"How long until that happens?" Ygritte liked to get straight to the point, internally praying she wouldn't have to wait long to get him inside her.

"Next September..." Jon's head hung forward and Ygritte felt like she just got a volleyball spiked straight into her face. That was ten months away! She felt a bit woozy, like she needed to sit down again. But she just turned her attention to stepping into her boots and bending down to lace them. "I know it's a long time but I really like you-"

"Fine," she interrupted him, "but you're gonna have to do that thing with your tongue a lot." Ygritte pursed her lips as she relented. "And I'll suck you as well but I'm not swallowing - it's too nasty."
"Really?" He looked like he couldn't believe her.

"Yeah - it tastes like battery acid-"

"No," he laughed, "you'll be my girlfriend and let me... um, do that again?"

"Go down on me?" Ygritte grinned at him. "You can do that as much as you want. In fact, as my boyfriend I'm going to expect it several times a week." His expression just got even happier and it made her heart throb to see his beautiful face beaming at her. Gods, it was just unfair for a man to be so pretty. "Think you can handle that?"

"I know I can," he moved closer to kiss her but she put her finger to his lips.

"You know nothing, Jon," she wrapped her hand around his head, crushed her lips against his for one last kiss, and then shoved him away. "Come on," she brushed past him to unlock the door, "I'm sure we've been missed already." Jon caught up with her and tugged her hand into his, opening his mouth to say something when a crash outside caught their attention. They ran towards the sound to find the party disrupted by her uncle, the biggest asshole who ever lived.

"You have no right!" He roared as he moved towards a terrified looking Sam. "You stole my daughter!"

"Dad," Gill tried to move between them but Sansa caught her arm to hold her back. "Please don't do this."

"Sir," Sam was shaking but stood his ground. "I know how you must feel but I truly love Gilly-"

"SHE'S MINE," uncle Craster grabbed Sam's collar and pulled back his fist as the idiot just squeezed his eyes shut to take the hit. Jon sprung into action, running forward to put himself between the two and push her uncle back. Bile rose in Ygritte's throat as things started to make sense, starting with Gill's reluctance to say who raped her. All those nights her cousin begged to sleep over at her house... Oh gods, no...

"You," Ygritte didn't even recognize her own voice as she picked up the screwdriver on a table next to her. Her feet moved without her permission and her hand raised to plunge the tool into her uncle's neck. She wanted to feel his hot blood rushing over her hand, to see the life fade from his eyes - but Jon switch his position to grab her arm. "I'll kill you someday," she promised her uncle, knowing she could've fought Jon off but she let him stop her - for now. "Count on it."

"Stupid ungrateful whore," he spit in Gill's direction, ignoring Ygritte completely. Of course, he didn't see her as a threat - the man prided himself on being a misogynist. Still, she never considered he'd actually rape his own daughter. "You'll come crawling back one day and I won't take you in." Uncle Craster shoved Jon back and opened his mouth to start hurling more filth at his crying daughter. The hound was just suddenly behind him, grabbing her uncle by the back of his neck.

"I suggest you leave," he growled in a deadly voice. Ygritte watched with satisfaction as the hound dragged her uncle to the door and literally tossed him out. She dropped the screwdriver to the ground with a clatter and watched as her cousin threw her arms around Sam to sob on his shoulder. Gill didn't need her anymore, she had someone else to take care of her now - that thought both hurt and relived her. Jon wrapped his arm around her and pulled her out of her daze.

"You okay?" His serious grey eyes were so beautiful, like a storm rising in the distance.

"I will be," she managed to croak. This day her uncle unwittingly signed his own death warrant - she would never let him get away with what he did to Gill. The woman-hating penal system didn't give a
fuck about rape - he'd be out in a few years if the case ever even went to trial. Even then, Gill would be the one on trial, mercilessly grilled about her sex life by strange men - her sweet cousin was too soft for that. No... A few years of jail wouldn't be enough for him to pay for his perversion. Caster would die and she'd be the one who ended him.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this long overly personal note about my 'zero days' but in the end it just sounded like a weak plea for pity and that's not me. If anyone pities me I'll fucking hate it - I could build a bridge to nowhere with all the false pity I've received over my lifetime. I just hated being all emo and vague like last time when I wrote the chapter "I'm Fine". A 'zero day' will happen again, it's the one thing in life I've always been able to count on. And I'll survive it - on my own - because that's what I fucking do. Only the last part of what I wrote seemed important to say:

To my kindred with 'invisible disabilities' - I BELIEVE YOUR PAIN IS REAL! Don't let anyone make you feel like you're just being weak. You aren't weaker than everyone else - you're stronger for surviving the pain, judgement, and isolation. I tell myself that every day - I just wish someone would have said that to me a long time ago. I wasted years of my life just waiting... letting my will to live ebb away and giving up writing because I didn't dare hope I would live long enough to have any success. We all need to define our success by our own standards. When I get back on the horse, striving to make each day count so that I can live to fight another day, I feel successful. Life is always worth fighting for, even when it hurts too much (physical or emotional pain).

Sorry if that got too personal. Carry on with your enjoyment of various smutty fanfics.
The rain drizzled down the window as Drogo's truck drew ever nearer to her family's manor. The house was a mausoleum to her once happy family: her mother cried all the time. Aunt Elia never left the house, just stayed at home, and did everything she could to pretend it was normal not to go outside... ever. Uncle Rhaegar behaved exactly the opposite. He was never home after he resigned his position as mayor and left politics. She easily forgave his inability to remain in the family business but would never forgive his abandonment of them.

She put on a pretty dress and a pretty smile and forced herself to forget all about... Gregor Clegane haunting her dreams. There wasn't enough eye concealer in the world for her to keep having those nightmares. In her sleep, she was the one home instead of her aunt, waiting in the kitchen to be brutally attacked. When she woke, crying in the early morning, she wanted someone to comfort her but there was no one strong enough. Dany was the strong one in her family, they came to her to cry. To be surprised with the hound's attendance to Sam's wedding was too much.

"Sorry I asked you to leave early," she noticed Drogo was even quieter than usual, if that was even possible. He did not even acknowledge her apology: just keep driving forward... closer and closer to her tomb. "Fine!" Dany slunk down in her seat and scowled at the dash until her head lolled forward, creating a curtain of blonde hair between them. "I don't really want to go home," she murmured.

"And I don't want to go on a date. I don't want..." She looked over to see his dark eyes watching her with intensity.

"Pull over," she pointed to the side of the road and he pulled the truck in front of a private driveway. Dany leaned forward to look up at the darkening sky, the storm only just beginning, before she turned her eyes back to Drogo. Holding his gaze she unbuckled her seatbelt to pull off her shoes and let them both clunk to the truck's floor. She broke their staring contest to lean against the seat, reached under her skirt, and pulled off her underwear. The lacy undergarment must not distract her this time so it was carefully stowed away in her purse.

Dany returned her gaze to meet his and braced her hands against the seat to slide beside him. He watched, like he always did, without emotion or reaction. Oh, she would get plenty of reaction out of him before this was over. Her hand slid up his leg to unlatch his seatbelt and splayed her fingers across his chest as she slowly guided the buckle to its home. She never let her eyes leave his, inwardly wishing to unclothe his assumedly stunning body. There was no time: she needed him now, promising herself to get an eyeful later.

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She rose over him, fitting a knee between his leg and the door to straddle his lap. Her hands gently cupped the side of his face as his hard expression softened. It was something one had to look closely for, the tenseness of his upper lip relaxed and the height of his strong brow lifted slightly. Dany might feel ashamed for the way she pushed him away but had to admit she was perfect for him. Who else would be so patient, learning all of his impossibly subtle expressions?

He was her friend and the person she wanted to have sex with: that made him her boyfriend, nothing more and nothing less. The normal thing to do with one's boyfriend is to kiss him so that's what
Dany did. Through heavy-lidded eyes she watched him watching her as she lowered her lips to his. Those black eyes burned into her, the heat of Drogo's gaze felt good even when almost unbearably hot. His hand was in her hair at once, crushing their mouths together.

Her hands tugged at the waist of his jeans until the button popped open, only about ten percent of her actual focus on the task. The dominating way Drogo kissed her set her mind spinning. Ironic really, the more she wanted him the more difficult it became to remove their impeding clothing. Instead of using his free hand to help like last time, he just grabbed a handful of her ass and yet she absolutely agreed with his tactics. Last time he did most of the work and this time it was her turn, even as she still wanted him to take control.

Finally, she managed to free his impressive erection from its denim prison and wasted no time pulling her skirt out of the way. The way his hand squeezed her ass and pulled her hair already made Dany wet but she still teased the tip of his cock against her slick entrance. He thrust his hips up, pushing into her as she sank down to envelope his full length. Drogo leaned forward, pushing her back against the wheel and gripped her hips. His hands lifted and then pulled her back down onto his hardness, over and over while she whimpered and panted in ecstasy.

Drogo was perfect for her: he fucked like a man was supposed to fuck and it made her feel alive. It was the most natural thing to be done and he did it perfectly. She did not have to feel ashamed, or explain to him what she wanted, he just somehow knew. The gods saw fit to provide coverage for their shameless roadside fucking: sometime they really were going to have to try a bed. Rain fell down in heavy sheets, curtaining the truck and obscuring their scandalous activities.

The raindrops pounding on the metal roof banged with an erratic tempo, playing to the rhythm of her writhing hips. All the while the controlled pace of his hands remained impossibly steady, building up her pleasure. Dany braced her palm against the roof as she tried to hold back finishing: a new challenge she was not quite up to. Her climax crashed around her, tearing a whimpered imitation of his name from her lips. His cock pumped within her as he released a string of groaned Dothraki she could not understand.

She curled her arms around Drogo's neck and slumped against his overheated body, resting her head on his shoulder. Neither of them made any attempt to move, only his hand lightly stroked over her hair as their heart rates returned to normal. The words he said were starting to make sense as her mind cleared of its sex fog. He was saying terms of endearments, ones he never taught to her but she researched on her own... To have a better understanding of the language.

"I feel better," she murmured against his neck. At least this time she was on the pill but they really should use more protection... Oh, who cares? Can life really get worse? What's an STD or a baby in comparison to the shit turns her life had taken in the last few years? A radical upset might just be the thing she needed to start living again. Suddenly, she had this vision of a dark-haired baby in Drogo's arms and it looked perfect. Too perfect, she admitted to herself, nobody ever gets 'happily ever after' outside of the movies.

"Good," his voice was so quiet and deep she almost seemed to 'feel' the word rather than hear it. Dany lifted her head to meet his eyes and wanted to tell him he meant more to her than just fucking the sadness out of her. Instead, she extracted herself from his hold and sat back in her seat to give herself time to think. At least she did not feel like running away again: that would start to get embarrassing. "I want you to be happy," his rare confession of emotion brought a smile to her lips.

"You really do make me feel better," she offered as a compromise. Being happy was something she had to force and fake with everyone else, if Drogo really loved her he would understand. Dany wished she had room in her broken heart to feel guiltier for using his love to satisfy her need to be
cared for. She fooled herself into believing that parties, shopping, and sleepovers were enough to heal her torment. As soon as that monster was released from prison, she reverted to the same weak girl she was before. "Tell me something I can do for you... Anything."

"Stay with me tonight," his request was simple enough and it surprised Dany how much she wanted to agree instantly.

"Your parents won't mind?" Dany smiled as she imagined bringing Drogo home to her mother's house and having him stay the night. Mother would be so shocked!

"They live in Bravos," there was never any emotion inflection in his voice. Perhaps that was why Dany's mind raced to inject an accusatory tone, her own self-berating over not knowing anything about him.

"I'll come home with you," she decided out loud, almost saying the statement as a question. Drogo watched her face carefully and she gave him one determined nod to back up what she said. She meant it, why shouldn't she want to spend the night at her boyfriend's house: that was totally normal. The rain cleared by the time they drove all the way outside the city to a small ranch beside the interstate. "You drive all this way every day to school?" Technically the property was within city limits but it was a winding route that took almost two hours.

"Yes," Drogo casually answered her shocked question as he pulled up in front of the ranch home. "Come," he got out of the truck and she followed him into the house. They were greeted by a young man who appeared to be of an age with Drogo. "He is Rakharo," he told her, "my cousin."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Dany, Drogo's girlfriend." She gave her most winning smile to Rakharo and hoped he approved. Dany extended her hand in greeting as Rakharo approached them. "He didn't tell you about me, I assume."

"Drogo doesn't tell anyone about anything," he smiled warmly and accepted her handshake. His common tongue was perfect but the clipped way he spoke vowels gave away his foreignness. Dany was not absolutely dying to know Drogo's entire family history: not even a bit.

"I have noticed that," she smiled at Drogo, who pulled her along further inside the house. "Bye," Dany waved goodbye to Rakharo as they walked past the living room and into a hallway.

"Irri," he knocked on a closed door. When it opened, an annoyed dark-haired beauty darted a curious glance between them. "Shafka azhat qemmosor ha maan dothralat?" Drogo was asking 'Irri' to give Dany some riding clothes. Oh, horses: how exciting!

"Everything sounds so rude in Dothraki," Irri complained but Drogo just gave her his signature blank stare. "Fine, whatever," she scoffed before turning to Dany with a half-smile. "He asked-"

"I understood," Dany interrupted, feeling good about understanding at least basic conversational Dothraki.

"Oh," Irri's dark eyes widened in surprise, "okay then." She waved a hand and turned back into the room. "Follow me." Dany smiled at Drogo as she let go of his hand to follow his cousin into her room. "So... Drogo's never brought a girl home." She rummaged through her dresser, pulling out items of clothing. "I hate how they can bring girls home. But if I even dreamed about bringing a guy here, they would draw straws to see who could slit his throat. Drogo is especially obsessed with the 'old ways'. He didn't try to trade a horse for you, did he?"

"I think his passion for Dothraki culture is charming," Dany answered diplomatically. It was one
thing for her to complain about Drogo's stoicism and old-fashioned mindset. She didn't want to hear it from someone else... Also, it was starting to chafe how little she really knew about him outside of DnD.

"Good," Irri laughed. "Because that boy is never going to enter the modern era." She moved away from the dresser and handed Dany a change of clothes. "You can get changed in here."

"Thanks," Dany called after Irri as she exited the room. She quickly changed into the outfit, a simple long shirt, and a pair of comfortable jeans which fit well. It was lucky that she and Irri were of a similar height and build, only the boots were a bit too snug. When she left the room, she stepped into the hallway, nearly running into a man as broad as Drogo by not as tall.

"Ki fin yen!" The man's head whipped towards the living room, where Rakharo sat on the couch with Irri. "Fin i hazi ifak vikeesi?" He was speaking so fast that Dany could not be sure but it sounded like an insult.

"Es havazhaan, Qotho!" Rakharo leapt off the couch, striding towards Dany and 'Qotho' with an annoyed expression. The man with the bad attitude pushed past her to disappear into the next door. "Drogo already went out to the stable," Rakharo offered her a reassuring smile. "Do you want me to show you the way?"

"No, thank you," she was a bit shaken by the asshole who called her a foreigner. Dany never used to let herself get this rattled. It made her realize just how much of a comfort Gregor Clegane's imprisonment was before it ended. "I can find my way." She forced a confident smile and waved as she headed towards the front door. "Hajas, Rakharo!"

"Dothras chek, Dany." Rakharo's words could be interpreted as a respectful farewell but it literally meant 'ride well'. Dany could feel the anticipation building as she walked out to the stables she noticed behind the house. Motion in the field drew her attention to an enormous black horse, flying across the field with Drogo on its bare back. He and the animal were like one fused body: gliding across the earth as if they might take flight at any moment. The beauty stole her breath away as she moved closer.

Dany hooked her arms over a fence separating her from the field and leaned her knee against a lower post to stare in amazement as he rode. Drogo was always in command of everything, that's what made him so appealing. It was clear this was his true fortitude: riding as though he were born to it, guiding the powerful animal's movements. The horse suddenly pivoted to race in her direction and came to a dramatic stop in front of her. She blushed at a sudden ridiculous thought... she wanted him to fuck her on that horse.

"I'm ready," she called, waving a hand at her new outfit. Drogo slipped off the horse onto the ground as if he'd been performing the action since birth. Gods save her: she had never been so turned on her whole life! When did she suddenly develop a thing for horseback riding? She could not even lie to herself this time, everything about him was perfect.

"Now we ride," he put his hands on either side of hers.

"I was hoping you would say that." Dany pushed up on the fence to climb over it and his hands moved to her waist to help. He pulled her into his arms and carried her to where the horse stood and set her down on her feet.

"You only need to know one thing about horses," he patted the animal's flank as he spoke low and gentle. Dany recognized his soothing tone and felt he was calming them both. A smile tugged at her lips but strove to take his uncharacteristic monologue seriously. "You ride them."
"I think I understand that much," Dany rolled her eyes at his serious expression.

"No - you are..." Drogo took her hand and pushed her fingers into the horse's mane. "You are not taking a ride," his dark eyes pierced hers. "Know you have the control." Dany nodded her head and watched as he climbed onto the horse's back effortlessly. His hand reached for her, pulling her up to sit in front of him and guiding her hands to the mane.

"I am in control," and for the first time she believed those words from her own lips. Though Drogo was behind her, one hand tucked around her waist, he let her lead the horse. Dany struggled at first to learn how to steer their direction but he let her learn on her own without interference. As always, he seemed to know exactly what she needed: that she wanted to feel literally in control of where she went.

"Oh Drogo," she leaned back against his chest, "this is so beautiful." Dany sighed wistfully as she admired the sun sinking behind the trees as they slowly moseyed towards the sunset. "I could just stay here forever."

"You could," he sounded serious about his offer to let her stay but there was an unfamiliar tightness to his voice.

"What are you thinking?" Dany asked the question even as she dreaded the answer.

"You don't want me to say," he wanted to tell her he loved her. As much as she wanted to fight it, a tiny part of her would not totally hate it if he did say it. It was nice to be loved, it felt warm and comfortable, even knowing the cold would return someday.

"Maybe I just hate the common tongue," she guessed aloud. Every time a boy told her 'I love you' was a lie, they never really meant it. But when Drogo gave lost himself in passion and spoke sweet endearments in his native tongue, it did not sound like a lie. "Everything you say in Dothraki sounds beautiful."

"Jalan Atthirari Anni," he murmured close to her ear and the words instantly filled her with unexpected joy. Dany thought he might just say he loved her but he said something so much more meaningful and honest.

"Shekh Ma Shieraki Anni," she imagined him wearing a shocked expression, though she knew it unlikely. That phrase was very important in the Dothraki language: a testament of singular devotion. It was true, Dany felt devoted to Drogo: at least she gave him as much of herself as she could bear. "You are the only light in my life. Otherwise, I live in darkness..." She untangled her fingers from the horse's mane to hug his arm holding her. "Drogo, I am happy with you." The admission cost her less than she feared and actually made her heart feel lighter.

"Good, I am happy too." Drogo wrapped his other arm over hers and held her with just the right amount of tightness. "Anha dothrak chek asshekh." Truer words were never spoken, they both had ridden well this day.

Chapter End Notes

YES! I did it! A full Dany POV chapter! I'm feeling froggy now... I think I might just write a Drogo POV - I don't know! It might possibly maybe happen at some point!!!
Am I stretching this week out too much? I just don't ever want it to end! But, as with all wonderful things, it must end sometime. How will our teens survive the end of their stolen days of bliss? Parents are coming home... Let the angsting begin.

Next Chapter is entitled:
The Last Night I Sleep, starting with a Missa POV then pure Sansan FTW.
MISSANDEI

Well, that was the most uncomfortable situation she had ever been in. After the bride's father was thrown out in a surprising show of heroism by the hound, the party inevitably died down. Missa wondered how she ever managed to have such a normal family. Sure, it was hard to be an only child and harder still that dad was always deployed somewhere overseas. All-in-all life was fairly ordinary until she somehow made friends with Margaery and Dany. She hoped they might speak to each other at the reception but Dany disappeared right after the ceremony.

Torgo brought her jacket and stared at his feet as he helped her pull it on as everyone else was already leaving the shop. He had been painfully shy all night, stuttering what small conversation he could make and even almost spilled his drink on her. She managed to avoid the catastrophe but he apologized for almost ten minutes before falling silent. That was before the father-of-the-bride's tirade... it certainly was an unforgettable night. Sansa and the hound were about to leave when she decided she had something to say them.

"Can you wait here for me?" Missa smiled at Torgo's obedient nod, somewhat enjoying his nervousness. Underneath the layers of insecurity and shyness, she recognized a calm strength.

"Sansa," she called as she followed the couple, "please wait!"

"Missa," Sansa looked tired but gave a small smile, "sorry we did not get a chance to talk-"

"It was a crazy wedding," Missa waved a hand in Torgo's direction, "and I've been a little preoccupied." She returned Sansa's smile with a sheepish one of her own. "This is technically my first date... ever."

"You will always remember it," Sansa rolled her eyes as she laughed. Missa thanked the gods she was not the only one who found this wedding absolutely mad.

"That is for certain," Missa shook her head as she chuckled, her mood turning somber as she resolved to say what she needed to say. "I really came over here to say, to both of you," she glanced up to the hound's bored expression, "I'm sorry. Marge and Dany are both really strong and sometimes it is near impossible not to go along with them." She looked to them both in turn. "Please say you will forgive my interference in your relationship."

"It didn't do much but send her running straight into my arms." The hound sneered down at Missa and she tried her best to flinch away. His eyes seemed to bore straight though her and his face was so pitiful and frightening at the same time. Sansa poked him in the arm and gave him a stern look so he groaned before he relented. "So I guess I forgive you."

"Thank you," she breathed a sigh of relief and gave him a genuine smile. "What you did back there was really brave."

"Brave?" He snorted and shoved his hands in his pockets. "It's not brave to toss out a piece of trash."

"I think so," Missa insisted. "Gilly must think so, he clearly frightened her terribly."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
chin up at him and found that she did not find him so intimidating anymore. "You are the biggest person I've ever known but you chose to use that advantage to help protect people. From now on, I won't let anyone speak badly about you in front of me."

"You'll be wasting your time defending me." The hound never struck her as a modest person before but now she could clearly see though his tough facade. How sad for Dany, to be so afraid of someone who would never see harm done to her. They had all woefully misjudged him and now it was her responsibility to set things right.

"I don't spend my time doing anything not worthwhile." Missa stood up straight and turned her eyes back to Sansa. "I hope you can forget how idiotically I've behaved and I would honestly like us to be good friends."

"I would like that too, Missa." Sansa smiled brightly as she tucked a hand around the hound's arm. "And I think you are wrong for what it's worth... I think you are the strongest one of the three. Neither Margaery nor Dany have even come close to apologizing sincerely. It was brave of you to do this."

"I only wish I had been brave earlier and stood up them." Missa furrowed her brow in determination and clenched her fist by her side. "To be sure, they will both be getting a full report on what happened here today," she promised wholeheartedly. This time, she would not let those two act like the queen bees and run roughshod over her. "I will not rest until the entire school is gossiping about what a great guy Sandor Clegane is."

"When all seven hells freeze over," he scoffed.

"Best dress warmly then," she countered. The hound... Sandor raised an eyebrow at her cheekiness. "Alright, I have the most awkward first date ever to finish." Missa clapped her hands together once and glanced back at Torgo to see him still standing patiently waiting for her. "Wish me luck," she waved as she turned back to her date.

"Good luck!" Sansa called, actually giving Missa a bit more courage. She and Torgo walked together, he did not try at all to take her hand as they headed for her car. He did run around to the driver's side to open the door for her and she smiled her thanks before getting in. Once he was safely seated and buckled into the passenger side, she pulled the Mini Cooper out of the parking lot. The drive to his house was excruciatingly quiet but when she pulled up in the driveway, he did not get out.

"I guess," he ran a hand over his hair and peeked at her with a worried expression. "I really blew it big time."

"What makes you say that?" Missa fought the urge to smile as she asked the question seriously.

"Were you at the same wedding I attended?" He lowered the hand to his forehead and bowed his head with shame. "It was a bloody nightmare."

"None of that was your fault," she put her hand on his shoulder to gain his attention. "Besides, it will be a great story someday." Missa smiled at his confused expression. "We can look back on it and laugh about how our first date was a horrible wedding put on by teenagers."

"So... you want to go on another date with me?" His awed expression certainly was an ego boost. Missa was perfectly aware that she was conventionally attractive. Her face was symmetrical so it was no surprise he found her beautiful. But having blossomed in the shadow of two beauty queens never left a girl unscathed. She was never as confident as either of them, neither had she been so free with
her affections. High School boys were ridiculously moronic or egotistical... Torgo was the only one who seemed intelligent but humble.

"I would settle for a kiss first," her own bravery even surprised Missa but it seemed to give poor Torgo a stroke. He stared at her, unblinking and not breathing. "Unless, you don't want to kiss me-

"Of course I do!" Torgo pulled on his bow tie, clearly feeling a bit choked. "I mean, I just... I never kissed anyone before."

"Me either," she shrugged. "I still understand the basic mechanics." Missa took his dazed stare as a 'yes' and leaned towards him to pressed her mouth against his. His lips were impossibly soft as she held the contact for a moment and then pulled away. The kiss itself was not like fireworks or any other explosive analogy... it was tender, warm, and soft like a beautiful memory.

"Missa," he murmured, "I think I sort of blacked out there for a moment... Could we do that again?" She smiled at him, gently pulled off his glasses to set them on the dash, and then held his face between her hands.

"Pay attention now," she teased before lowering her lips to his again. Her heart raced as he lifted his hands to lightly hold her shoulders and Missa let the chaste but wonderful kiss linger a bit longer. "There," she pulled away and turned to hand his glasses back to him. "Was that better?"

"Brilliant," he pushed his glasses up over his dazed eyes and grinned at her. "So... can I take you out again?"

"I think I better choose the next date." Missa crossed her arms and raised a brow. "Aren't we forgetting something?"

"Uh..." Torgo looked completely lost and she rolled her eyes and sighed.

"This is the part where you ask me to be your girlfriend," she informed him. Had he never seen a teen movie before? This was rather standard typical relationship stuff.

"Really?" His beautiful eyes widened as he adjusted his glasses. "You want me? As your boyfriend?" Missa ignored his ridiculous questions and just stared at him until he sat up straight in his seat and gave her a determined look. "Please, Missa, will you be my girlfriend?"

"Yes," she answered with a smile, "I will gladly fill the position."

"Could we... just once more-?" His words cut off as she pressed another quick peck to his lips and straightened his glasses and bow tie.

"Call me tomorrow," she smiled, still leaning close to him.

"Sure-fine-good," he wheezed, "I will." His hand fumbled for the door handle and then Torgo practically fell out of the car. He made a quick recovery and waved goodbye before shutting the car door with a happy grin. Missa watched him walk up to the front door and turn once more to wave before walking inside. First date, check. First kiss, check. First boyfriend... big fat check. As odd as it all was, nothing could dampen her high spirits.

SANSA

She could not recognize herself anymore, the girl who snuggles with a naked boy under the covers while her father was away. Oh, the guilt was heavy, no doubting that, but there was this other person inside her... Another Sansa who reveled in the power of being fully clothed, chin-to-toe while he was
powerless under her hands. Her fingers curled around his neck as she pulled his face close to hers, his breaths were short and quick. His eyes squeezed shut and his strained expression made her smile in satisfaction.

Sansa propped up on her arm and tilted her face down to capture his mouth. As of late, she grew all too familiar with Sandor's struggle to keep control. All those lectures from her mother were starting to make sense; it was good advice to not 'get carried away'. Mother said her first time was 'precious' and should be saved for her husband. But that was such an old-fashioned way of thinking, marriages broke up every day because the couple did not love each other. Her hand trailed down over his chest and curled around his waist to pull herself closer. Love should be the only consideration when saving one's virginity.

Sandor finally said he loved her and though she wanted to hear it over and over, once would be enough. He might have a hard time expressing his emotions but in the dim table-side light, at least he could not hide anything from her. Sansa loosed her hold on him to pull the sheet out of her way, admiring his masculine beauty. She could stare at him for hours, but he always looked so adorably uncomfortable under her scrutiny. His face was even more enjoyable to watch, all of his toughness melted away under her touch.

Her hands roamed over his body as she lowered her mouth to his neck, feeling his pulse rushing beneath her lips. Sansa never knew she could yearn this badly for something she never had; it still seemed an eternity until the Winter Formal. It would be simply heartbreaking to go back to sleeping without him beside her, keeping her so warm she did not have to turn on the heat. Groans and growls rumbled in his chest as she touched him everywhere but the one place he really wanted. It was so embarrassing she could never admit it out loud... she liked to hear him ask.

"Sansa..." He quietly groaned her name, his signal that he could take no more of her tormenting.

"Hmm?" Sansa continued pressing kisses along his collarbone as she stroked the length of his arm. It was wrong of her to torture him but the reward was too sweet.

"Please," he begged in a tight voice as her hand smoothed down his stomach. She curled her hand around his hardness and smiled against his chest as his stomach tightened in response. His arm curled around her and his hand tightly squeezed her shoulder to pull her closer. Her accursed flannel pajamas prevented her from enjoying the softness of his skin. She could still felt his warmth seeping through the thick fabric.

She liked him to hold her close but she was torn with still wanting to see his face, watching him come undone from her touch. A lifetime could not be long enough to appreciate the wonder she felt to have this kind of power over him. His heart thundered in his chest as she carefully maintained a steady rhythm, stroking her hand over his hardness. Sansa tried to ignore the building ache between her thighs and focus on him but one leg unconsciously slipped over his. In an instant, she was pushed back into the mattress with his full length pressed against her.

"Little bird," his voice was thick. "This is starting to feel a bit one-sided." Sansa could not help the giggle that escaped her throat. Sandor narrowed his eyes at her before his mouth descended on hers, thrusting his tongue into her mouth. Her hips rocked against his thigh between her legs, drawing a moan from both of them. He returned the motion, driving his hardness against her stomach as his knee slid between her thighs. She could not take it anymore, pushing on his chest to break their kiss to unbutton her top. "That's not a good idea," he growled.

"Don't be mad," she pouted at him as paused on the middle button. "You did say I could do whatever I wanted." Sansa resumed unbuttoning as she held his dark gaze, knowing she was pushing both of them too far.
"I meant it," he grumbled with a sullen expression that made her smile.

"I want to feel you," she pulled him down by his shoulders against her, shivering as his hot skin smoothed against hers. His heart pounded against her chest as her own fluttered erratically as she nuzzled her face against his neck. Both of them moved at once, pushing against each other to find relief to the building ache and desire. His hand moved to her hip, his fingers digging into her flesh as he tugged on hips to pull her flush against this hard thigh. She gasped and whined against his neck and heard his smothered groan in reply as she impatiently squirmed beneath him.

Sandor moved his hand over her hip to splay over the small of her back, guiding her writhing into a coherent rhythm. Her senses were in tuned to everything, even the texture of his skin beneath her lips as she panted encouragement. His solid thigh between her legs slid back and forth, building up her pleasure. She arched chest against his as the friction between her legs made her grip his shoulders hard. He held her tighter, lowering his hand to grasp her thigh and rolled his hips to repeat the motion.

Her legs locked around his as her hips bucked against him in a desperate frenzy. The sensation overwhelmed her senses, driving her motions from some deeper instinct. The heat from his chest enflamed her oversensitive skin the intense feeling continued to build and grow... Until it snapped, pleasure crashing over her in wave after wave.

"Sandor," she cried out his name, arching against his chest, her face buried against his neck. Her body trembled and shook even with the warmth radiating from his body. Too soon he was gone, turned onto his back to pump his release onto his bare stomach. They lay unmoving except for their heavy breaths before he reached back to grab the box of tissues to clean up. When he finished, she pressed herself against his side. "Next time," she whispered in his ear, "I want you to see all of me."

"Shut up," he growled, "or I'm sleeping on the couch." Sandor's threat was empty, evident when he pulled up the covers and turned towards her to pull her close.

"My lips are sealed," she promised.

"For once." Sandor always had to have the last word.

"What are you going to do tomorrow?" Sansa could not help but worry about him, though she knew he was capable of taking care of himself. Sandor deserved someone to take care of him, just like everyone did. "I wish you could stay-"

"No, I should get out of here first thing in the morning." Sandor sighed like he would miss this as much as she did and that thought made her feel a bit better and worse at the same time. "If you dad comes home early we're fucked," he chuckled at her worst fear. "He'd never believe I didn't try to talk myself into your bed."

"So," she pushed the subject, "where will you go?"

"I'll sleep in the shop if I can." Sandor sounded completely relaxed, as if being without a home was not a big deal. "If not, there's always the Skylark."

"You're too big to live in a car." Sansa squeezed him tightly. "I'll try to help if I can."

"Don't worry," he squeezed her back. "I can take care of it."

"Sandor, about the Winter Formal..." It was hard for her to bring it up but she did not want to put off the conversation. "You have to let me pay for-"
"We already agreed on that," he cut her off his 'not up for discussion' growl.

"Things changed," she insisted. "We have to adapt."

"No matter what happens - if I make a promise to you I'm gonna keep it." Sandor was possibly the most stubborn person she knew, it was between him and Arya for the title. "Don't argue."

"I have to do something..." Sansa felt frustrated at always being the one to give in.

"What do you think this is?" His hand stroked through her hair. "You're the first person who's taken care of me since I can remember - I don't take that lightly."

"Hold me tighter," she never wanted to let him go. Sandor hated it when she felt sorry for him but she could not help it. His life was so sad, it made her want to do anything to make him feel loved. Except he didn't like her to say she loved him, so she had to show him as best she could. "Don't go tomorrow without saying goodbye... I hate when you don't say goodbye."

"I never want to say goodbye to you," he kissed the top of her head and held her until she fell asleep. Sansa was caught between awake and asleep, surely dreaming... She heard his voice whispering a profession of love.

Chapter End Notes

I've always wanted Torgo to be wearing glasses but I didn't want to somehow create more confusion about who he was supposed to be. Anyway, I'm making him a glasses wearer now... so much hotness.

Sansan are taking their separation fairly well but Gendry and Arya are coming up next, they tend to be a lot more dramatic about everything.
ARYA

She woke just as the sun was peeking through the curtains of the single small window in his bedroom. It was a bit chilly so she pulled on the shirt he cast aside last night and tucked her body close to his for warmth. His peaceful sleeping face appeared more gorgeous every day. How would she survive not waking up beside him? Arya decided to go back to sleep so she could enjoy being woken up by him. Just as sleep started to claim her, a sound pulled her back awake.

"Thin walls," she grumbled and buried her face against his arm. A soft gasp caused her to launch into a sitting position and lock eyes with Gendry's beautiful mother. They stared at each other for a moment before Arya started shaking Gendry's shoulder.

"Oh," Ms. Waters leaned against the door frame, "just bloody wonderful."

"Dude," Arya shook him harder. "Gendry, wake up stupid - it's your mom," she hissed loudly.

"Five more minutes," he ignored her attempts to wake him up and covered his face with a pillow.

"You've got about five seconds young man!" His mother's shrill voice made to Gendry fling the pillow off his face and sit up to stare at her in disbelief.

"Mom?!!" He dropped his face in his hand, bemoaning their impossibly unlucky fate. "Oh no."

"Oh yes, trust me, I'm just as thrilled about this." His mother put her hands on her hips and looked at them both with a stern expression. "I was able to move up my flight time and I wanted to surprise you." She laughed without humor, throwing her hands up. "Guess I got the surprise! Great - just great - this is my life. Both of you get dressed - family meeting time. And that includes you." She pointed at Arya before turning on her heel and leaving them to get dressed.

"Yes, ma'am, on the double!" Arya called after her before she shoved a still shocked Gendry off the bed. "Move it, stupid!" They pulled on some clothes before shuffling up to the kitchen with shamed faces, bowed heads, and hands clasped in front of them. She waited for them sitting at the table nursing a cup of coffee and looking about as miserable as they felt.

"Mom..." Gendry stopped whatever pleading he started when his mother turned her bright eyes to sharply glare at him.

"Don't 'mom' me, take a seat," She pointed at the chair next to her. Gendry's mom folded her hands on the table and looked at them both in turn. "Now... Are you two going to keep telling me that you aren't having sex?"

"We weren't... before." Arya knew that she was using too many hands signals, pointing, gesturing she couldn't seem to stop. "But we have already... at this point in time. At present - yes. But!" She held up a finger as she made her argument. "We used protection and love each other so that has to count for something, right?" Gendry just groaned and sunk down in his chair to stare at the table in a state of mild shock.
"Yes, it counts." Ms. Waters held her distressed face in her hands, making Arya feel guiltier than she thought she was capable of being. "Kids, why do you do this to me? I don't want to be the 'cool parent'." She looked up at Arya and almost apologetic expression. "You know I have to call your parents - I take it they don't know where you are?"

"No, please, no-no-no." Full-blown panic overwhelmed Arya as she struggled to explain herself without seeming crazy. "That cannot happen, my parents... they are super old-school. Like - 'wait until marriage' traditional family values." Her elbow braced on the table as she leaned forward. "One of two possible outcomes - either they die from shock or they kill me. I need to ease them into the idea of Gendry as my boyfriend and they will never accept him if they knew..." She trailed off as she realized her babbling wasn't helping.

"How am I supposed to trust either of you after this? You're awfully quiet." Ms. Waters eyed her son who hadn't stopped staring at the table the whole time. "Don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

"No... I don't know what to say." He shook his head and didn't look up at that either of them. "Everything in my head sounds pitiful."

"How about starting with an apology?" Ms. Waters made an excellent point and Arya opened her mouth to start apologizing but Gendry spoke first.

"I can't do that." Gendry looked up and his mother with an apologetic expression, at odds with his words. "I regret that I hurt you... but I can't be sorry for this last week." He turned back to face Arya, taking one of her hands into his. "Best week of my life: I've never been so happy."

"Me too." Arya swallowed hard against the lump in her throat, embarrassed by the tightness in her voice. She turned back to see Gendry's mother observing them with an unreadable expression. "Aw, Ms. Waters! We never meant any disrespect - I swear. But it was hard for Gendry that you had to leave and miss his birthday. He would've been here all alone..."

"What am I supposed to do with you two?" Ms. Waters looked completely lost as to what to do, making her feel even guiltier.

"Love us... for all our faults?" Arya turned her most lovable rascal smile on Gendry's mother.

"Kids, I don't want to have to say this..." Ms. Waters crossed her arms over her chest and sat back in her chair, looking between them both with a worried expression. Then she focused her eyes on Gendry waving a hand at him with a tight smile. "Happy birthday, darling - you're a criminal."

"Mom!" Gendry's shocked protest was followed quickly by her own.

"Ms. W - I swear."

"You just told me," she cut them both off of the stern look, "your parents were uptight about you having sex. You're fourteen and he's eighteen." Ms. Waters heaved a sigh and shook her head. "If your parents had a mind to use the law they would have every right. Nothing you say would change the fact that what Gendry is doing is illegal."

"Then we'll stop." Arya knew she couldn't keep that promise but it's spilled from her lips anyway. "I can wait another..." She held up her fingers as she calculated how long it would take for their relationship to not be 'illegal'. "Oh... I can't do it." She smirked at Gendry despite the heavy mood. "We have to break up so I can find a younger guy."

"Ha-ha, such a funny girl." He glowered at her, not appreciating her joking attempt to ease the
tension. "What we really need is your parents' approval."

"You'll never get it," she insisted. "But my father's approval is really all you need, mom follows his lead."

"I wonder what that's like." Gendry crossed his arms and frowned down at her so she rapped her knuckles against his bicep in retribution. "Ow, you're so cruel to me." He rubbed the tender spot with an exaggerated pout. "We have to break up so I can find a gentler girl."

"Please," she scoffed and rolled her eyes at him. "You'd die of boredom in a week without me."

"I'm still here," Ms. Waters waved her hand at them, "in case you two forgot." They both turned toward her and her tight expression fell completely as she leaned against the table. "Who am I kidding? You win - I'll support your star-crossed love. I won't say anything to your parents... I'll leave that up to you." Her head lifted as her eyes narrowed at Gendry. "But this," she wagged a finger between them, "isn't happening here again." She got up from the table and slowly walked back to her bedroom. "I'm going to sleep for a few years, wake me when she's of age."

They followed her example, rushing back to Gendry's room to throw her stuff together. A quiet tension settled between them as they quickly dressed and made their way down to the Lincoln. When they were settled into the car and ready to go he didn't start driving, just sat there and stared at the steering wheel.

"Just so I know..." Arya gripped the seat tightly in her hand as she feigned nonchalance. "Am I going to get dumped at the game tomorrow?"

"What?!" His wide eyes snapped to her. "No, of course not! Why...?" Gendry exhaled slowly as he turned back to the wheel, nodding his head. "I guess I deserved that."

"I didn't say it to make you feel bad," she mumbled, "I'm just a little spooked." Last time they got caught, he turned into a stranger, cold - not even looking at her. If that happened again, it would just destroy her.

"I'm so sorry, Arry," Gendry tilted his head forward to rest against the steering wheel. "I fuck everything up somehow."

"No, that's not true." Arya slunk down in her seat and groaned. "We have some kinda bad luck or something. I was born too late, for starters." She raked both of her hands through her hair, tugging at it in frustration. "Really, this is all my fault."

"Sitting around feeling sorry for ourselves isn't gonna fix anything." Gendry straightened up and turned over the car ignition to pull out of the parking lot and start driving into the city. "I really think if I could just talk with your father-"

"Why don't you believe me?!" Arya could tell she was taking out her frustration on the wrong person but that was a horrible habit of hers and very difficult to break. "There is nothing we can say or do to convince my dad having some eighteen year old 'man' bang his little girl. He's better off in the dark - way, way in complete darkness."

"We're not 'banging'..." His quiet protest trailed off as Gendry kept his focus on the road.

"No?" Arya barked a laugh and turned towards him. "What are we doing then?"

"Loving." His quiet but sincere answer pulled Arya out of her bad temper and plunged her into a sea of guilt. She leaned back, tilting her head against the seat and staring up at the ceiling of the car.
"Dad's not gonna see it that way - trust me, I know him." She turned her head towards him when he didn't answer, seeing the tight expression on his face. "Please, Gendry lets not waste this last bit of time together upset." Arya sat up straighter as she began to worry he was taking her straight home already. "We knew it had to end today and, honestly, you're mom handled that well."

"She's just putting on a tough act," he shook his head. "I know she's really worried." Gendry glanced towards her, his strained face softened somewhat. "Same as you."

"Fine, you got me," she threw her hands up in defeat. "I'm totally freaking out on the inside." Arya kicked her feet up on the dash and sat back with her arms crossed. "But that's just how I deal with things - I pretend it doesn't bother me until it actually doesn't."

"I can't do that, I just feel how I feel." Gendry sounded apologetic, like it was something to be ashamed of. "Can't help it." She loved that he was so easy to read, that his adoration of her was obvious to anyone who looked for it.

"I love that about you." Arya leaned closer to him and placed a hand on his thigh. "Don't take me back yet."

"I should take you home." He didn't sound like he actually meant his words.

"You should take me somewhere so we can 'love' for the few hours of freedom we have left." She saw a hint of a smile tugging at his lips.

"Listen up, Arry, and listen good." Gendry grabbed her hand, lacing his fingers with hers. "I'm taking you to my forge and I'm gonna love you until neither of us feel even a bit sad." She grinned in victory. "Then I'm taking you home," he sighed. Her smile fell as reality punctured her moment of triumph.

"Sometimes it feels like," Arya wished there were anything she could do to just magically be a few years older. "I do nothing but make trouble for you." He lifted her hand to his lips before letting it go to focus on driving.

"Gods help me, I love it." He flashed his half-smile at her. "I've never once been sorry I met you, I can only feel grateful." The silence that fell between them comfortable once more. They arrived at the park before too long and held hands as they trudged through the woods to the clearing where the forge stood. Arya couldn't wait a moment longer after he spread the sleeping bag on the ground. She stepped in front of him and started working at the button of his jeans when he grabbed her wrists.

"Let me do everything," his bright blue eyes were wide and pleading yet she was driven by urgent impatience.

"But-"

"This has to hold us over for who knows how long," he interrupted as he let her hands go to cup the sides of her face. "Don't rush it." Gendry gazed down at her, his blue eyes searched her face as if memorizing it. It make her whole body feel weak to stand under such an adoring gaze when she felt so undeserving.

"Okay," she murmured, admitting to herself she would agree to anything while he looked at her like that. Arya stopped him as he leaned down for a kiss, holding onto his arms to support her weakened knees and used her last bit of strength to speak. "Tell me."

GENDRY
"You're so beautiful." He kissed her soft and gentle, smiling against her lips as she let him take the lead, and lowered his hands to slip under the hem of her shirt. Arya being obedient was nothing short of miraculous and he wasn't about to waste a moment of her rare calm mood. His knuckles skimed over her soft skin as he pulled her shirt over her head, breaking their kiss. "I'll always need you."

"You're going too slow." She whined impatiently as he unfastened her pants and pushed them down over her hips, crouching in front of her. Gendry smiled and hurried to untie her boots as her whining turned to polite growls. "Gods, hurry up... please." She quickly stepped out of her shoes and pants to hop onto the sleeping back, sitting down to stare expectantly at him.

He peeled off his shirt and heard her hum of appreciation as his attention turned to removing his pants. After kicking his shoes off, he moved to sit next to her as she wiggled with impatience but still waited for him to make the first move. Gendry watched her hungry eyes darting over his body and her hands twitching against her legs. She was like a predator, ready to pounce if he even looked at her wrong, but somehow he tamed her.

"I would keep you," he tucked her hair behind her ear, "forever if I could." Gendry smiled as he caught her hand sliding up his leg and kissed her impatient frown. "I want to wake up beside you every day and fall asleep with you every night." He could see so many emotions swirling in her stormy eyes: lust of course, but it went deeper than that. "Someday," he promised, "I'll make that happen. Until then, will you wait for me?" Arya narrowed her brows in confusion.

"You're the one waiting me for," she replied with a brow raised.

"That's a given," he smiled. "I'll always wait for you, Arya."

"Oh gods, Gendry," she whined. "If you don't fuck me now I'm going to die."

"Promise me," he insisted. "I know I'll mess up again and have to beg your forgiveness. Swear you'll wait for me to get this right."

"I'll never give you up," she declared with sudden forcefulness. "You are mine."

"Then never doubt me again," he pulled her close, "never get scared of me letting go 'cause I never will." Arya nodded her head slowly in agreement and he lowered his lips to hers. His hands traveled up her ribs and behind her back to unhook her bra, pulling the straps down over her shoulders to toss the garment aside. Gendry laid her back onto the sleeping bag, following her down to stretch out beside her and admire her slim form. He leaned on one arm and trailed his other hand lightly from her shoulder to her hip, watching as she shivered in response.

Everything about Arya looked so fragile and breakable, so at odds with her indomitable spirit. That spirit he admired even more than her delicate beauty. As much as she would hate it, he wanted to always protect her and keep her safe. Her skin was pale as snow and he could see trails of light bluish veins underneath, which he traced with his fingertips. The tips of her breasts were the same dusky pink color of her lips and he dipped his head to wrap his lips around one peak. She cried out and clutched his head but he used his free hand to pin her wrist against the ground. Her hips twisted as he teased the hardening peak with his lips and tongue. His head spun from the panting cries she released in response. He let go of her hand to cup her other breast, expecting her ear-piercing scream. Gendry loved that Arya had such a passionate response but he would hate to draw any unwanted attention. They were in a public place and his forge wasn't exactly 'up to code'; and those were the least of their illegal activities.

He forced himself away from her, rising up on his knees to tug her panties off as she helped by
raising her hips. Perfect: that was the only word he could think to describe her, naked and unashamed as the sunlight made her fair skin glow. The gloom of his messy bedroom hardly served as a proper romantic spot. She really did belong out here in nature, like a wayward nymph who came to seduce him and would shimmer away when he blinked. His gaze moved up to her veiled eyes as he moved over her to settle between her legs.

"I've waited more than long enough," she insisted. Her hands immediately went to the waistband of his shorts to start pushing them off but he captured one of her hands to pull it around his neck. "What are you doing?" Arya huffed and puffed in her adorable angry way. "Trying to kill me?"

"I'm trying to kiss you, milady," he smiled as he dipped his lips to hers, keeping his hips a safe distance from her writhing body. She latched onto his head with both hands, her short nails piercing his scalp as she thrust her tongue into his mouth. Arya devoured him like her favorite prey before bracing her hands against both of his shoulders and pushing him away.

"There," she heaved breathlessly, "now you've kissed me." Arya's narrowed eyes were so dark they were almost black. "Don't test me."

"I'm trying to make up for the first time," he admitted. He was a panicked mess that night and it wasn't good for her, he promised himself to make the next time they came here unforgettable. His hand slid between her legs to find Arya more than ready for him but his exploration wasn't quite finished.

"Please, Gendry, I need you now." Arya was beyond reasoning with, she bucked against his hand. "No more, please."

"You realize this is the only time you say 'please' to me?" Gendry chuckled as her eyes squeezed tightly shut. "Open those pretty eyes, milady." She obeyed, eyes opening up wide as she gave him a pleading look. "You're mine now and always," he promised, "nothing can come between us." He reached over her head to fish a condom out of his pants pocket and she helped by pushing down his shorts. Once everything was in place, he wrapped one arm around her waist and positioned his cock to push inside her with a groan. "I'll never let you go."

She lifted her hips to take him deeper, rocking against him as he tried to hold her still. Arya whimpered incoherent protests at his lack of movement but he stroked his hand along the side of her body. The soothing motion, along with his quiet shushing, seemed to calm her somewhat but her body was taunt and shaking.

"Don't rush," he murmured in her ear, "I want to remember everything." Arya whimpered as she nodded and he thrust once deep inside her as a reward for her rare patience. She muffled her cry against his shoulder and clung to him tighter. Her legs lifted up to lock around his waist, testing his resolve to take it slow. Gendry turned his head to find her lips, pulling away when she tried to dominate the kiss only to press his lips to hers again.

He continued to push in and out, building a slow rhythm, holding himself back driving into her at the furious pace he knew she wanted. Arya twisted and wriggled beneath him, babbling through her rising cries. Sometimes she encouraged him, other times she cursed him, and more than anything she commanded him to go faster. No matter what she said, he maintained the slow and steady pace: gratified when she tightened around his cock. Gendry recognized the signs and quickly covered her mouth with his own to catch her scream.

The fluttering around his cock nearly drove him to finish: Newton's second law of motion, F=ma. He squeezed his eyes shut and held her taunt body close until her trembling ceased. Only then did he allow himself to pump his release deep inside her, shuddering until he was spent. Now, that's how it's
done, he congratulated himself as he rolled over off of her. In the past week, he had Arya more times than he could remember but that was the first time they 'made love' and it was the best yet.

"That was," she panted and he beamed proudly as he waited for her praise. "Torture," she groaned and he felt deflated. Gendry propped up on his elbow to gape down at her in disbelief. "The best kind." Arya grinned up at his likely dumbfounded expression. "Rest a bit," she pushed him back down and tucked up by his side. "Next time we're doing it my way."

"As milady commands," Gendry sighed as he folded her into his embrace: sometimes hard work just goes unappreciated. In just a few short hours, Arya would be back where she belonged and he'd have to face the music with mom. But holding her close as her finger traced little circles over his heart made him forget they weren't the only two people in the world.

Chapter End Notes

Am I being to cruel to Gendrya? They keep taking risks they are bound to get caught! Luckily, Gendry's mom doth protest too much about her 'cool mom' status. I don't know if I've emphasized this enough: she's only 35 and painfully single. I need to hook her up with someone! But who? Hmm... Who is single and worthy of Gendry's mom? Maybe she's just cursed to be single... I'd have to name her if I hooked her up with someone, lol.
A Good Man Lost

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A Good Man Lost

SANSA

Daddy got in late Sunday night, greeting them both wearily before dropping his luggage off in his room. He asked Sansa and Arya to join him in the living room and they both sat on the couch while their father sat in his chair.

"First of all," he looked to them both, "I want to give you an update on how everyone is. The family is looking well: you wouldn't believe how much little Rickon has grown. Both Bran and Robb asked if they could come down to visit you and I told him I would think about it. Your mother misses you terribly and told me to make sure you to call her more often."

"We really missed you daddy," Sansa meant it honestly, even though she wouldn't trade the last few days for anything. She felt even guiltier about how blissfully happy she was while breaking so many of her father's rules.

"I missed you girls too," his smile turned serious as he focused his eyes on Arya. "Can you explain why you were absent two days last week?" Her younger sister open her mouth, presumably to let free a whole slew of lies but Sansa spoke first.

"I stayed home a day too daddy..." She twirled the strand of hair around her finger and tried to maintain eye contact. "You know," she gave him a pointed look, "girl stuff."

"Ah, well." Daddy cleared his throat and nodded once and understanding. "That's alright then." He looked between them once more. "Did anything happen, while I was away?"

"It was a fairly boring week - wouldn't you say, big sister?" Arya turned a puzzled look at Sansa and she couldn't hold back her nervous giggle.

"I agree... boring." She smiled even wider at daddy, trying to have to act natural and worried she was failing miserably.

"Well," Arya slapped her knees before standing up. "I have some homework to catch up on." She looked down at Sansa. "Help me out, would ya, sis?"

"Sure..." Sansa rose off the couch, throwing one more smile at daddy over her shoulder as she followed her younger sister. Arya ushered her into the bedroom and then shut the door behind them.

"What was that?" Arya gave her a suspicious look, crossing her arms and narrowing her eyes. "Why did you cover my ass?"

"I just don't want things to get all weird between you two." Sansa avoided Arya's hard stare as she sat down on her bed. She hugged a pillow and rested her chin on it. "It makes it uncomfortable for me too. Besides, I was not exactly the 'good daughter' while daddy was away. It is not fair for you to get in trouble when we basically did the same thing."

"You've changed, Sansa." Arya put her hands on her hips and gave Sansa and approving nod. "I like
"I guess I have changed a lot," Sansa murmured, not really knowing how to feel about it.

"My debt to you is starting to pile up." Arya flopped down on her own bed, turning on her side to face Sansa. "You plan on collecting anytime soon?"

"When I need a favor from you, it is going to be something huge." Sansa pointed at her younger sister. "Be ready." Arya chuckled and turned on her back to pull out her phone, probably to text with her boyfriend. Sansa laid back on her bed, already missing Sandor's warmth, her mind swirling with uneasy thoughts. She wished he was here to distract her and tell her to stop worrying her 'pretty little head' about everything. It would be so easy if she did not constantly care about everyone else first and put herself last. Only... that was becoming less and less true with every day.

Had she really changed so much? Yes, the answer came to her immediately; she had become a different person in the time since she met Sandor. Not only because of him but the whole life changing process of moving to a new place and starting a new life. She gained confidence to stand up to others and fight for what she wanted. Sansa liked who she was becoming for the most part but worried that she might lose who she was. It was just like when she gave up joining choir to join the cheer squad.

Her old, timid self would have never done that but she did it without hesitation because she hoped it would impress a boy. But she did not regret the decision at all because it actually worked! If Sansa had never been invited to Joffrey Baratheon's party, she might never have started dating Sandor. That night seemed almost a lifetime ago, that was how changed she felt in the short period they had been together. A small worried voice in the back of her head wondered if she might be losing the 'sweet innocence' that attracted him in the first place.

Sansa unplugged her phone from the charger on her bedside table and stared at it, wondering if Sandor was sleeping in his car. It might annoy him if she kept pestering him about his homeless state but her stomach twisted with worry for him. It wasn't just that the nights were getting colder and he might get sick from not sleeping properly. Everyone deserved a home to go to... a place where they felt safe and loved. For a few days she hoped he found that 'homey feeling' with her here.

'I miss you already,' she typed in the message and sent it with mounting anxiety. After a few minutes came his reply.

'Dream sweet, little bird,' he wrote, 'I'll be seeing you soon enough.' Sansa pulled the phone over her heart and felt tears prickling behind her eyes. She never dreamed it would be this hard; they had only spent a handful of nights together. Those few nights offered her a glimpse into what a future together would be like and it made her impatient. In a little more than three weeks the Winter Formal would finally arrive... Would she change even more in that time?

JOH

They all gathered in the empty room but there would be no game this day: it was a day to say goodbye. Sam stood up as everyone around the table hushed to hear him speak... for the last time.

"I want to thank everything for coming to my wedding." Sam beamed like a besotted fool he was. "It meant a lot to Gilly and me." Jon smiled at his friend's unfailing cheerfulness: to him the wedding was a success because he got to marry the girl he loved. "As you can probably guess, I've decided to graduate early." Collective groans rose from the table, even though they'd all been expecting this.
"This will be my last week. So, after much deliberation and discussion I would like to present your new Dungeon Master." Dany stood up and waved with a nervous smile.

"I know I'm fairly new to the group," she braced her hands on the table and looked around at each of them. "But I promise I will take my duties seriously."

"Thank the gods," Pod smiled at Dany. "None of us was gonna do it." A mummer of agreement came from everyone and Jon agreed. They'd depended on Sam to do all the work and none of them had the patience or time to devote like he did.

"Bravo," Torgo chimed, "you really saved us Dany." Her fair skin blushed at the attention as her smile grew even wider. Jon knew the backstory for her character was mostly her scenario. He looked forward to continuing the adventure with her at the helm.

"Don't all start crying at once now," Sam frowned at the group for ignoring him. "I'm only leaving the group for the next eighteen years."

"Oh, Sam," Pod jumped up from his seat to run around the table and pull Sam in for a hug. "We're gonna miss you so much, buddy."

"It won't be the same without you," Jon stood up to take the next hug and barely got his arms around Sam before Arya was wedging her way in.

"You were the first person to accept me into the group," she put her arms around Sam as far as they could go. "I'll really miss you." Just then, Jon noticed Hot Pie starting to choke up and a smiling Pod trying to cheer him.

"Me too," Sam pulled back from Arya and looked at everyone around the table. "Even though I won't be coming here anymore and I'm an old married man now... I hope we can all stay in touch."

"Let us know if there is anything we can do for you and Gilly," Gendry came up behind Sam and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Except babysitting," Arya added, "I definitely can't be trusted." There were laughs all around at her stating the obvious.

"This group was the first place I ever felt acceptance," Sam sniffed a bit as he addressed the group. "You are all my best friends and I'm honored to have sat around this table with you."

"To Sam," Pod raised his can of soda, "the greatest storyteller who ever played the game!"

"Here-here!" Arya lifted her hand as if holding an imaginary goblet. "To Sam!" They all clapped while Sam reddened and waved his hands, not used to being the center of attention.

"Have you and Gilly found a place yet?" Jon's mind always turned to more practical matters and he was curious to find some way to help them get started in the new life together.

"Yeah," Sam smiled happily, "actually there was an empty apartment in Gendry's building for a good price."

"The building manager is an alright chap," Gendry told Sam. "Anything gets broke and he'll have it fixed within a day."

"Thin walls though," Arya complained and Jon just gave her a disgusted look. "What?" She shrugged before rolling her eyes at him. "They'll have a crying baby - it's a valid concern."
"It's a small place," Sam continued with a happy grin, "but we are working hard to make it feel like a home."

"If it is not too presumptuous," Dany interjected, "I would like to propose we all pitch in to help put the nursery together. As our thanks for your service as Dungeon Master."

"We'd love to do that," Jon backed her up, "wouldn't we?" Everyone around the table agreed and looked to Sam for an answer.

"That would be brilliant," he choked with emotion, "thank you." Sam swiped his eyes a bit and smiled around the room. "Everyone, I'm really gonna miss these Mondays together." Before long the bell rung and the group all wished Sam good luck as they left.

"Sam," Jon put a hand on his friend's shoulder to hold him back while everyone else left. "I just want to say that I've never known a better man. If there is anything I can do, don't hesitate to ask."

"There is something..." Sam sighed a laugh and Jon could see a new maturity in his best friend. "Stop worrying about me. I know I should be scared out of my wits but I just can't help being happy." He shrugged and only smiled wider. "I never thought I would fall in love or get married and now I've done both before graduating high school. I'm excited to become a dad... honestly, I can't wait."

"I'm happy for you, Sam." Jon pulled Sam in for one last hug before letting him go. They walked together to the end of the hall before splitting off as Jon headed to class. Most of the students were already there and he smiled as he saw Ygritte sitting in her usual seat. Her loose fiery hair fell in wild tendrils against her light-colored sweater. He thought she never looked more beautiful.

"Hey, handsome." Ygritte leaned back in her seat and grinned at him. "What's got you smiling?"

"Just happy..." Jon turned towards her, struck with a sudden brilliant idea. "Ygritte, I think I'll take you on a proper date this weekend."

"Is that a request?" She laughed as she leaned closer to him.

"No, you have to go." Jon smirked as he lowered his voice so only she could hear. "Or else I won't do that thing you like."

"Naughty boy, I suppose I have no choice then." Ygritte quirked her brows as she ran a lustful look over him. "But I can't wait that long."

"After school?" Jon didn't want to wait that long either.

"I'll look forward to it," she agreed in a low and wicked voice. Class started, breaking up their flirting, but he caught her shooting naughty looks in his direction. Jon prayed for the day to pass quickly.

**YGRITTE**

She took him back to her place, wasting no time getting him into her bedroom and started to strip his clothes.

"Ygritte," he laughed, "slow down." There was no reason to slow down - in fact - she would rather hurry up in case dad made it an early day at the shop. She wrangled with the buttons on his shirt and
tugged it off to reveal his flawless body.

"I knew it," she murmured, admiring every inch of bared skin.

"What?" Jon flushed a bit, completing the look of the perfect virgin lover.

"You're fucking gorgeous!" She grinned as she stroked a hand over his chest and stomach, feeling his muscles tighten under her touch.

"Ygritte, you're so beautiful-" His blathering cut off as she put a finger to his mouth.

"Let's put that mouth to better use," she tugged him close and captured his lips, pulling him back to fall onto her bed. They worked together to remove her clothes and she sat up to pull off her sports bra to be left in just panties. He gaped at her as if he'd never seen a naked girl before - she supposed he actually hadn't. "You have some amazing self-control," she chuckled.

"It's failing me at the moment," he wheezed, "I don't know if I can hold out." Ygritte felt a strong temptation to just seduce him right then and there. But she couldn't take it if he got all mopey afterward and broke up with her. Jon had only been hers for a matter of days and she wasn't nearly finished with him yet.

"It's up to you," she shrugged. "Personally, I hope you lose every last shred of honor and fuck me senseless." Ygritte grinned at his tight expression - Jon didn't look relaxed by her joking she decided to take pity on the poor boy. "But I do enjoy how good you are down there - licking and sucking on me like you love it."

"I do love it," he licked his lips as his eyes darted to her panties. Ygritte arched against the bed to take pull off her underwear and throw them aside.

"I'm all yours, Jon," she let her knees fall apart and gave him an inviting look. Jon rose up on his knees, looking down at her with his dark eyes roaming hungrily over her body. Ygritte raised a hand to slide it up over his torso but he caught her wrist and pinned it over her head. He lowered his lips to hers, smoothing his palm over her chest and down her side as he kissed her softly. She squirmed with impatience and hooked her free hand behind his head. When he broke the tender kiss she was already breathless and aching.

Her whole body tensed with impatient anticipation as he knelt between her spread thighs and bent down to hover his mouth over her. Even the warmth of his breath washing over her made her hips twitch and fist the sheets in her hands. Ygritte groaned as he put his mouth on her to swirl his tongue in slow circles around her clit. Her hand twisted into his dark curls as she writhed under his lips and tongue. She whimpered, pleading in a voice she did not recognize. Just when she was about to come he pulled away. He pressed wet kisses to the insides of both thighs, his soft hair barely bushing over and teasing her. As she opened her mouth to start begging him to keep going, he buried his face between her legs once more.

She moaned when he pushed his tongue deep inside her. Her hips jumped when he splayed his hand against her thigh to spread her leg further apart. His tongue thrust in and out of her, as his hands squeezed her flesh as she trembled from overwhelming pleasure. Ygritte dug her toes into the mattress as she cried out, sparks of light flashing before her eyes. Her hips arched up to his mouth as
her whole body shuddered before she collapsed onto the bed.

"You're a god, Jon," she panted. "Seriously, people should worship you."

"I think I'm worshipping you," he crawled up to flop beside her, gasping for breath even harder than her. Ygritte appreciated his hard work and fully intended to repay the favor if she didn't pass out from the aftershocks first.

"Anytime you want," she moaned as another aftershock gripped her. "Day or night - call me and I'll come running."

"Is it really that good?" Jon turned on his side to face her with a hopeful expression.

"You've given me both of the best orgasms of my life," she praised. "And every other memorable one was a solo job. Who knew my virgin boyfriend would be the best I ever had?"

"Glad I could be of service," he curled his hand around her waist to pull her close. Ygritte let her fingers trail down his muscled stomach to start undoing the button on his pants. Jon held onto her wrist to stop her, pulling her gaze up to his tight expression. "That's not a good idea: I think I'll just keep my pants on."

"Suit yourself," she moved her hand around his waist and wriggled closer to his warm body and laid her head on his chest. Ygritte could feel herself being lulled to sleep by the steady thudding of his heart under her ear. Ten months was an awfully long time to wait for sex... but it helped to think about how impossibly good he'd be at going down on her by then. She might forget sex was even a thing by then.

Chapter End Notes

Just because it's a 'small batch limited edition' beer doesn't mean it's fit for human consumption.

That is all.

Oh yeah, my A/C will finally be 100% fixed tomorrow! Is is just me or has it been broken forever? Literally, it feels like forever.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Buds

SANDOR

The drive to school from the pet shop took less time than he thought it would, arriving at school earlier than usual. He was parked for all of two minutes before she jumped into his car - Arya, the little sister, emphasis on the word 'little'.

"Hey," she huffed as she closed the door behind her.

"Just come on in why don't you?" Sandor rubbed a hand over his face as he wondered what the kid was up to this time. According to Sansa, the little mischief maker was always plotting and scheming up something. "Sup, short stuff?"

"Listen," she turned towards him with a furrowed brow. "Sorry for bothering you but I'm desperate." Arya certainly looked desperate - he was more surprised by how worried that made him. "Can you tell me where to find some green?" What the fuck - about a dozen different scenarios went through his head and all she wanted was some dope?

"What makes you think I smoke?" Sandor faced the kid full-on and waited for her to get the hint.

"You're not a sheep," she jerked her chin towards the school, "like the rest of these animals."

"Kid, are you blind?" He pointed directly at his bad side.

"Ooooh, right," she pointed her finger at him like a gun, "gotcha. Still, you know anyone? I'm in an eighth hell of grounding and I need something to help pass the time." Arya did look like shit - paler than usual with big dark circles under her eyes. "I'm not big on sitting around doing nothing."

"I can understand that," he went back and forth in his head for a minute before relenting. "Fine, I'll help you out." Sandor got out of the Skylark and started heading for the boy's restroom. Arya pumped her short legs almost twice as fast just to keep up but he wasn't looking to waste time by slowing down.

"Who are you taking me to see?" Her voice was a bit breathless so he slowed his pace just a little bit - wouldn't do if the girl passed out. How the fuck would he explain that to Sansa? 'Little bird, I was helping your baby sister buy some illegal narcotics on campus...' Yeah - that would go over real well.

"Greyjoy," he answered.

"Asha?" Arya kinda squeaked when she was surprised. "That jock?"

"Nah," he shook his head, "her brother, Theon."

"Oh..." She grimaced, the typical response to Theon. "He's the only game in town?"

"Hey," he narrowed his eyes down at her, "I'm doing you a favor here - don't get picky."

"You got it, big man." Arya saluted him with a grin before punching her little fist into his arm.
"You're alright." Sandor shrugged, unused to praise from anyone but Sansa. What was wrong with these Stark girls? He walked into the boy's room and she followed without any reluctance - short stuff didn't seem afraid of anything. Theon was hanging out in his usual spot in the handicap stall but he stood up straight when he saw them.

"Look, hound," he held up his hands in surrender. "Whatever beef you got with Joff has nothing to me. I'm Switzerland."

"Fuck Joff," he sneered at Greyjoy. "I'm here to introduce you to a new customer." Sandor waved a hand at Arya. "You're both welcome."

"Thanks, hound," he turned to Sandor with a confused smile. "That's real swell of you."

"Fuck your thanks," Sandor leaned against a tiled wall and crossed his arms. "Just sell her some weed, and get it over with." Theon set his backpack on the counter next to the sink and unzipped it to reveal a surprisingly organized array of marijuana.

"What'cha need, girl?" Theon smirked at short stuff's awed expression.

"Don't call me 'girl',' she sneered at Greyjoy. "I'm Arya - and I need to get fucking baked out of my mind."

"You've come to the right man," the idiot smirked even more at her little scowl. "I've got five kinds of dro," he pointed at each item as he listed it, "also dabs, wax, mids, ditch weed."

"Mids..." She reached out to pick up a bag, opening it up and sniffing the contents. "Smells good - how middy?"

"Middle of the road mids," Theon took the bag from her and pulled out a bud. "Want a taste?"

"Here?" Arya looked around the bathroom with a dubious expression.

"I smoke here all day," Greyjoy rolled up a joint with surprising speed and skill. "Try this." Theon handed the doobie to short stuff and she took a deep pull on it, holding in the lungful before slowly exhaling a cloud bigger than her.

"Oh my gods," she groaned happily. "It's been so long."

"Hit it again," Theon waved his hand when she tried to pass the joint back. Arya took another deep drag and blew out an even bigger cloud than the first - still didn't cough a bit.

"This is some good shit," her voice was hoarse and the next hit she took did make her cough.

"Do I look like I get bad shit?" Theon crossed his arms with a smug smile while Arya and Sandor exchanged a look. She dug some crumpled money out of her pocket and handed it to Theon who smoothed the bills like they were precious.

"Thanks, Theon," she stuffed the bag of weed in her pocket, holding the joint between her lips. "I'll be back next week." Arya puffed the joint down with a quickness, and passed the still-lit bud to Greyjoy.

"Always happy to have a satisfied customer," Theon called after her as they walked out of the bathroom. She dipped to the side of the building a to dig a bottle of some kind of perfume and spray it on herself. Sandor jumped out of the way when Arya held up the bottle like she was going to spritz him too and she just shrugged and put it away.
"Listen," Sandor stopped Arya before they split up. "Don't say anything to Sansa-

"I'm no rat," she scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Besides, I really needed it - thanks."

"Tough week?" Sandor didn't know why he suddenly cared - there was just something about short stuff that made him want to... Was he feeling protective? His little sister would be about her age by now if she'd lived.

"Tough life," she sighed as her shoulders rolled forward.

"Nice try," he scoffed, "rich girl."

"I'm not rich - my dad is rich," Arya narrowed her brows as her eyes darkened. "I'm not my dad."

"I hear you there," he relented. Rich kids have bad days too. "Alright, wolfgirl, what's your damage?"

"What else?" Arya laughed wearily as she shook her head. "You know about my dad's rules - you met my boyfriend... I'm so fucked." That sounded painfully familiar.

"Sansa might be right," he rubbed a hand over his chin, "about us being alike."

"Don't ever say anything remotely like 'Sansa is right' to me ever again." Arya raised a brow and smirked as she looked him over. "Not unless you want me to doubt your intelligence even further."

"Sansa is really fucking smart," he argued. He was a senior and nearly all the classes Sansa took were more advanced than his.

"And really fucking stupid at the same time," she countered with a grin. "I still love her though - she's the only sister I've got." Arya eyes narrowed at him, suddenly somber. "What about you?"

"I haven't got any sisters," he answered gruffly, averting his eyes. 'Not anymore', he added silently in his head.

"No, I mean..." Arya cleared her throat and dug her toe into the dirt. "Do you love her?" Sandor snapped his eyes back to short stuff, surprised she would get so personal when they barely knew each other. "Forget I asked," she waved a hand, "it's none of my business. Only..." She looked him dead in the eye and didn't waver an inch. "If you don't love her - don't play with her heart. Or I'll fucking kill you."

"I'll keep that in mind," he smirked down at her dead-serious expression. Arya searched his eyes for something and then seemed to relax though he hadn't answered her question.

"Thanks, giant dude," she patted her pocket, "I owe you one." Then she took off running to her class and he ambled in the other direction. What a strange girl... he decided he really liked her. The kid was nothing like her sister, they didn't even look related, but she was cool in her own way. Sandor didn't doubt for a second she would make him pay if Sansa ever cried over him. But he didn't need threats from a little girl to keep that from happening. If anything - he'd be the one crying into his whiskey when she eventually wised up.

The school day was uneventful until he got to Spanish class and that's when it started to get bizarre. The little bird was... Just out of it, staring off at nothingness and barely said two words to him. She asked to see him after school but the expression on her face made him pretty sure she didn't want any kind of fucking date. If he had to guess, Sandor thought he might actually get dumped - today. They met after school in front of the weirwood tree and walked beside each other to his car, not touching.
When they sat down inside the car, she finally broke for tense silence.

"Sandor," the way she said his name had the small hairs standing up on the back of his neck. "Can we just... talk?" Fuck, that's it - she had enough and wanted to break up - he knew it was only a matter of time.

"Sure," he braced himself, "go ahead." Best just to get it over with.

"Do you think I've 'changed'?" She kept her head down, a curtain of hair hiding her expression, as she fiddled with the sleeves of her sweater.

"What do you mean?" Sandor gripped the steering wheel, wondering where in the seven hells this was going.

"When we first met..." She waved a hand and then let it fall limply in her lap again. "Do I seem different from then?"

"I didn't know you then." Sandor wished if she was going to do it, then just get it over with already. He could handle being dumped - he just didn't want to hear a bunch of reasons.

"You know what I mean." She tucked her long hair behind one ear and pecked at him sideways.

"Nah," he argued, "I really fucking don't."

"Sometimes I don't even recognize myself anymore." Sansa tilted her head against the head rest and stared up at the car ceiling. "I break daddy's rules and I don't feel nearly guilty enough. I couldn't care less about finishing my homework if I can spend all night with you. I feel... like a different person."

"Is that a bad thing?" Before he had his guard up, waiting to be dumped. Her sudden moodiness was just plain confusing.

"That's what I'm asking you," she turned her bright blue eyes on him, wide and worried. "Do you like the person I'm becoming?" Then it dawned on him what she must be going through.

"You're still 'you', little bird." He fought to hold back his smile of relief, not wanting her to think he was laughing at her. "You're just growing up." Sandor sank down in his seat, letting out the breath he been holding pretty much all day. "I keep forgetting you're younger than me because you're so damn smart. Over the next couple of years, you're gonna feel completely different. You'd hate the asshole I was two years ago. I would've tried to fuck you that night at Joff's party and then I would've dumped you."

"I can't believe that," she looked horrified that he would even say such a thing but it was the truth. Before he turned eighteen, Sandor thought about the path he was on, following in his father's footsteps. That was the last thing he wanted, so this year he promised to get his shit together and stop being such a drunken violent asshole. And wouldn't you know it - all of a sudden, he gets a sweet and hot girlfriend. Funny how things work out like that.

"Believe what you want," he shrugged. "Back then, there was nothing I cared about more than getting wasted and basketball - in that order. This year I started to think about what I want outta life."

"And?" Sansa would not be satisfied until they had 'talked about their feelings'. There were few things he wanted to do less than discussing his hopes and dreams for the future. But getting dumped by Sansa was at the top of that list.
"I want to play pro ball," saying it out loud sounded ridiculous. "Not to live up to my dad's expectations... I want all that fucking money." Sandor smiled, just thinking about the piles of cash just waiting for him - money is freedom. "I'll buy a big ass house and a Harley and never talk to anyone in my family ever again." It was a simple dream, but it was all his.

"Sounds nice..." By the tone of her voice, he could tell she wasn't pacified.

"But?" This is the problem with 'talking' - it always just leads to more talking.

"Who is going to live in that big house? Just you... all by yourself?" Sansa wanted him to make her a bunch of promises about how they'd still be together in a decade. "I guess that is a bit far in the future." He wasn't about to start making promises he couldn't even begin to keep. Sandor took a moment to think about what he should say, it couldn't be a lie, but he didn't want to hurt her either.

"I'm not staying in the Crownlands after I graduate," he went for honesty. "I have to play college ball somewhere but not here." Sandor looked at her, trying to read the thoughtful expression on her face. "I decided that long before I met you."

"When you pick the school you want to attend..." Sansa gave him a smile that was pretty but didn't quite reach her eyes. "Tell me first, so I can be the one to celebrate with you."

"Easy - I don't have anyone else I'd want to tell." Sandor could tell she needed more, wanted to hear professions and promises. "Sansa, making plans about the future is always a gamble. We don't know what will happen between then and now. All I know right now - you're the best thing in my life."

"Me too," her small smile fell as her brows knitted with worry. "Did I kill the mood?"

"It's totally dead," he let out an exaggerated sigh. "I can't even think about kissing you right now." Sandor peeked at her glum expression and chuckled at her. "Who the fuck you think I am?" He whipped the Skylark out of the parking space and drove way too fast to the emergency make-out spot. No more talking - that wasn't what he was good at - he apparently won the little bird with his kissing skills. That was his in, he swept away all her good senses until the was nothing left but a horny teenaged girl.

She was so sweet and innocent, Sansa couldn't help but fall in love with him because she wanted him. In her romantic mind, love and sex were the same thing. Sandor wanted her the moment he saw her - but he knew he loved her when she said... 'I'll always be with you' - just like that, with the most honest look on her face. That should've scared him off but instead he almost blurted it out that he loved her. He didn't even know it himself and then it was like somebody turned on a light switch from 'off' to 'hopelessly devoted in every way'.

"Sandor," she started up again as soon as he parked behind the building. "I want you to know-

"The time for talk is over," he jerked a thumb at the backseat. "Get back there." It was strange how just telling her what to do worked almost all the time. Sandor thought he should stop doing that... someday. Sansa flashed a coy smile at him before obediently opening her door to move her seat up and slide into the back. Sandor huffed out a breath to blow away the dark cloud hanging over him before he followed her example. By the time he closed his door she already had her top off and was reaching behind her back with an expression of concentration.

"What... are you doing?" Sandor stared as she reached behind her back and wiggled a bit before pulling her bra off. Completely and totally off - and set it aside... And then she was just completely topless, naked from the waist up. Holy fucking gods in all seven heavens.
"I told you," she flushed and avoided his eyes as she moved her hands to unzip her skirt. "I want you to see me."

"Might be," he coughed, "you should-" Sandor grabbed her wrists and pulled her hands away from her skirt. "Fuck - that's enough."

"But-"

"Don't argue," he cut her off, unable to tear his eyes away from her chest. There was... she was... things. Reasons.

"Are you just going to stare at me?" Sansa shifted her shoulders uncomfortably. She might have hid herself except he was still holding onto her wrists.


"For how long?" Sansa was whispering for some reason. "It's embarrassing if you just stare."

"Can I kiss you?" Sandor didn't even realize he spoke out loud until she closed her eyes and leaned forward. "Not like that," he chuckled when her eyes popped open.

"Oh," she was still the same blushing little bird, "okay." It still stunned him sometimes that the most perfect girl in the world smiled at him. Sansa curled her hands around his neck, sat across his lap, and looked up at him through her lashes. He swept her hair aside to cup the nape of her neck as his arm supported her back and she tilted her head back in invitation. Sandor dipped his head down to run his lips down her throat, tasting the soft skin of her neck as he inhaled her sweet scent. Sansa gasped as her hand fell from his neck to invite him to continue trailing lower.

His hand up slid from her hip to trace his fingers along the underside of her breast and she arched into his light touch with a whimper. He groaned as he cupped her breast, kissing down over her collarbone to the soft swell of her breast before turning his eyes up to hers. She was watching him through heavy lidded eyes with parted lips as her chest heaved under his hand. Gods she never looked more beautiful, he had to kiss her panting lips, nipping her full bottom lip between his teeth.

Sansa moaned as he pulled away, following after him, so he captured her mouth again as she pressed her chest into his palm. Sandor swiped his thumb over the peak of her breast and grinned against her soft mouth as she cried out. His cock somehow grew even harder under her soft ass writhing in his lap. With great effort he tore his mouth from hers and leaned her back to slide his lips along the top of her breast. Her hand clutched his head as her back curved to push her chest closer to him.

If he thought he was mesmerized by the sight of her breasts, the taste and texture pushed any conscious thoughts from his mind. Sansa closed her eyes and sighed polite encouragements punctured with his name, her voice low and breathy. He opened his mouth to flick his tongue out over the rosy pink tip, causing her to cry out and tighten her hold. His lips and tongue savored her lush flesh, gently sucking on the tip until she was moaning with each breath. Sandor trailed his fingers down her trembling body to disappear under her skirt.

Without hesitation she opened up to his hand, which found her panties already slick. He pressed his luck by slipping his fingers underneath the last barrier. She gasped as her whole body tensed - both of them froze until she rocked against his fingers. It was almost more than he could bear, swirling his fingers around over her slick hot flesh. It was only a moment before she was wailing one high-pitched note. Instead of taking her usual recovery time, Sansa slid off his lap. Her blue eyes flashed at him, filled with heated passion.
"Take your shirt off," she ordered as her pink tongue darted over her lips. Sandor quickly obeyed and went further to free his cock before looking back to see her staring at his erection hungrily. "Lean back." Sansa pushed on his chest so that he rested against the seat and she pulled his shirt from his grasp to cover his cock and then straddled his lap. She firmly gripped his hardness and curled her other arm around his shoulders to press their chests together. His hand cupped her breast as she tugged him firm and steady until he was groaning his release against her shoulder.

"Sansa," he shuddered as she held him tighter, her heart racing against his chest. She tossed the shirt on the floor and wrapped her other arm around him to squeeze him tighter. "No matter how much you change," he gasped in another lungful of air. "I'll always want you to be mine." Whatever barrier that kept him from saying these things to her always came tumbling down when she held him close. Sandor pulled on her shoulders to look into her eyes. "I swear," he swallowed hard, "I have to leave Kings Landing, but I'll still always want you."

"So," tears collected in her eyes, "you won't break up with me before you leave?"

"I'm leaving this shit place," he pulled her close again and stroked his hand down her hair. "Not you - I never want to leave you... I'll just steal you when I leave."

"And hide me in your dorm room," she laughed softly before going still and silent. "We can make it work long distance, I know we can."

"Anything you want, little bird." Sandor hated to feel hopeful, things never worked out like he wanted. But Sansa always made the impossible seem easy when she said it in that determined voice. Even if it turned out that one or both of them was lying their asses off... it still felt good to believe their love could conquer all obstacles. Maybe, just maybe, 'happily ever after' isn't total bullshit.

Chapter End Notes

It... is... finished. Seriously, for a bleak moment today I thought I had a crisis of confidence. Turns out I just forgot to turn the A/C back on after the repair techs left. DUH! I was burning up for no damn reason! Then I was fine and finished this chapter but I really have to thank everyone for bearing with me during this difficult and sweaty time. I will really be able to focus now that I can wear clothes inside my house again.

Thanks to all air conditioning technicians everywhere:

Yea, though thy thunderous footfalls,
Fall upon my tender pounding skull.
The raging storm of boots and ducts...
Brings a cold wind I cannot live without.
SANSA

Between both of their practice days and her efforts to not raise daddy's suspicions, it was hard to find free time to spend with Sandor. However, today was a special day so Sansa put forth her best effort into planning the perfect after school date. In her mind, nothing beat an evening in the backseat of his Skylark. She got permission from daddy to stay out late and made plans with Sandor during Spanish class. On her way to meet him under the tree she spotted him walking ahead and hurried to catch up with him.

"Hey," she got his attention before wrapping her arms around his. "Do you know what today is?" Sansa did not expect him to have the answer but felt it was right to give him a chance anyway.

"Thursday." Sandor shrugged like it was just a regular day to him. But to her, today was a very special day... a reason to celebrate.

"Yes..." Sansa tightened her hold on his arm. "And it has been exactly one month since you agreed to be my man." Was it really only a month ago that he literally yelled at her that he liked her? It was the most adorable thing she had ever seen, the contrast of his vulnerable ferocity. That was the first time he let his hound persona slip and she saw right though his tough act.

"Uh-huh," he did not even make an effort to sound excited. "So?" Apparently Sandor did not share her enthusiasm but she would not let it dull her good mood.

"I thought of something special to give to you." She turned her eyes was up to peek through her lashes at him, it seemed to be his weakness.

"What's that?" A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth and Sansa knew she already won. Sandor never turned her down once she worked up the courage to ask for something. She tried harder every day to be more honest about what she wanted instead of constantly fearing a bad reaction.

"A song," she answered with a flutter of her lashes. Sansa smiled as his eyes darkened, feeling delightfully naughty for teasing him. "Really, I've never actually sung for you before."

"Alright," he agreed as they approached his car and both of them sat down inside. "Where will this performance take place?"

"Let's go back to the beach so nobody will be around." She lowered her voice and leaned towards him with a coy smile. "I only want to sing for you."

"If I had my way," he reached out to sweep her hair behind her shoulder and cupped the side of her face. "You'd be singing for me all night." A shiver of anticipation ran up her spine as his thumb lightly caressed her cheek.

"Mmm, but it is a school night..." She closed her eyes as she nuzzled her face into his warm hand. "This weekend I could 'sleep over with a friend'." Sansa looked up at Sandor again, the pace of her heart picking up as she awaited his answer.
"I want that more than anything," he pulled away with a sigh and turned the car ignition over. "But I don't want the guilt to eat away at you again." Sansa felt ashamed of her sudden guilt-driven pity party while subsequently grateful she had Sandor to lean on.

"I felt better after we talked," she admitted as she pulled on her seatbelt. "You are always so good at cheering me up." Sansa loved the rumble of the Skylark coming to life as it drove out of the parking lot and onto the road. "I'm tired of always being the 'good daughter', it always felt like I was obligated to be perfectly obedient. When my siblings got in trouble, my parents would hold them up next to my example. That's too much pressure to live under, being a perfect daughter and student. I'm so much happier just being your girl."

"In my book," he flashed a grin at her. "You're still an overachieving brown-nosing little nerd."

"Thanks a lot," she replied dryly.

"Anytime," Sandor grinned even wider and she was grateful he was still in good spirits despite his current lack of a home. She worried the situation would make him revert and start hiding in his anger again. Surprisingly, he actually seemed even happier and more relaxed since he left his father's house. Even though it was a difficult situation, Sansa hoped it was all turning out for the best. Maybe it was best for him to be away from his family if they only hurt him instead of loved him. It made her want to hug her parents and never let them go.

They arrived at the beach while the sun was still high in the sky, diffused somewhat by thin covering of clouds. The water shined like a mirror, the small glittering waves breaking over the dark rocks. A group of seabirds flew overhead, becoming small black dots on the horizon before disappearing. The breeze near the ocean carried a chill on it and Sansa pulled her jacket tighter and buttoned the front. Sandor walked around the Skylark to stand behind her and she turned around to face him with a bashful expression.

"I wore slightly more appropriate shoes today..." Sansa looked down at her feet before turning a hopeful expression up at him and he pulled her up to his arms without her even having to ask. "You're the best ever." She pressed a kiss to his cheek before tightening her arms around his neck to rest her forehead against his face. He walked to a large collection of rocks ahead and set her down before sitting on one large rock jutting out of the ground.

"Sing a song for me, little bird." Sandor crossed his arms and waited and she suddenly felt even more nervous than when she first saw him naked. Actually, thinking about him being naked did take the edge off her nerves. Sansa smiled at him and took one calming breath before she started to sing...

"You with the sad eyes," she smiled as his eyes widened in surprise, "don't be discouraged. Oh, I realize... It's hard to take courage." Sansa felt her confidence take flight as the song poured from her lips. "In a world full of people, you can lose sight of it all. And the darkness inside you, can make you feel so small."

"But I see your true colors shining through," she put her heart into the melody, raising to a crescendo to emphasize the lyrics. "I see your true colors and that's why I love you." Sansa blushed as Sandor continued to stare open-mouthed with awed wonder. "So don't be afraid to let them show, your true colors. True colors are beautiful... Like a rainbow." She finished the song and bit her lip as she waited for his reaction.

"Holy fuck!" Sandor looked positively shocked. "You could do that professionally... What the fuck is wrong with your parents?" He rubbed his hand over his head and stared at her like he still couldn't believe it. "You could already have a record deal somewhere."
"Oh my gods," she flushed and tucked her hair behind her ear. "You're exaggerating, I just love to sing."

"I'm not fucking with you," he argued, "you could sing professionally - you're pretty enough too."

"I would never want to do that," she shuddered, "being the center of attention makes me nervous."

"Good," he grinned, "then I'll stay you're biggest fan." Sandor stood up and moved to stand in front of her, taking her face between both of his hands. "You're impossible," he murmured, "you know that? You shouldn't exist outside of dreams."

"It's not fair," she sulked, "I feel the same way about you..." He took her chin between his fingers and pulled her eyes up to meet his. "But you never let me say things like that without rolling your eyes."

"I'm the man of your dreams, am I?" He grinned, not rolling his eyes, but the tone of his voice still sounded disbelieving.

"Of course," she gazed up at him, "you're everything I dreamed of my whole life."

"You've got some pretty fucking weird dreams, little bird." Sandor could not see himself the way she saw him. He did not know how confident his compliments made her. It was one thing for her parents or friends to call her 'pretty' with polite smiles. When he spoke so assuredly, calling her a 'dream' as if stating a fact, she truly felt beautiful in his eyes.

"Not at all," she argued with a smile, "just simple. I wanted someone who was brave, strong, and gentle. You have all three qualities in spades." Sansa's light mood fell when she saw he did not take her words seriously. "I did not pick that song randomly, Sandor. I see you in a different light than you see yourself." Without warning, he scooped her up in his arms again and started walking towards the Skylark. It always gave her a rush when he did that, like he was a dashing hero rescuing her, but she kept her silly thoughts to herself.

Sandor set her down on her feet and opened the car door and she moved the seat forward to get into the backseat. When he joined her Sansa did not waste a moment before pressing her lips against his as she fumbled with the buttons of her jacket. Finally, she pulled it off, throwing it behind her to curl her arms around his neck as she kissed him. His lips were warm and she sought more his warmth with her hands, lowering one to slide underneath his shirt to feel his hot skin. How was he always radiating heat even in the cold? It made her want to feel every inch of his skin heating hers.

Her longing for him was nearly at its breaking point and though the day of the Winter formal drew ever closer it still seemed ages away. Twenty-two days... she marked down her calendar every day but her eyes were always pulled to her birthday. That was only in nine days and it would certainly be a 'special' day. Was she silly for wanting to wait any longer? Only a month had gone by since they started dating and it already felt like a lifetime. Sandor returned her kiss but did not deepen it or try to pull her closer so she pulled back to give him a questioning look.

"Is it alright if I just hold you?" Sandor scratched the side of his face and looked away... bashfully! Him, being bashful... was he blushing?! He didn't even blush when he got completely naked in front of her! Sansa wished she could go five minutes without thinking about him naked, it was awfully distracting.

"Really?" Sansa put a hand over his forehead to check for a fever. "Are you okay?" He always felt this warm, she could not tell if it was a sign of sickness. Oh! She knew he would get sick not sleeping in a proper bed! "We should check-"
"Quit chirping and hold still," he pulled her hand away from his face and tugged her into his lap to embrace her tightly. "I've just missed you," his voice was gruff, "I can't sleep right without you." Sansa's heart was nearly about to bust at Sandor's sudden sweetness, in his grumbly style that she adored for some reason.

"Me too," she pressed her ear against his chest to listen to his steady heartbeat. "The nights seems to pass so slowly without you." Sandor rested his cheek against the top of her head and they both relaxed, warm and comfortable. She tried to stay awake but she felt so nice and safe wrapped in his arms that she quickly feel asleep. By the time she woke up the sky had already turned dark and the air had grown colder. His lips were softly pressing kisses to her hair and she stirred a bit to let him know she was awake.

"Stay with me tonight," he murmured against her hair. Sansa reluctantly slid out of his embrace to stretch out beside him with a yawn. She actually argued in her mind for a moment... Could she really lie to daddy well enough to stay out on a school night? No, that would make her feel too wretched and probably bring on another self-induced guilt trip.

"I can't stay out all night," she patted her face to wake up, "that will get me just as grounded as my sister." Sansa pitied how Arya tossed and turned all night, texting until all hours of the morning and sneaking out to make phone calls. She could not imagine how lovesick for Sandor she would be if she only saw him an hour a week!

"I can see the logic behind that." Sandor slunk down in the seat, crossing his arms. "I fucking hate logic," he growled and she laughed at him.

"You would make a terrible Vulcan," she slapped her hand over her mouth like she cursed. Oh no! The cat's out of the bag now! Sansa slowly turned to face his questioning expression, hoping he did not even know what she said.

"You're a Trekkie?" Sandor raised his brow at her and Sansa realized he was not giving her a judgmental look. Oh thank the gods... Wait a minute!

"Do you..." Sansa gaped at Sandor with a renewed sense of hope bubbling up within her. "Like Star Trek...?" He just gave her a look like, 'of course I do' as he slowly nodded his head. "What?!"

"I pretty much love everything sci-fi," he shrugged with a half-smile. "Firefly and Battlestar Galactica are the best shows ever made."

"Okay," she turned her body to face him. "I won't argue with that except to say you forgot Doctor Who and Stargate."

"Doctor Who is badass..." Sandor looked away with a grimace. "Stargate, not so much."

"Really?" Sansa loved how fun Stargate was, much better than Battlestar. "The Battlestar Galactica remake was less a sci-fi show and more a drama about alcoholism."

"It was 'real', little bird," he debated with feeling. Oh my gods! They were debating about sci-fi shows! How much better could this relationship get?!

"Firefly though... best show ever." She felt thrilled that they shared one favorite show. "It's a shame that it only got the one season and a movie."

"Agreed, it's a fucking bloody tragedy," Sandor gestured sharply with his hand to emphasize his words before turning a questioning look at her. "Sometime, do you wanna..." She knew exactly what he was saying.
"Have a Firefly marathon," she finished his thought. "While wearing Jayne hats that I personally knitted."

"Shut the fuck up," he gaped at her, "you are fucking with me." Sansa beamed happily as she basked in his impressed reaction. Nobody was ever impressed by her knitting skills... nobody. "You sing like an siren, are an amazing cook, and you're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen." Sandor scoffed a happy and disbelieving laugh. "Now you're telling me you're sci-fi fan," he narrowed his eyes at her. "You know what this means."

"What?" Sansa blushed at the heated look in his eyes, hoping it meant he was going to kiss her.

"I'm stealing you," he threatened playfully.

"That old threat," she waved her hand dismissively.

"I mean it," he grabbed her hand to pull her closer. "I'm going to steal you somewhere so far away." Sandor smiled down at her, his expression relaxed and happy, looking younger than he ever had. "Where should we go?"

"Aren't I being stolen," she curled her free hand around his neck, "do I get a choice?"

"I am 'stealing' you," he promised, "but you'll like it." Sandor grinned wickedly and Sansa had no doubt she would love every minute of being stolen by him. If he didn't follow through on his threat soon enough she just might go ahead and steal him first.

"I just want to go wherever you go." Sansa raised her face to kiss him but Sandor turned away so her kiss landed on his cheek.

"That's the most fucking boring answer ever." Sandor ignored her as she tried to turn his face back towards her.

"Ok, I have a better one." A satisfied smile curled Sansa's lips when he turned his focus back on her. "Steal me away to the future," she whispered, "to the night of the Winter Formal." He made a low growling sound in his throat and wrapped a hand around her waist.

"I ain't got no TARDIS, little bird." Sandor made a Doctor Who reference while flirting with her... The gods were good! He leaned his mouth close to her ear to whisper softly. "But I'll promise this much..."

"What?" Sansa was hanging on his every word, somehow falling for him even harder.

"I'm going to try my dammedest," he put his lips closed to hers but did not kiss her yet, "to make that night last forever." Then he captured her mouth, cupping the back of her head to kiss her senseless until she was panting against his mouth.

"Oh Sandor," she gasped in air after he broke the kiss, "you really are my dream come true." Sandor just smirked at her like she was a silly little bird and she gave up trying to convince him... for the time being. The hour had grown late and they had to be leaving soon, as much as she hated to be parted. "I have to go home," she pouted.

"This weekend," he tightened his hold, "I'm keeping you."

"Sounds wonderful," she pressed another light kiss to his lips before they let each other go. There was always something coming between them... Curfew, daddy's rules, Sandor's past, and friends interfering. But all of those hurdles were nothing when compared with his leaving after graduation.
No matter what, Sansa swore to herself she would not let a little thing like distance come between them. By the time he graduated, she intended to have captured his heart so completely he would never be able to leave her.

Chapter End Notes

True Colors, performed by Jules Larson:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=SRHgGxqBWys

Okay this is tentative, don't kill me if I'm off by a little bit... I've outlined about 8 chapter before THE WINTER FORMAL - OMG! I'm way too excited, this author has built this up way too much... Oh, right, that's me! I'm so mean! I have Sansa's dress all picked and a yummy suit for Sandor... Mmm... I love Sandor so much I think I'll give him the next chapter!
SANDOR

He called first to the house phone to make sure no one picked up, then drove by real slow to see if there was any movement inside. Sandor pulled into the driveway and psyched himself up, the house looked empty so there was nothing to be scared of. Most of his shit he could take or leave but there was one thing he needed. When he walked into the house, it was quiet and no lights were on but he crept through the hallway. Greg's bedroom door was open and no movement came from inside, Sandor pushed open his own door and his heart stopped.

He found Greg lying on his bed, going through the notebook... Sansa's notebook, full of little mementos of her like pictures and little notes she gave him. Also, the receipt from the Italian restaurant and other information Gregor should never have. Sandor knew he never should've kept such a fucking stupid sentimental thing, especially not in the house. His hand braced against the door frame, squeezing it so hard the wood started to splinter.

"This your little girlfriend, Sandy?" Greg held up the first picture Sansa gave him - she blushed so prettily as she handed it over, saying 'look at this when you miss me'. Now his monstrous brother knew what she looked like and her favorite restaurant.

"Don't touch that," he meant his voice to sound threatening but it was just a pitiful wheeze. Sandor had taken a few steps into the room without even realizing it, reaching out his hand for the notebook.

"She's real pretty," Greg turned the page back to the picture. "What'd you do to get this sweet little thing?" He squinted at the picture. "She blind? Retarded? I'd still fuck her." Sandor's stomach turned as his fear skyrocketed into full-blown panic. The scariest thing about Greg's threats is he said then just like a normal person. Any man would want to fuck Sansa and most of them would admit it. But he didn't mean 'fuck in a consensual, mutually pleasurable kind of way'. The monster didn't want to hear the little bird sing - he wanted to destroy her.

"Don't fucking talk about her," he rasped in a slightly stronger tone. "Get out of my room."

"You left," Greg flipped through the notebook, wearing a mocking grin on his face. "That makes it my room."

"This is dad's house," even as he said it Sandor knew it was a weak argument.

"Com'on," Greg just smiled wider. "You're not that stupid - this is my house." He tore the picture off the page, tossing aside the notebook, and continued to stare at Sansa. "I bet she doesn't give it up easy," he chuckled as he traced a finger over the photo. "You must be working real hard to get between those long legs. You know she's playing with you," he looked up at Sandor with a smirk. "That's always been your problem - you don't know how to take what you want."

"Give it to me," he managed a low growl as he approached the bed, "now."

"Or what?" Greg stood up and his eyes flickered to the top of Sandor's head with an approving expression. "Oh, you did grow a bit, little brother. Sandy's not so little anymore." His light
expression fell as he stared into Sandor's eyes. "Still scared, aren't you? Still pissing yourself at the sight of me?"

"Only a fucking idiot wouldn't be scared of you." Sandor stood his ground and refused to back down - even if he needed his fear, he still would not give into it.

"Is she a 'fucking idiot'?” Greg held up the photo, daring Sandor to try and take it - exposing him to a rib shot. No, his good brother taught him too well over the years. "Does she know about me? Maybe I'll pay her a little visit."

"I'll kill you," he promised.

"Big words, little brother." Greg chuckled - staring down a Sandor like a full-grown Doberman might regard a yapping pup. "You ever kill anyone before?"

"You're the only fucker I want dead." He meant it, if that monster ever even went near Sansa, Sandor would kill him without hesitation.

"Always thinking small, Sandy." Greg lifted a hand, smiling when Sandor flinched, and used it to brush off his shoulder. "That's why you'll never make anything of yourself."

"Like you?" Sandor saw the flash of anger and Greg's eyes and knew he was pushing his luck.

"I'll keep this one." Greg put the photo in his pocket and pushed past Sandor to leave the room. He grabbed the notebook and a few other things before leaving his father's house - never looking back again. He returned to the pet shop to get ready for his date with Sansa. The whole time he was thinking about Greg's threats and debating if he would do more harm than good by warning her. She needed to know that she was in danger but he didn't want her living while constantly looking over shoulder. His mind was still reeling from wondering what to do as he drove to pick her up. Sansa was waiting for him outside of the apartment building with her younger sister standing beside her. When he pulled up in front of them, Sansa opened the door and tilted her head in the direction of short stuff.

"I hope you don't mind," she gave him a pleading look. "My sister a total mess and I begged daddy to let me take her out for a night... I thought we could have a double date." Sansa's smile looked worried and Sandor hated himself for all the times he snapped at her. She shouldn't ever have to be afraid of what he'd say. He felt so fucking guilty about putting her in Greg's sights he would agree to just about anything.

"Fine with me," he shrugged, and quickly avoided her eyes to hide how terrified he felt. Sansa smiled and sighed in relief as she pulled the front seat forward to let Arya into the back. "Good to see you, short stuff."

"Uh-huh," Arya groaned her reply. If he thought the kid looked like shit the other day, now she looked like shit run over. Sansa let out a single smiling sigh, as if willing herself to be happy about her sister tagging along. He pulled the car out of the parking lot and started heading into the city.

"So," he looked to Sansa, "where are we headed?"

"Thai!" Arya shouted her answer, seemingly on reflex.

"Italian!" Sansa was only a second behind her younger sister. "Fine," she relented with a huff, "anything but steak." Sandor was no expert on healthy sibling relationships. He wondered if the little bird was selling herself short by saying she and Arya weren't 'close'. From his perspective, they
really seemed to care about one another - what with short stuff's death threat and all.

"I've never eaten Thai food before." He also never had a good relationship with any of his family members before - it was interesting to see what that looked like. "Where's the restaurant?" Sansa opened her mouth to answer his question but short stuff interrupted.

"You've - never - eaten Thai before?" Arya acted downright shocked. "You haven't lived!" Sansa rolled her eyes at her sisters exaggerated reaction and gave him directions to the restaurant.

"It's pretty good," Sansa admitted, "a little too spicy for my taste."

"Spicy?" This was sounding better and better to Sandor. "The hotter the better."

"Good man," Arya praised from the backseat. When they arrived at the restaurant, she leaned forward between the two front seats excitedly. "Oh my gods, there he is! Park faster!" Once Sandor parked the Skylark. Sansa could not get out of her sister's way fast enough. Short stuff practically fell out of the car and sprinted into her boyfriend's waiting arms. Sandor got out of the car and walked over to stand beside Sansa.

"I really appreciate you doing this," she sighed as she watched her sister. "I just can't stand to see her so..." Sansa waved her hand at the couple clinging to each other as her words faltered. "Usually, Arya is the strong one. Lately, all she does is mope around the house."

"No problem," he smiled down at Sansa as he took her hand in his. "I don't mind helping the kid out." He could see the internal conflicts going on behind her eyes, struggling to figure out what exactly the 'right thing' to do was. "I think you're a good big sister, you are risking your own happiness because you care about hers." Sandor would give anything to have anyone in his family care about him that much. In the past, he used to curse his mom for not loving him enough to take him with her too.

"You always know exactly what to say," her expression relaxed and she smiled at him. "I will thank you properly later." After meeting Sansa, he never had a single moment that he regretted being alive and he even stopped hating his face. It didn't matter if everyone else in the world stared or avoided his face, not when the little bird smiled just for him.

"Alright, short stuff," he growled at the kid still glued to her boyfriend - equally oblivious. "Let's get inside, I'm fucking starving." Sandor wanted to get this fucking 'double date' over with so the real fun could start.

GENDRY

Arya let go of the death grip she had on his waist and she grabbed his wrist to lead him over to stand beside Sansa and Sandor. Gendry was still shocked that they were all standing there together, staring at Arry in disbelief.

"How...?" When he got a text from Arya, it just read: 'I busted out for the night', and directions to the restaurant. Not a word about Sansa and her boyfriend, or how Arry got out for the night.

"We have Sansa to thank for my brief liberation." Arya beamed at her sister without a hint of sarcasm before turning back to Gendry. "We don't have to eat..."

"I promised daddy I would keep an eye on you," Sansa cut off Arya, narrowing her eyes at her younger sister. Not in a million years would Gendry have guessed Sansa and Sandor would help him and Arry see each other. But he was eternally grateful they gave up their date for them. "Please don't make me more of a liar."
"Thanks, Sansa." Gendry smiled at them both. "And Sandor, thanks man." The fierce giant just shrugged. "I'm sure going on a double date isn't exactly what you two had in mind for tonight."

"Which is why we shouldn't intrude." Arya crossed her arms and looked like she wanted to argue more.

"Arry," Gendry pulled on her shoulder to turn her towards him. "We're going inside that restaurant and eating a proper meal." She sulked but did not argue, probably too happy to be out of the house. He looked between Sansa and Sandor again. "I'd be happy to pay to show my gratitude: it's the least I can do."

"No argument here." Sandor grinned and Gendry fought the urge to look away from the intimidating expression.

"Of course when a man offers to pay..." Sansa scowled at her boyfriend before brushing past him to head inside the restaurant.

"That's not it and you know it," Sandor grumbled as he followed behind her. Gendry took Arya's hand in his and they both followed the arguing couple.

"No," Sansa turned up her nose when Sandor opened the door for her. "I don't know it." Once inside the restaurant the hostess led them to a booth right away and sat their group down with menus.

"I can't even imagine Arya paying for anything," Gendry quipped as he grinned down at her.

"I spend my money frivolously so I never have any," she shrugged without shame. "Besides, I thought you liked my impulse purchases." Arya raised an eyebrow and he remembered the purple corset.

"Right," he assumed a more serious expression, "sorry milady. You are infallible and faultless."

"Don't forget it," she squinted at him before breaking into a smile.

"It is not the case that Sandor never lets me pay for anything," Sansa explained. "We disagree on splitting the costs of attending the Winter Formal."

"She disagrees..." Sandor studied his menu as he grumbled under his breath, earning him a pointed stare from Sansa.

"The Winter Formal?" Gendry had almost forgotten that was coming. "I'd love to go but even if Arry wasn't grounded, she'd never go for it."

"Never thought I'd be grateful to be grounded," Arry had the most smug expression on her face.

"See?" Gendry waved his hand at Arya. "She's not the dancing type."

"I love to dance," her protest surprised him. "Just not in a dress surrounded my cheap decorations." Gendry was about to argue the merits of going to a high-school dance, even though he'd never been to one personally. Just then a soft-spoken waitress stopped by the table to take their drink orders and whisked away to fill them.

"Arry," Sansa grinned at her sister, "I just thought of a way for you to pay off the debt you owe me."

"No..." Arya looked horrified but Gendry hadn't caught on yet what they were talking about. "You don't mean-"
"I told you it would be big," Sansa smirked mischievously and he could finally see the resemblance between the sisters.

"Not happening," she crossed her arms defiantly. "I'm not wearing a dress." Then Gendry got it, Sansa was blackmailing Arya into going to the Winter Formal! He grinned and leaned back to watch Arya get beat at her own game.

"Oh yes," Sansa's eyes glittered with excitement. "A dress, jewelry, makeup... and heels."

"Noooooooo," Arya groaned and looked up at the ceiling, "gods why?!"

"This is sounding better and better!" Gendry's grin fell as he remembered Arya would still be grounded by the time of the Winter Formal. "But what about your dad?"

"You don't get it," Arya shot a disgusted look at her sister. "Sansa is daddy's little princess - he'd do anything she asked."

"That's not true," Sansa twirled her hair.

"It's mostly true," Arya countered. "How else do you explain his letting me off tonight?" Their breathy waitress came back with their drinks and took their orders before leaving again.

"I think you will look good in an A-line dress." Sansa ignored her sister's question and continued to gloat, already confident in her victory.

"Fine you two enjoy the dance," Arya scowled at him and Sansa before she jerked her chin at Sandor. "Maybe we can sneak out when they're not watching."

"Fuck that - I'm going to that dance even if it kills me." Sandor grinned at Sansa, who blushed and took a sip of her drink. Gendry laughed at Arya's comically disappointed expression.

"Ugh," Arya threw her hands up in defeat, "et tu giant dude?" When her hand fell down on the seat by her sides, Gendry quickly took a hold of the one beside his leg. Her eyes flicked up at him and a she smiled, lacing their fingers together and letting go of her argument. They didn't stop holding hands even after their food came, both eating with their free hand. Sandor loosened up and together with Sansa, they were actually great company so the night passed too quickly.

"I promised you would be back by nine," Sansa told Arya with an apologetic expression as they walked out of the restaurant.

"I know," Arya scowled before letting go of his hand to grab her sister into a fierce hug. "Thanks."

"I'll see you tomorrow." Sansa returned the hug before letting go, waving goodbye to Gendry, and getting into Sandor's car.

"Bye, giant dude!" Arya cupped her hands around her mouth as she called after him. "Bring Sansa back in one piece."

"No promises, short stuff." Sandor tossed a wave over his shoulder, which Arya was already ignoring as she ran around the Lincoln to get in. Gendry checked his watch and dismayed at how little time there was before she had to be home. There was only about ten minutes to spare when he pulled up in front of her apartment building. She launched at him, locking her arms around his neck, and burying her face in his shoulder.

"You've got to go now to be on time," he tried to disentangle her arms around his neck but she
wouldn't let go. Gendry held her tightly and felt her body slightly trembling. "Are you crying?!"

"Don't be stupid," her voice was tight. "It's too hard... I miss you so much." As much as he wanted to let her run down the clock, every minute they spent outside this apartment was a risk. Her father could have been waiting outside or looking out the window.

"I'll do anything," he offered. "What will make you feel better?"

"Come sleep with me," she grumbled, knowing it was an impossible request.

"Maybe I can do something almost as good," Gendry tugged her arms lose and pulled her back to look into her shining eyes. "I'll call you when I get home and talk to you until you go to sleep. When I hear you snoring I'll hang up."

"Sometimes it takes hours for me to fall asleep," she warned.

"I can talk for hours," he assured her with a grin. "I'll be like the Dungeon Master of your insomnia."

"I love you, Gendry." Arya really did look like she would start crying any minute and it was breaking his heart.

"And I love you, Arya." Gendry watched her get out of his car without another word and stride into the apartment building without looking back. That was her way: once she set her mind to do something, she just did it. He hurried home and called her as soon as he kicked his shoes off and collapsed onto his bed. She picked up on the first ring.

"On the drive over I tried to think of what to say," he started talking right away in a low soothing tone. "Should I be boring to put her to sleep quickly? Should I tell funny stories about mom to put her in a good mood? Then I realized there's only one thing I could talk about forever: you. The first time I met you I had the same thought, over and over: this is one strange girl." She snickered softly. "Shh," he chided, "your strangeness never once seemed like a bad thing. You're young but you know yourself better than anyone."

"You don't compromise on your beliefs and you fight tooth-and-nail for what you want. Simply put milady, you're my hero: ever since I met you, I've tried to be more like you," Gendry could swear he heard Arry rolling her eyes. "If I had to pick one word to describe myself before I met you it'd be 'alone'... Remember when you showed up at the forge that weekend? You just barged in like you owned the place. At the time I was still trying to fight my attraction to you, which was the stupidest thing I've ever done."

"I knew it was going to be like this," he put his free hand behind his head. "I knew that our relationship would be opposed and there'd be forces out of our control pulling us apart. But even as I was trying to run away from you, I wanted to be around you and catch whatever crumbs of affection you dropped. Thing is, I thought I'd be the only one suffering. Even though I hated myself for having you thrown out of the group, it opened my eyes to your feelings for me."

"I don't know if any of this is coming out right," he sighed. "Somehow, knowing that you're lonesome for me, it makes me less lonely. I trust you when you say you love me and that I'm yours. I know one day we'll be together and nothing will ever come between us again. I will find a way someday to prove that my love for you is just as strong. Even if you miss me, it's only temporary, not just your grounding but... What I mean to say is... I want to spend the rest of my life with you." One soft snort signaled she fell asleep.
"Goodnight, milady," he whispered. The only reply from Arya was her light snoring and Gendry listened for a while before he started dozing off. He ended the call and rolled onto his side to face the spot where she used to curl up by his side. Someday, he reassured himself, she would be his every night and they would look back on this time and laugh at how miserable they were. All he had to do was stay patient and dedicated, never giving up.

Chapter End Notes

Do me a favor in the pass-it-on spirit. Say you have a bookmarked fic that hasn't updated in a while. A few encouraging words from you might make the difference in that author's day and lead to a beautiful piece of writing. Yesterday I had a whole bushel of beautiful words thanking me for my work and it really inspires and encourages me. I'm not writing this fic alone - I truly mean that. My loyal commenters are all quite spectacularly wonderful people and I hope you all know it. I wish I had time to respond to all my comments but I get caught up writing... and time just slips away.

Next chapter will be pure San<3san.
The ride from the restaurant was oddly quiet and tense, even though they had just been laughing and joking with Arya and Gendry. They were the most shockingly adorable couple! She never imagined her sister would ever be totally captivated with a boy, let alone a sweet and slightly goofy one. They were good together, which partially justified her dishonesty to daddy in her mind. Honestly, Sansa could not stand to see her sister suffering anymore. Sandor maintained his distracted silence as he pulled the Skylark in front of the pet shop.

The quiet persisted as they walked to the shop's entrance. Sansa waited as he unlocked the door, and then followed him into shop. Sandor kept the lights off as most of the animals seemed to be sleeping, even her yappy friend, Buster. They continued straight to the back, and he flicked on the light switch, flooding the small space with bright florescent light. She blinked a few times as her eyes adjusted and glanced around the room.

"Oh, thank the gods." Sansa heaved a sigh of relief as she saw the pen of puppies was no longer in the back room. The wicked things she intended to do with Sandor this night were not for their innocent puppy eyes to see.

"What?" His raised brow made her blush over her silly thoughts. Sandor closed the door and the click of the latch sliding into place made Sansa jump like she heard a gunshot. She could not fathom what she was so nervous about! Why was the air so thick between them? What caused this persistent unease? Sansa knew it was a bit presumptuous to drag her younger sister along on a date but he did not seem to mind...

"I worried the puppies would still be here," she explained vaguely, forcing a smile as he moved across the office to set his keys down on the desk.

"They were moved out front," he said with a shrug, "it was time anyway. Most of them are gone already, since pups get adopted fast." Sansa turned around to look at the rest of the room, seeing a futon on the floor with a mess of blankets and pillows on it. "Sorry, it's not exactly the Ritz." Sandor moved to stand beside her, frowning at his makeshift bed. "I should've got a hotel-"

"And waste good money?" Sansa waved her hand, dismissing his apology. "No, this will do quite nicely. It's... cozy." They shared another tense moment, standing together staring at the futon on the floor as the clock on the wall ticked impossibly loud and slow.

"Did you forget your bag?" Sandor broke the silence first, shifting from one foot to the other and glancing around the room without focusing on anything.

"No, I have everything I need." Sansa held up her purse before walking over to the desk in the corner to set her bag down. "There's a fresh dress in my purse." She unbuttoned her jacket, folded it in half, and set it beside her purse.

"I can give you something to sleep in..." It seemed Sandor was doing his utmost best to fill the odd
silence between them. Sansa turned around to face him to find his unwavering gaze focused entirely on her, only setting her nerves more on edge.

"Sandor," she lowered her eyes to study the speckled floor. "I planned to sleep in nothing." Sansa peeked back up at him to see Sandor's eyes widen in surprise. Last time he stopped her from fully undressing but the suspense was killing her. She was not all that nervous about him seeing her whole body; more like anxious to get past it.

"Ah," he nodded, still wearing a surprised expression.

"I will wear something if you want-"

"Who the fuck am I to tell you what to wear - or not wear?" He gestured wide with his hand before rubbing it over his head. "Wear what you want - or not..." Sandor seemed jumpy too but Sansa could not guess why either of them should feel nervous at all. Perhaps the setting caused the uneasy atmosphere, bright florescent lights highlighting his homeless predicament.

"Are you really alright here?" Sansa moved to stand next to him, observing the pitiful state he lived in with growing concern.

"I'm happier staying here than at my dad's house." Sandor turned to face her, moving back to lean against the wall behind him. "It's temporary, I can't stay here forever," he crossed his arms as he looked down at his shoe. "I might need to get a second job so I can afford a place."

"You're still a student..." Sansa wrung her hands with worry, frustrated there was nothing she could do to help him. "You shouldn't have worries like this."

"That's life, princess," he scoffed at her.

"I didn't choose to be born to a well-off family, Sandor." Sansa immediately regretting snapping at him, he was the last person in the world she was angry with. She sensed something was wrong but worried it was her own nervousness playing tricks on her.

"I didn't choose to be born to a family of fucking drunks and psychopaths," he sneered at her. "It is what it is." His expression softened as she looked away, blinking back the tears collecting in her eyes. "Sorry..."

"No-no-no, I'm sorry." Sansa did not even know why they were arguing! "I'm being weird," she shook her head, trying to clear the gloominess lingering in her thoughts. "You are right, I do live like a princess, and my parents are wonderful." Her voice lowered to a murmur as she hugged her arms around her waist. "I wish everyone could be so fortunate." He ignored her, pushing off the wall to walk past her.

"You know the real problem with dictatorships and monarchies?" Sandor sat down in the desk chair, heaving a heavy sigh. Sansa gave him a curious look, wondering at his sudden change in topic. "People who seek power are the worst kinds of people. If someone like you ruled the world," he grinned, "we'd have world peace and fucking mints on our pillows every night." She felt relived he let her sudden tantrum pass.

"I would need someone to help rule beside me." Sansa moved to sit on his lap, curling a hand around his neck.

"Nah," his hand slid around her waist, "you should just be high empress - I'll be your guard dog."

"My Queensguard," she corrected, smiling at his whimsical scenario.
"Same difference." The tension eased as Sansa relaxed against his embrace, playing along with his fantasy.

"My enemies would stop it nothing to steal my throne." She fought to keep a serious queenly expression on her face as his eyes narrowed playfully.

"I'll kill them all or die trying," he promised. "You're the only one I'd ever kneel down to."

"I don't want a throne, Sandor." She dipped her lips to briefly brush against his. "However, I would not mind just a small amount of kneeling." He chuckled in that deep rumbly way that sent shivers running down her spine. "Lover," she tilted her forehead against the side of his face, whispering in his ear. "It feels silly even saying this... I feel nervous."

"Fuck," he huffed out a breath, "me too."

"I'm not sure why," she sighed in relief that she was not imagining the tension between them. "But I feel like we more 'alone' than ever."

"Nobody else but us is setting foot in this place until Monday morning." His words finally made sense of her nervousness... There would no risk at all of being caught or stopped and whatever happened tonight would be completely up to them. Sansa stood up and pulled her hair over one shoulder, pointing to the zipper running the length of the back of her dress.

"Will you help me with this?" Her back tensed as he rose to approach her and slowly pulled the zipper all the way down. His lips brushed over her exposed neck, relaxing every taut muscle in her body so that she melted against him. As Sandor kissed her neck, his hands pulled the dress over her shoulders and let it fall around her feet. "Wait," she managed to gasp, "you are distracting me again..." She stepped forward and turned around to face him, standing up straight. "Do you like it?" She bought her very first set of real lingerie just for this moment.

"I keep waiting to get used to you," his eyes slowly studied the length of her body, heating her face though she felt no embarrassment. "But you get more fucking beautiful every time I see you." He suddenly knelt before her, lowering his eyes steady on her while removing her shoes one at a time. Sandor getting down on one knee before her sent Sansa's heart fluttering within her chest, immediately picturing him pulling a ring box out of his pocket.

"I believe you." She pulled his chin up to meet his eyes. "That you think every part of me is beautiful." The backs of her fingers lightly skimmed over his cheek. "Do you trust that I feel the same about you? I don't overlook or ignore any part of you."

"I believe you..." He rose to his full height to cup his hand behind her head and dipped his lips to press a tender kiss to hers. "What I can't believe is my own good luck." She tugged at his shirt until he pulled it off over his head and wrapped her arms him, soaking his warmth into her skin. "I don't feel like I deserve you."

"I deserve you..." She pulled away to meet his eyes once more. "You are my good luck. I was such a mess when I first attended Kings High." At the time, she actually hoped to meet Joffrey Baratheon, who would have treated her like a plaything and tossed her out when he grew bored. "You taught me to open my eyes and see the word. Not for how I wish it was, but how it really is." Sansa felt a familiar fear bubbling up and decided to voice it aloud. "You don't love me only because of the way I look, do you?"

"There are a few truly beautiful girls at Kings, little bird." He stroked his fingertips down the side of her face and she turned her cheek into his warm palm. "You shine brighter than them all because you
"I think that is something we have in common." Both of her hands caught his and held it against her heart. "Maybe that's why we're perfect for each other." Sansa turned around, still holding his hand, and led him to the futon. She knelt on the surprisingly soft mattress and started to unlace his shoes and helped him remove them. Her hands moved up to unfasten his belt and then tugged his pants down around his ankles. He stepped onto the futon to sit beside her, reaching out for her but she held up one finger. "Wait, I'm not finished."

Sansa grinned at his confused expression before turning to peel off his socks, tossing them aside while he laughed at her. His laughter died when her fingers curled around the waistband of his underwear and he helped her to finish undressing him. It was a strange and powerful thing to make someone else naked... To strip away all that they hide from the entire world. She wanted him to feel the same, to share the power of vulnerability equally with her. Sandor understood what she wanted when she turned her back and pulled her hair aside.

It might have been nervousness or inexperience that made his hands tremble as he fumbled with the bra's clasp. Either option held equal appeal, pulling her lips into a smile as she turned around to face him. His fingers slid over her shoulders to slip the bra off, sliding his fingertips lightly over her breasts as he lowered the garment. She rose up on her knees to let the bra fall away and guided his hands to her new lacy undergarment... The last uncrossed barrier between them. He slowly slid the panties down and Sansa sat back, lifting her legs so he could pull them completely off.

After the initial flurry of mixed emotions about being seen entirely naked passed, all that remained was a insistent humming under her skin to be close to him. The very first time she touched him was an accident but even then Sansa felt the strong 'pull' to be near him. She reached out one hand to lightly push him down on the mattress. His eyes were dark and intense, fixed on her face as he complied with her gentle touch on his chest. It might seem silly that her first wish when alone and naked with the person she loved was to cuddle.

An eighth heaven of silken warmth spread through Sansa as she tucked herself alongside his body, trying to get as much skin touching at once. Then the bliss erupted into a torturous restlessness, sending trembling sparks running under her skin. Desperately seeking a distraction from her torment, she rose up on her elbow to dip her lips to his. Her own urgency seemed to awaken his, compelling him into grasping her waist to haul her on top of him. Sandor groaned as she settled her weight onto him, his hardness pressing into her stomach.

"We don't have to wait," she braced a hand on either side of his head to meet his eyes. "I'm ready." Sansa forced herself not to flinch or blush at all, to prove that if he wanted her this night she would not insist on waiting.

"Little bird," he choked as he turned his face away from her. "You know... I have to go - when I graduate." His face tightened with an unreadable emotion, something like regret but angrier. "I've waited my whole life to get away... I can't stay even for you." Sansa covered his mouth with her fingers, wishing he did not doubt her devotion.

"I would never ask you to stay for me," she insisted. "I will be yours no matter how far away you are." Sansa knew he did not want to make promises for the future but he brought up the subject. "In two years I will come to you."

"You'll have dreams of your own by then," he wound a loose lock of her hair around his finger. "Right now, you're everything to me. Isn't that's enough?"

"It's more than enough," she assured him with a smile. "I won't ever regret a single moment I've
spent with you, Sandor." Sansa held his face between her hands, her throat tightening with emotion. "I'll cherish them forever." Her eyes held his though she felt them welling with tears. "Whatever you want, I'm yours." In one quick motion he reversed their position, trapping her body between his and the mattress. "Tell me you're mine," she demanded breathlessly, needing to hear the words.

"You know I'm yours." The weight of him crushed her in the most wonderful way, her whole body trembled in anticipation as she curled her legs up by his sides.

"Are we going to...?" Sansa used every ounce of willpower to keep from begging him to make love to her, to ease the fierce aching consuming her body. Sandor braced over her, causing every muscle in his arms and torso to tighten.

"I made you a promise - I won't waste it here like this." His words barely registered in her brain as the sight made her salivate. "Tell me what you want." Sansa could be quite happy to lay beneath his taut body for the rest of her life.

"There is something..." The mere thought was enough to make her blush and look away. "It's slightly embarrassing."

"You think you can shock me?" Sandor's confident smirk gave her the courage to meet his eyes to ask him directly for what she wanted.

"I would like to kiss your..." Her words faltered and she wrapped her hand around his hardness to finish her request.

"Kiss?" Sandor raised his brow at her, clearly a bit shocked by her request, before rolling onto his back and blowing out a deep breath. "Do whatever you like." She sat up, crossing her legs so that her shins and knees were flush alongside his ribs. First she took a moment to admire him in all his naked glory, a true work of art fashioned by the gods. A more perfect specimen of masculine magnificence could not exist in the real world... Her man was unique, not just strong but gentle enough to reign in that strength.

Sansa's fingers trailed down his stomach before curling her hand around his hardness, always a thrill to see and feel how much he wanted her. She lowered her lips to kiss the very tip of him, feeling the texture his silken skin and tasting a small bead of salty moisture. Her eyes closed as her curious tongue darted out to get a better taste, drawing a sharp gasp from him. Sandor moved his hand to her thigh, curling his fingers around her leg to squeeze lightly. One of her hands slowly roamed over his taut stomach while her other slowly pumped his hardness.

"Fuck," he groaned, his stomach flexing under her hand as she grew bolder. Her lips and tongue stroked over his hardness, savoring his taste and softness. By the pressure of his fingers digging into her thigh and the small growling groans coming from his that, Sansa learned what he liked.

"Sansa," he rasped as his hip twitched, "fuck - I'm close..." Sansa wrapped her lips around his hardness to catch his release as his hand tightened on her thigh. A rush of hot saltiness rushed over her tongue and she swallowed on reflex until she had to pull away to gasp for breath. She fanned her heated face with her hand as she leaned back to catch her breath.

"Huh..." Sansa licked her lips as she wipe her chin. "Tastes like caviar." She turned back to Sandor only to be confronted with the most dumbfounded expression on his face. "Did I do something wrong?!"

"Your turn," he sat up to grasp her shoulders and pushed her back against the mattress. He trailed his lips down her body, drawing a gasp from Sansa when he flicked his tongue over the tip of one
breast. His hand pushed her legs further apart, as he kissed her stomach, then inside her hip before finally moving between her legs. If she thought he was good at kissing her mouth... Sandor devoured her as she shuddered uncontrollably, shifting her hips towards and away from the thrilling sensation he gave her.

Her mind melted, sweeping away her ability to feel shame as she cried out over and over until she was nearly sobbing from the intensity. The building passion was nothing like she felt before, almost so powerful she could not latch onto the feeling to find her pleasure. Instead it consumed her like a perfect storm, pulling her below a like undertow and tossing her body around in wave after wave. For a moment her whole body felt frozen and unbreakable then she shattered, letting out one ear-piercing sob before slumping back against the mattress.

"Gods in all seven heavens," she gasped for breath. Sansa pushed back a few strands of her hair from her perspiring forehead as he collapsed beside her. She had never been so exhausted and contented at the same time! "It's hard to believe," she released a panting chuckle, "sex will be even better than that."

"I'm not making any promises," he replied dryly. The sound of their heavy breathing filled the silence and she almost nodded off to sleep. Sandor turned onto his side to face her and she mirrored his position, surprised to see a serious expression on his face. "There's something I have to tell you..." He squeezed his eyes shut and she reached out a hand to stroke his cheek as he seemed to face some internal struggle. "I love you, Sansa."

"I know," she smiled when he opened his eyes again. Sansa yawned as she sat up to pull a rumpled blanket over them before falling down with a sigh. "You know I love you, don't you?"

"I know," he pulled her close, wrapping her in his tight embrace. "Dream sweet."

"Dream sweet," she replied, "my love..." Then Sansa fell into a deep slumber, only able to sleep well when safely enfolded in Sandor's arms.

Chapter End Notes

Yesterday I had 'familial obligations'. To make up for my lack of chapter yesterday I made this one extra-long and smutty with just a dash of awkward sweetness. I'm feelin' pretty good about it.

Next up! Arya plots and schemes! I love when she does that.
When he walked inside, the atmosphere in the empty room was relaxed with the most notable exception being Dany. She poured over her notes to make last-minute changes before the game started. Jon sat down, glancing at Sam's empty chair beside him and refusing to let himself feel sad about his friend's absence. Everyone else was seated and chatting, except Drogo who stared hard at Dany: it might have been a loving gaze for all he knew. The last one to arrive was Gendry, who beelined straight to Arya without even looking at anyone else.

"Here you go, milady." Gendry set down a covered disposable coffee cup in front of Arya. "Just the way you like it, black and extra-sweet." She took a sip of the hot beverage but scrunched up her nose before dropping the cup on the table.

"This isn't what I want." She scowled at her boyfriend and his smile fell as a look of panic crossed his face. Then Arya leaned forward, pursing her smiling lips. Gendry grinned like a happy idiot before complying with her request for a kiss. Jon rolled his eyes at the sickly sweet scene but was surprised at how little he cared otherwise. They were happy and there was nothing he could do about the situation anyway. It could be worse... He couldn't help but think of the hound somehow pulling the wool over poor Sansa's eyes. What a bloody nightmare.

"Alright, everyone," Dany's confident smile wavered for just a moment. "Let's get this game started." All eyes turned to her as the chatter quieted down. "You are deep in the jungles of Suinha Mountain, following The Protector to The Arena..."

Trudging through dense woods was not his favorite thing to do but he and the group followed along after The Protector. He led them through the jungle covering the mountain Khaleesi's Dragonborn clan lived on. Snow still couldn't believe she was just... gone.

"Fuck the gods!" Arry's sudden outburst drew his attention.

"What?" Gendry walked beside her while Snow occupied the other side.

"I can't find my dagger!" The Halfling was undeniably clever but possibly the most irresponsible person Snow had ever met.

"I'll make you another, milady." Gendry seemed to be in a good mood, though dressed in full armor and just as hot and tired as the rest of them.

"So you can be useful," she grinned at the blacksmith. As they walked, The Protector explained in great detail to Gray Worm the history and purpose of his existence. The rest of the group showed little interest in what The Protector said. Suddenly, Arry interjected into their conversation. "Wait, you came to life to fight this evil force draining the clan... right?!" That's basically what Snow expected to happen.

"No, I am The Protector." His answer shocked to them all into paying closer attention. "I do not engage in violence of any kind."
"What about Khaleesi?" Drogo's growled question sounded more like a threat.

"She is in a deep dreamless slumber," The Protector explained, "waiting for the next time the clan needs her help. Then she will become The Protector." From what Snow understood, that time would not come for another generation.

"I thought 'the protector' was some kinda god?" Even Hot Pie, who usually couldn't even understand these kinds of things, showed a sudden interest.

"Boccob is..." The Protector waved his hand as words failed him before placing his fist against his chest. "Within me." Silence fell over the group as they finally understood: they helped Khaleesi sacrifice her life for her people. Though she only walked with their group for short time, Khaleesi would never be forgotten.

"Well, fuck me!" Arry seemed to be the only ones not affected by the gloom. "Never thought I'd meet a gods-honest god!" She scowled around at the group as they trudged on in silence. "Look, you bunch of babies! I miss Khaleesi too and I wish she wasn't a fucking statue, but she's not dead. She's going to become a fucking goddess someday," she shouted, "That's nothing to get all weepy over! Get over your shit so her sacrifice won't be made in vain."

"The Halfling speaks truth," Drogo backed up Arry's words. "I gave my word - we will fight."

"Of course we will," Pod stepped in between The Protector and Gray Worm, putting his arms around them both. "Now, you might be a god but we're a rag-tag group of adventurers. Don't underestimate us."

"I assure you," The Protector chuckled, "I had my own group of friends who led me through the five trials. Your help will not only be greatly appreciated, it is necessary." His good cheer faded as he heaved a heavy sigh. "I believe our old adversary is an enemy we have in common, you know him as a powerful warlock."

"No..." Gendry gaped in disbelief. "Arry killed Brawlis."

"He goes by many names," The Protector revealed. "Do not mistake him for the creature you have faced, that was only his host body."

"Not much of one," Arry scoffed with a sour expression.

"The Devourer-

"Oh," Arry interrupted once more with the snort, "that sounds good."

"The Devourer," The Protector started again, "gives his host power, knowledge, and extended life. In exchange, the host slowly loses control until The Devourer has consumed every part of them. Anyone who offers themselves to The Devourer must be mad with ego or simply foolish."

"That basically describes Brawlis," Snow added dryly.

"There is something you must all know..." The Protector's words trailed off as he remained silent for a moment. "The Devourer can never be defeated, only contained. The risk involved in this undertaking cannot be overstated."

"Well," Pod let go of The Protector's shoulders to take a long swig out of the gourd hanging off his belt. "The Devourer has never met us before." Snow had spoken to Pod several times about his drinking affecting their missions. The Cleric only argued that his god demanded revelry. A narrow
path between the trees opened up to a clearing to the front of a huge white temple. The jungle had nearly reclaimed the structure with bright floral-bearing foliage.

"Here it is... The Arena." The Protector stopped in front of the vine covered structure to gaze at it with something like apprehension on his face. Several marble Dragonborn statues stood on pillars, holding up the front of the temple. Their arms extended upwards to brace against the roof. The genders and garb of the statues varied but all of them wore an expression of deep angst, some of them even weeping pitifully. "Here we can summon The Destroyer but he will be untouchable, no blood can be shed on this sacred ground."

"Then what's the fucking point?" Arry skipped up to The Protector side as he led them inside The Arena. Unlike the white stone forming the exterior of the temple, the interior walls and floor were dark marble. The ceiling was almost black, but the statue-bearing pillars that held it up were white.

"We will reveal ourselves to each other," The Protector continued his explanation. "He will see the face The Protector wears and I will see his new host." A stone altar stood on a low circular dais in the center of the interior chamber.

"I get it," Arry murmured and nodded as she looked around, "you size each other up." The altar was formed from the same white stone as the pillars, contrasting against the glossy black floor. Though the outside of the temple was overgrown and uncared for, the inside was spotless. Two more statues knelt beside the altar: a Dragonborn girl frozen in fervent prayer while an elderly man hid his face in his hands. The Protector moved forward to the altar, pausing to briefly stroke the stone hair of the child statue. He knelt between the two statues and began to murmur in a hushed tone.

"Boccob, si drekik wux ekess evnek wer ehaiasm di sia irlym." Behind the altar, a rush of pluming black smoke rose from the ground. A petite form materialized in the dark smoke, with long curling raven hair and skin pale as snow. Those bright violet eyes were familiar but the hatred glittering in them was not...

"Khaleesi?" Grey Worm managed to choke out what everyone was thinking. It was her, but it wasn't her.

"Arry, dear," The Devourer wearing Khaleesi's face smiled evilly at Arry. "Did you really think I was so easily defeated?" She licked her pale lips. "I did enjoy our time together..." Snow's brain scrambled to make sense of the impossible scene before him. Arry's dagger...?

"How is this possible?!!" The Protector roared at the horrifying aberration, which had stunned the rest of them into silence. "You cannot take one unwilling!"

"While you slumbered," she sneered, "allowing your people to be unprotected. I continued to seek a way to destroy you once and for all." The Devourer walked around the altar, leaving a trail of smoke in her wake. "My last host was creative and shameless, he was easy to sway." She wagged her fingers in the group's direction. "These... adventurers," she spit the word like a curse, "got in my way too many times." A cruel smile curled over her beautiful bloodless lips. "So I decided to make use of them."

"Rules are made to be broken!" Arry jumped forward, pulling her bowstring taut and aiming at The Devourer's head. "I plan to spill blood today!" Snow understood the Halfling's fury, she was the one most used and tricked by The Devourer. Her dagger must have somehow become a temporary host when the evil demon escaped Brawlis' body.

"No!" Drogo yoked her up around her neck with one massive arm. "Khaleesi will be hurt." The Devourer cackled as black smoke swirled around her, swallowing her until she disappeared. Arry
yanked free of the Barbarian's choke-hold and turned around to face him with a fierce expression.

"This is not the day for vengeance, Arry." The Protector approached her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Today we have seen the worst The Devourer can do. Now we must plan our attack." The whole group stared at The Protector as the gravity of the situation sunk in. They had to face an unbeatable foe who was using the body of their comrade... If they somehow managed to destroy The Devourer once and for all, Khaleesi would be lost to them forever. The bell rung.

"Let's all have a round of applause," Jon stood up, "for Dany's first day as Dungeon Master!"
Everyone around the table clapped as Dany blushed and stood up to take a bow. Nobody could ever replace Sam but that wasn't what she tried to do. Her way of continuing the story would be different but just as gripping and fun.

**ARYA**

She studied all the girls in every single class as her three-step plan to see Gendry more often formulated in her head. Most of them all seemed somewhat the same, overly concerned with what boys think about them. There was one girl who stood out, not just because she had serious facial scars covering one side of her face. But also because she seemed to be quietly observing everyone, just like Arya.

"Hi there," Arya approached the girl as class let out. "What's your name again?"

"Shireen Baratheon," she answered with a light blush blooming in her one unscarred cheek. Baratheon?! Arya couldn't believe her good luck - the girl she chose happened to be related to dad's potential business partner. "You're Arya Stark, right?" Arya was right, this girl might be quiet, but she paid attention to what went on around her. "Oh, but you can just call me Sheri."

"Can you walk with me for a few minutes, Sheri?" Arya decided to follow her instincts to convince this girl to help her.

"Sure..." Sheri's eyes narrowed slightly and Arya knew she had to tread lightly, so as to not make this girl feel like she was being used. Although, that was pretty much exactly what was going to happen. Personally, Arya thought the facial scar looked pretty badass. The girl seemed self-conscious about it, letting her hair fall over her face.

"Listen," Arya lead the way and Sheri followed. "You seem like a nice girl so that's why I came to you - I need a favor."

"A favor?" Sheri still seemed suspicious and she had a reason to be so. Arya stopped as they reached the hallway of lockers and looked around until she spotted who she looked for.

"See that hot guy over there?" Arya pointed out Gendry, who was standing next to Hot Pie as he tried to shove more books and his already stuffed locker. "The one leaning against the locker?"

"Yes," Sheri nodded her head before turning back to look at Arya with a smile. "Is that the boy you like?"

"That's my boyfriend - and he's totally whipped by me." Arya sat leaned back on her heels, crossing her arms, as she smugly basked in Sheri's astonishment.

"No way!" Sheri whipped her head back to look at Gendry again. She didn't blame the girl for being incredulous, it just proved how ridiculous hot her boyfriend was. "I mean, not that I don't believe-"

"Hey stupid!" Arya smirked as Gendry instantly looked up at her with that silly lovesick smile on his
"Come over here." She waved him over and he immediately obeyed, jogging up to her while still smiling. "Tell me you love me," she demanded.

"Love you." Gendry grinned like a ridiculously handsome besotted fool, fitting into her plan perfectly. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the girl's shocked expression. Then his attention slid to Sheri. "Is this your-

"Kiss me." Arya ordered and he instantly followed that command as well, pressing a brief kiss to her lips. "Now go away," she waved her hand and dismissal.

"Arry..." His brow scrunched up as he frowned at her, clearly confused by her odd behavior but it would all be worth it when it worked out.

"Go - away - now." She scowled at him, wishing they were telepathic so she could explain what she was doing. Gendry shoulders slumped as he turned around and ambled back towards Hot Pie. Arya turn to Sheri with a confident smirk. "See?"

"Wh-wha-what..." Sheri's mouth hung open as she glanced between Arya and Gendry. "What just happened?!" Then a wide excited smile broke over her face. "He's even better looking up close!" This was working exactly as Arya planned. Step one: impress the fuck out of a lonely girl.

"You have excellent taste." Arya brushed her shoulders off and hooked her thumbs and her belt loops as she spread the bragging on a little thick. "His body is so amazing - like, a-maz-ing." Step two: make the lonely girl envious.

"Teach me your ways!" Sheri grabbed Arya by the shoulders with a look of desperation on her scarred face. Step three: make the lonely girl see Arya as her only hope.

"I think we should be friends." Arya chuckled as she pulled Sheri's hands down, watching as the girl nodded her head vigorously in agreement. "Good - now friends help each other out, right?" She pulled her face into an exaggerated pout and gazed longingly at Gendry. "I'm grounded, because my dad doesn't approve of my dating before sixteen."

"That's so old-fashioned!" Sheri expressed just the right amount of outrage and Arya had to bite her cheek to keep from smiling. "My dad is the same way but... he doesn't really have to worry about me dating." She lowered her head and self-consciously pulled her hair forward over her face.

"Look at me!" Arya waved a hand at herself. "I'm not the prettiest girl but I bagged a mega-hottie like it was nothing." She took Sheri's hand away from her hair and looked the girl straight in the eye. "I can help you find a date if that's what you want." How hard could it be?

"Really?" Sheri's eyes widened, filling with a mixture of disbelief and hope. "Honestly, I don't have a lot of friends..." She turned her eyes down to their hands still clasped together. "I'm not very good at talking to people."

"Bullshit," Arya argued, "everyone else is just an asshole." Sheri turned her eyes up again, a small smile crinkling her scarred face. "You're alright, Sheri." Arya decided she wasn't just going to use this girl to get what she wanted but also truly liked her. "Want to come back to my place today and hang out? I'm grounded but I can just tell dad we're working on a project together. You okay with that?"

"Sounds like fun," Sheri grinned. They walked arm-in-arm to the weirwood tree out front, as Sheri called her mother to get permission to go over to a friend's house. Before long dad pulled up in front of the school and Arya led her new friend down to the car and opened the passenger door.
"Dad," Arya waved a hand at Sheri. "This is my friend, Shireen Baratheon - we are working together on a school project." Sheri smiled shyly and gave dad a little wave as he sized her up and looked pleased. "Is it okay if she comes over for a few hours so we can work on it?"

"Of course," Dad was immediately suckered in by Sheri's feminine shy cuteness, as expected. He was always telling Arya to find more girl friends, probably because he assumed they would keep her out of trouble. "Hello, Shireen," he greeted her with a smile. Arya closed the front door and opened the back so both girls could slide into the backseat. "Do you like steak?" Arya rolled her eyes at dad's predictability.

"I am a fan of all varieties of meat, Mr. Stark." Sheri replied with an honest expression. Arya once again congratulated herself on picking the diamond in the rough.

"Then we will get along just fine." Dad put the car into drive and pulled away from the school. "So, what kind of project are you girls working on?" Arya already had some vague reply to that question but she didn't even have to use it.

"For History class," Sheri answered before Arya could even open her mouth. "We have to make an oral presentation on a historical figure we both admire and we only just decided on Visenya Targaryen."

"Ah," dad chuckled, "Arya loved stories about her when she was little."

"Nice," she whispered under her breath and Sheri responded with a little wink. Without a doubt, this girl was definitely going to be Arya's ticket to freedom.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so glad I could include Shireen, I think her character is adorable and I always thought she and Arya would get on well.

Sandor POV next - it's Sansa's birthday! We'll find out how he's coping with the guilt about Gregor finding out about Sansa. Also, he's going to make one of Sansa's most secret of dreams come true! Yay! Bittersweet is how I like my teen romance :D
He tried - he really tried his fucking hardest - to make this day, her birthday, special for Sansa and so far it seemed to be working. She nearly burst into happy tears every time he opened a door for her and thanked him a full ten times for just buying her a hot chocolate. The weather cooperated, staying cool and sunny as he drove her to their surprise destination. When the top of the wheel came into view, she gasped and turned to him with a hopeful expression. Sandor still wouldn't give into her curiosity, refusing to spill any details until they pulled up in the parking lot.

"A carnival?!" Sansa leaned forward gazed up at the Ferris wheel with an open-mouthed smile and shimmering excited eyes. When she turned those bright eyes on him, Sandor focused on pulling into a parking spot. He wasn't used to faking a smile - still not used to smiling at all - and his mind wouldn't forget the darkness hanging over them. Every day he had a new justification for not telling her the truth about Greg but those excuses ran out.

"Quit gawking and hurry up, little bird," he stepped out of the Skylark and started walking toward the carnival. He heard her slam her car door and the gravel under her boots as she skipped to his side to hang off his arm. Sandor loved when she did that, her little hands holding onto him tightly and her head tilted against his shoulder. She chirped her thanks and about how much she 'adored' carnivals but he couldn't focus on her words. The ticket booth operator was just the first of many confused looks they would get tonight but he did his best to ignore it.

"What should we do first?!!" She dragged him around, her chatter competing with sound of booths' music and the metallic screeching of the rides. At first Sansa just wanted to walk around and look at everything until she spotted a booth and pulled him over, it was a basketball game. "Oh look, a wolf!" She pointed up at the stuffed animal prizes. "Can you win that for me?" Sandor was surprised she didn't want the rabbit or cat.

"I could do it blindfolded," he grinned down at her before passing the gawking carney some money and picking up the first ball. Swish - nothing but net and Sandor saw the trick right away, the basket was barely big enough for the balls to fit through. He turned his twisted grin at the dopey fuck running the booth and tossed the second ball in without looking. "How many do I have to put in before I get that wolf?"

"Ten, in a row," the carney replied without really meeting Sandor's eyes. Fine with him - he didn't want to look at the ugly fucker either. For every one of the next eight baskets he sunk, Sansa cheered and clapped. The carney handed over the stuffed wolf without much enthusiasm but the little bird snatched the toy and hugged it tightly.

"Let's put it in the car," he started to lead her away from the booth but she didn't follow.

"I want to carry her," she pouted. "And her name is 'Lady'." Sandor shrugged, not caring either way and let her take his hand to lead him through the carnival. Next he rode in a bumper car that he could barely fit in while she drove - the fucking wolf crammed between them. The little bird shrieked and giggled as she crashed into other drivers while he sulked with his arms crossed. Afterward she
wanted to go into the fun house - filled with fucking mirrors - and she made funny faces at herself.

Once that eighth hell was over, they stopped by the lemonade stand and he bought one for her and water for himself. They sat and sipped their drinks as the evening sky turned violet with the sinking sun. Crowds of people poured in as the day slowly melted into night. Lights came on all around the carnival and Sansa wanted to walk around the whole thing again. Sandor didn't really mind since she clung to his arm and chirped excitedly. Rides whirred around in a blur of lights and the air smelled like cotton candy and fried dough.

"Hungry?" He noticed her staring longingly at the funnel cake booth.

"I am a bit hungry..." She smiled sheepishly up at him and held up one finger. "Let's go on one more ride first." Then her eyes glowed with excitement as they turned to look up at the Ferris wheel in the center of the carnival. Sandor knew eventually she would drag him to the Ferris wheel and had been dreading it all day. Sansa bounced on her toes as they waited in line, watching the baskets get filled one by one.

The pimply-faced kid running the ride did a double take at his face before turning an incredulous stare at the little bird. Sandor sneered at the kid until he averted his eyes and opened the basket door so they could get on. He could admit his cowardice, never telling Sansa how much she meant to him. There were so many things he should've told her and he planned to say them all - before this ride ended, even if it killed him. The door shut behind him and it banged closed with finality before the ride started moving again.

"Sansa, I have to tell you something" he watched as she sat her wolf beside her and scooted close to him - beaming with happiness. "I've never been happier in my life, every day I wake up looking forward to seeing you and hearing your voice." Her smile brightened and Sandor had to look away as he told ahold of one of her hands. "I haven't been good enough to you." Sansa started to argue but he didn't let her. "Let me finish... I've tried my best to make you happy sometimes." He eyed her sideways to see her confused but still smiling expression. "I did, didn't I?"

"So happy," she assured him, squeezing his hand. "I can hardly believe it."

"Being with you has been like a dream," he practiced this confession in his head, trying his best to be sincere and not curse. "I love you more every day and I don't think I'll ever stop. Even if we are on opposite sides of the world, I'll still love you. That's not a promise, just the simple truth."

"Oh, Sandor," she clasped her hand between hers and held it against her chest. "That's the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said... ever." Sansa ducked her head in his vision. "Did Arya tell you it was my secret fantasy to have someone declare their love for me on a Ferris wheel?"

"You're a bit predictable, little bird." He chuckled at her dubious yet still delighted expression.

"Mean boy," she admonished as she lifted her lips to his. Ah, lemonade on her lips - that's how the drink was meant to be enjoyed. Sandor could have kissed her until the wheel - hells, even until the world stopped spinning. But the clock was running down and he still had more to say so he gently pushed her away and turned his body to face her.

"Sansa, just..." Sandor got lost for a second - wanting to face reality but losing his nerve. "I've got more to say and we're going to sit on this fucking wheel until I get it out." Sansa's smile fell as a concerned expression crossed her face but he couldn't stop once he started. "There's not much in my life I can control - practically fucking nothing. After graduation I'm picking up my certificate, not stopping to walk around in some polyester dress or throw a cap." Her jaw dropped in shock and she shook her head.
"Just me," he continued before she could interrupt, "my shit, and my Skylark are heading on a one-way trip to Anywhere But Here. That's all I've ever wanted... before I met you." Sansa's eyes sparkled with rainbow colors from the carnival lights. "I never dreamed about meeting a girl and falling for her, I didn't dare. You make me so happy I keep forgetting why I have to get away - as far and fast as I can. I'm not safe in Kings Landing and neither are the people I care about."

"If this is about your brother," she quickly interrupted as his words failed him. "If he's making threats then we can go to the police-"

"You're so fucking naive," Sandor leaned back, laughing though he didn't think anything was funny anymore. "I was like that once, I thought if I told somebody..." He squeezed his eyes shut and closed his mind off to the feeling of her soft hand lightly covering his. "Nobody gives a fuck, girl. Everybody's got their finger in some rich man's pocket and Greg knows how to make himself valuable to rich men. They don't like to get their soft hands dirty, see? He likes it - he loves to hurt people." The last words barely choked from his throat. "And he knows about you."

"We should tell my father," at first her voice was just a whisper but it grew stronger. "Come home with me and tell him whatever threats your brother made. Explain the truth about what Mr. Baratheon is really like."

"No point in that, little bird." Sandor felt like a weight was lifted off his chest after telling her, the worst part was over - for better or worse. "The result's the same." He turned back to face her, surprised to see the tears gone from her eyes. "I'd swear to the gods that I love you, Sansa, if I believed in them." She smiled again, small and shaky but still genuine - it was enough. "We should end it now."

"What?! No!" For some reason she looked shocked. "What are you saying?! Was she really so surprised? There wasn't any other option for him - this was the only way he could keep her safe.

"Say I tell your dad what's up - what happens to us?" Sandor didn't wait for her rose-colored answer. "If he believes me and has half a brain, he'll send you on the first flight to Winterfell. If he doesn't believe me then he'll forbid you from seeing me." A single tear spilled down over her cheek but she didn't argue. "And if I don't let you go now, and something happens to you because of me... You understand, don't you? I'm hanging onto life by a fucking thread here. I even shock myself that I made it this long without just... giving up."

"Don't say that," her hand and voice shook as she reached out to grab one of his sleeves. "Don't ever say that... Oh gods, please don't leave me, Sandor." A few more tears spilled as her head hung forward but she quickly wiped them away. "I'll do anything."

"I'd do anything for you, that's what I'm saying." He pulled her hand free from his sleeve and set it down in her lap beside the other. "I love you - I wish you could always be mine." Somehow, the words were easy to say knowing he'd never get to say them again. "But if we keep on going, I won't have it in me to let you go so I gotta do it now. If you ever think back on your first boyfriend," a smile tugged at his lips at the memory of refusing to ever be called that. "I want the memories to make you smile." The basket door suddenly swung open.

"Can we go around once more, please?" Sansa flashed her prettiest smile at the pimply ride conductor staring expectantly at them. Sandor had almost forgotten they were even on a ride - the carney blushed and closed the door again "Thank you," she called. Her smile vanished as she suddenly turned cold, not a tear shining in her glowering eyes.

"You're breaking up with me," Sansa's pretty lips curled into a sneer. "On my birthday, on a Ferris wheel. After granting my most secret love confession fantasy." She huffed a laugh and wagged her
head. "Sandor Clegane... you are... indescribable." Then she suddenly grasped the front of his sweater, her sudden strength shocked him, and pulled his face close to hers. "And you are mine," she asserted with surprising resolve, "I won't let you go. So no thank you, I turn down your offer to break up."

"Little bird..." Sandor shook his head and wrapped his fingers around her wrists to yank them off the front of his hoodie. "What the fuck is wrong with you?!" He struggled to lower his voice to a menacing growl. "I dumped you - you can't un-dump yourself!"

"Watch me!" She screeched and yanked her hands free to slap one palm against her chest. "I'm my fricking birthday! Of course it scares me that a violent criminal knows I even exist! It's terrifying!" Sansa threw her hands up. "So what? So is driving a car or falling in love or any number of things. This giant contraption could be faulty and collapse on top of me!" Her arms crossed over her chest in defiance. "I'm still going to ride it!"

"A fucking carnival ride," he snarled, "never tried to rape someone to death." Sansa snorted like he was being dramatic so he grasped both of her shoulders. He had to make her understand - the world wasn't made up of rainbow and fucking gumdrops! "Wake up, little girl - there are real monsters in the world." Sandor didn't try to hide his own fear as he kept their eyes locked together. "He turns me into a cowering little boy," he rasped through his tightened throat. "I can't protect you."

"We'll protect each other," she wrapped her hands around his forearms with a look of such determination on her face. "That's what people do when they love each other. I'm starting to worry I'm the only person who has ever loved you and that's horrible to say, I know." It might be 'horrible' but Sandor knew the truth when he heard it. "You don't protect someone by throwing them away, we have to stick together." Sansa's words make him think of his mom, how she abandoned him with Greg and dad. But this wasn't the same, mom left for herself - not for his own good...

"No matter what," he reminded her, "I'm leaving at the end of the school year." Sandor unclenched his hands and let them fall from her arms. "Don't you see? It always had to end sometime - I should've never dragged you into my life." From the beginning, he knew it was wrong but he always intended to keep his promises. Greg getting out of jail was just his own rotten luck catching up with him.

"I think I pushed my way in," she gave one sad little laugh. "We have to try, that's all we can do." Sansa turned her wide blew up at him, pleading as if he actually had a choice. "I'm not happy you are leaving after your graduate but I understand better than you think. Right now, I know you are doing this before the Winter Formal on purpose."

"You'd prefer I fuck you - then dump you?" Sandor had tried to persuade her as kindly as he could but his patience ran out.

"How generous of you," she replied dryly, "to leave my virginity intact for the next boy who comes along." His eyes snapped to her face before he could stop himself. "Oh, you can glare at me but I know that is exactly what you are thinking." Sansa gave him a disgusted look that he felt straight down to his bones. "How dare you presume to make decisions for my good? Either you are looking down on me because I'm a girl or because I am younger. I don't know which option makes me more upset." The basket door swung open again and Sandor glared at the intrusion.

"Give us one more go around!" Sandor growled at the pimply kid, who shut the door again right away. He sat back, covering his face with his hand and wondering where he went wrong. "This is not how I thought this would go..."

"You thought I might shed a few tears and meekly nod my head." Sansa spoke in a clipped tone,
calling him out on his own assumptions about her. "Sorry to disappoint, but I told you that I'm changing and it's mostly your fault." She cupped her hand against his cheek and turned his head to face her. "I won't give you up without a fight! What do I have to do, beg?" Tears welled and her eyes once more as her voice wavered. "I would beg until I ran out of breath. Do you need to hear it?" Sandor knew she had him - he'd never be able to withstand her begging.

"You win," he whispered in defeat.

"Don't ever try to break up with me again." She slumped back into her seat and pulled the stuffed wolf into her arms to hold it tightly. "I won't forgive you so easily next time. On my birthday, for love of the gods," she grumbled under her breath, "I'm so fricking hungry." Sandor held it in the whole time - held in in for days even as he tried to find some solution. He buried his face in his hands and couldn't fight back the tears anymore. He heard Sansa gasp before he felt her hands pulling him towards her and holding his face against her chest. "I'm sorry, oh gods I'm so sorry."

"What am I gonna do?" Sandor knew he sounded like a whimpering child but all the false bravado left him when he failed to set her free. "I can't keep you safe." He was holding her too tightly, wishing he could keep her close forever. "Oh fuck, Sansa, I can't let anything happen to you..." His voice lowered to a harsh whisper. "You're everything..."

"Listen to me," her one hand stroked over his head soothingly as she held his head tight to her chest. "I might not seem like much, but I'm stronger than you think." It was humiliating for Sansa to be the strong one, comforting him while he cried uselessly. "We're both scared but we would be fools not to be. I won't let fear take away the person I love the most... Together we are stronger, we will find a way to keep each other safe."

"How could you want," he gulped one shuddering breath, "someone as broken and fucked up as me?"

"You've been hurt in so many ways, yet you haven't been beaten by it." Her voice was soothing, without a trace of resentment for his show of weakness. "My father says the only time you can be brave is when you're afraid. I'm so afraid Sandor, of losing you most of all. But I can be brave if you can." Sandor didn't deserve her understanding and sympathy - he certainly didn't deserve her devotion. If this really was some kind of coma dream, he'd fucking kill the doctor who woke him up.

"I'm trying," they were the only two words he could manage.

"That's all we can do." Sansa gently urged him to sit up and she use the back of her fingers to wipe tears off his face. "Don't ever hide anything from me again and don't try to drive me away. Someday, if you stop loving me-

"That won't happen," he swore - no matter what that was one promise he couldn't break even if he wanted to.

"If..." She continued with solemn expression. "Only then will I accept us breaking up. I'm going to love you as long as you let me."

"Can't fucking get rid of you," he joked, earning him a scowl from her. "Just trying to lighten the mood." Sandor wasn't ready to let her go yet so he pulled her close again and breathed in her calming floral scent. "I won't lie, little bird, I'm scared shitless. He's my nightmare and has been my whole life. You're in real danger and I have no fucking clue what to do about it - dumping you was my big plan."

"So we come up with another plan," Sansa wrapped her arms around his waist, "together."
"No matter what it takes, I'll keep you safe." He really shouldn't make any more promises but this was one he intended to keep come hells or high water.

"Come meet my father," she asked again, "he might surprise you. I know you don't trust rich people but he's a good man." Sandor knew not every daughter says that about her father - all along he could tell Sansa respected the man. "I think he will help once he gets to know you first, he will see what good and honest person you are."

"Fine, I'll meet him." Sandor didn't have any better ideas but he knew something had to be done. It was an eighth hell to go through a week of worrying about Sansa's safety. "Sorry I sobbed all over you like a fucking child."

"It has been a long time since someone protected you, Sandor." She bunched the back of his hoodie into her fists. "I won't ever let anyone hurt you again." Sansa released him and tried to pull away to look up at him but Sandor just held her tighter.

"Can we stay like this a little longer?" He wished it didn't sound like begging though that's exactly what it was.

"As long as you want," she relaxed against him again and ran her hand up and down his back. They held onto each other until the door to their basket swung open for a third time. To the obvious relief of the conductor, they finally got off the ride.

"Sansa," he pulled her beside a tent for some privacy. "You aren't safe - don't ever let your guard down." Sandor's mind reeled with advice she should know to stay out of Greg's clutches. "Don't go anywhere alone. Call me if you need a ride, I'll drop everything."

"Sandor," Sansa interrupted in a weary voice, "later we can talk about it... Just not now."

"Sorry-"

"Tell me you love me," she pleaded quietly.

"I love you," whatever reservations he had about those words seemed silly after what they just went through. It felt like he'd been fighting on a battlefield all day and still didn't know which side won the war.  

"Again," she demanded in a stronger voice.  

"I love you, Sansa." He kept his eyes locked on hers, watching as her expression relaxed.

"Let's get out of here," she sighed wearily. "Take me to the shop so I can hold you all night." He didn't trust his voice not to crack so he answered with a nod and put his arm around her as they walked to where the Skylark was parked. His brilliant plan - to let her down easy - blew up in his face, but mostly he just felt relieved. It was wrong of him to underestimate Sansa, to think she would value her own safety more than her love for him. That level of devotion should have scared him but it only made him want to keep her even more.

If there were any gods - they would damn him straight to all the hells for his selfishness.

Chapter End Notes
I regret nothing!!!!

"It would hardly have been a really serious engagement if it hadn’t been broken off at least once."
- Cecily, "The Importance of Being Earnest" (aka the best Colin Firth movie ever - it is known)

Especially when the weather was so charming! :D

Well, the good news is, I highly doubt Sandor will try that nonsense again. But how is he going to deal with Gregor? Spoilers, sweetie. <3
Dany

Drogo was giving her a ride home in his beat up old truck. Dany would rather stay over at his place, but she had been doing that far too often as of late. When she stayed at the ranch, the rest of the world just melted away. He was teaching her how to take care of the horses and the simple but hard work helped her sleep uncommonly well through the night. Well... he also tired her out in other ways.

"Tell me honestly," Dany turned to face Drogo, pulling the seatbelt strap behind her back. "How I am doing as the new Dungeon Master?" He eyed her sideways but did not respond. "Come on, I really want to know."

"Good." Something she learned about Drogo right away: whenever he gave a one-word answer it always meant he had more to say.

"But...?" Dany crossed her arms and stubbornly awaited his reply.

"To slow," he confirmed her fears with so few words: Drogo had a surprising gift for summary. "Not enough battles."

"Ouch!" Dany dramatically placed her hand over her heart. "I'm mortally wounded! Of course you're right," she admitted with a defeated sigh. "I just have all this background lore written and I don't want it to go to waste. Very well," she balled her fist in determination. "I am going to work really hard to make next week more exciting! Thank you for your succinct and brutal honesty, I shall treasure it always." With Drogo, it was always a guessing game to speculate how he truly felt. "Does it annoy you that I talk so much?"

"Yer mem zheana," he told her she sounded beautiful. His voice sounded even deeper in his own native tongue. Dany had redoubled her efforts to learn Dothraki for that very reason.

"I feel the same way about your voice." She removed her seatbelt and slid closer to him as they turned onto her street. The truck pulled into the driveway in front of her house and she gave Drogo the gate pass code.

"I have to go home," she looked at the giant house with reluctance, "but I don't want to." Drogo parked in front of the entrance and Dany reminded herself she had to make an appearance, or else mother would have a conniption. "If it's alright with you..." He turned to face her and she gave him a pleading look. "After the obligatory dinner with my family, could I come back to the ranch tonight?"

"Here," he pulled the keys from the ignition and removed one from the key ring before passing it to her. "Come when you want."

"Anytime?" She stared at the key in her palm with disbelief. "Just like that?"

"If you don't want-" Drogo reached out to take the key back but she snatched her hand away and clutched it to her chest.
"It's mine now," she protested with the playful scowl, "and you can't take it back!" She wrapped her arms around his neck to hug him goodbye. "Thank you, Drogo. It means more to me than you know. I feel so... unburdened when I'm at the ranch: like no evil can touch me there." She reluctantly pulled away to press one brief kiss on his lips, anything more and she would forget all about her family. "I'll come tonight."

"Jalan athirari anni." Drogo trailed his fingers through her loose hair.

"Shekh ma shieraki ann, I'll miss you." Dany forced herself to turn around, get out of the truck, and marched towards her house without looking back. She couldn't stay away any more than she already had.

"Mother," she called as she hung up her coat and purse. "I'm home." Mother immediately descended the staircase, approaching with an angry expression. As soon as she stood in front of her, mother slapped Dany full across the face without any warning. "Mother..."

"Where have you been?!" Mother immediately turned around and collapsed on the nearest sofa. "I needed you here!"

"I was... at a friend's house." Dany stood frozen in the entryway, holding her face in a state of shock: mother had never struck her before! "What happened?!"

"Elia locked herself in the bathroom for ten hours yesterday." Mother threw her arm over her face and refused to look at Dany as she approached to kneel by her side. "She says there was a car parked out front... Poor thing thought it was him coming for her."

"There's a standing restraining order."

"Don't be a child, Dany." Mother snapped at her like it was somehow Dany's fault. "I saw the shabby truck that dropped you off. Who was that?"

"My boyfriend," Dany lifted her head hire, refusing to feel ashamed for wanting to escape this house. "It doesn't make sense for you to start caring now-

"I am your mother!" She pushed against the couch to sit up and stare down at Dany. "Of course, I care! I have been taking care of Elia," mother wailed pitifully and covered her mouth. "I thought I could depend on you."

"I take care of Elia." Dany stood, refusing to be guilted for being irresponsible by a woman who runs from responsibility herself. "I wouldn't have let her stay in that bathroom for ten hours! Couldn't deal with it, could you? You took something to 'relax your nerves' instead of calling me," she accused with rancor. "Don't pretend with me!"

"Those are medications that have been prescribed by my doctor!" Mother tried to jump to her feet but it was obvious she was currently under the influence of some substance.

"He's little better than a drug dealer!" Dany was ready for it the second time, catching mother's hand before it could reach her face. "Slap me again," she warned, "see what happens."

"What has gotten into you?" Mother had audacity to be outraged but Dany wanted to ask that exact same question. Who was this woman wearing her mother's weary face?

"Life: I'm living." Dany turned on her heel and started up the staircase, heading to her aunt's room. "I didn't die that day with daddy and neither did you. Elia didn't die either but we let her hide in this house. Not anymore!"
"What are you doing?" Mother started to follow as Dany took the stairs two at a time.

"Elia!" Dany shouted for her aunt, her body trembling from the adrenaline.

"Dany?" Elia open her bedroom door, peaking out with a confused expression. "What...?"

"We're leaving." Dany pushed open the door all the way and took hold of her aunt's hands to pull her into the hallway. "I'm going to take you to a nice safe place where you can recover. Trust me," she assured Elia, who struggled a bit but still followed along. "I've done all the research -"

"She's not going anywhere!" Mother rounded the staircase banister and blocked Dany's path. "We Targaryens take care of our own!"

"Nothing is getting better!" Dany didn't bother to keep her voice at a respectable level: the situation they were in was not respectable. "It's been two years!" She rounded on her aunt, who was still trying to pull her hand away and starting to whimper. "You didn't die! I know what happened to you is... too horrible to imagine." Elia cried out and squeezed her eyes shut. "But you survived!"

"I lost everything!" Elia looked terrified but Dany couldn't stop herself. They had been walking on eggshells around her aunt for two years and nothing got better. "Rhaegar, the children..."

"You can see them again!" Dany insisted, trying to tug Elia around her mother. "It's been two years! Don't you miss them?"

"DANY!" Mother's screeching distracted Dany long enough for Elia to pull free. She stumbled back against the hallway before sliding to the ground in a pitiful shivering heap.

"You can't stay like this forever!" Dany knelt in front of her aunt and grasped Elia by her quivering shoulders. "I don't pretend to understand Rhaegar but if I were him, I would keep the children away too." Elia flinched away as if she was struck and started to cry. "I love you so much, I miss you! I miss your smile and the way you used to braid my hair! Come back to me please, Aunt Elia! Don't do this anymore!"

"Get out!" Mother tried to pull Dany away from Elia, who started to sob uncontrollably.

"I won't give up on her!" Dany shrugged her mother off, refusing to relent until she said something that got through to her tortured aunt. "Come with me now," she gentled her voice and loosened to grip to rub up and down Elia's arms in a soothing motion. "I will take you somewhere safe that nobody but me knows about. There you can get proper treatment, not just pills that take away some of the pain. You can still get your old life back."

"I'm sorry, Dany..." Elia visibly struggled to hold back from crying. "For forcing you to grow up too fast."

"You were the victim," Dany pulled her aunt into a tight embrace. "None of us are to blame for what happened. We had our problems like every family, but we were happy. That day..."

"Dany," mother gasped in horror, "don't!"

"We never talk about it, ever." Dany moved away from her aunt to sit on the ground between her mother and Elia. "We pretend that day didn't happen: but it did!" Mother leaned her head against the banister and wiped away a few tears that fell down her face. "That day I felt so sick and there was nothing I wanted more than to get home to you." Dany smiled through her tears at Elia. "Remember, your famous beef bone broth? It could cure anything, I knew you would take care of me. That's how it used to be and I know... I know it can be that way again and am willing to do whatever it takes."
"This place you picked..." Elia's voice was barely louder than a whisper. "Could you come visit me there?"

"I would come every week if that's what you want." Dany crawled closer to her aunt, keeping their eyes locked together. "We can go right now and I'll show you exactly how far it is. You don't have to stay," she promised. "You can just see the route and the building for yourself."

"I always did love a good road trip." A ghost of a smile flitted across Elia's lips. "Remember Rhaella, before the kids were born, we used to go up to the lake house?"

"Before the kids..." Mother exhaled a long shuddering breath. "Another lifetime."

"No," Elia reached out to take Dany's hand. "It was just the first chapter. I trust you Dany."

"Let's go." Dany stood up and helped Elia to her feet, never once letting go of her hand. Mother did not try to stop them as they descended the stairs, put on their coats and shoes, and left the house. Tonight, Dany did not know what gave her the strength to do what she should have done two years ago. That wasn't true: she could guess where her courage came from. After dropping Elia off at the treatment facility, she would return to the ranch and find her own happiness waiting for her.

SANSA

Exited beyond description, she raced out of the licensing building and ran to her father's car. She felt freer than ever before, as if the whole world was suddenly open to her. Sansa opened the car door and sat down inside before passing over her brand-new driver's license to daddy.

"Congratulations, lemoncake." He beamed proudly at the license before handing it back to her and pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I knew you could do it."

"Thank you, daddy." Sansa replaced the license in her purse and decided she wouldn't waste any more time. She would finally be honest with daddy, at least as much as she could. "I promised someone I would go on a date with them after I got my license."

"So soon?" His voice was a little tight as he put the car into drive and started heading for home. Sansa worried that daddy still wasn't ready for her to start growing up. That seemed a normal thing for fathers and daughters to go through.

"Truthfully, I've liked this boy for some time." Sansa tugged at a strand of her hair and tried not to look to guilty. "You saw him before," she reminded him. "He sometimes walks me to the weirwood tree after school. I don't want to put too much pressure on him but I would like it if I could bring him home to meet you sometime."

"The sooner the better," daddy seemed a little anxious but at least he was willing to meet Sandor.

"Thank you, daddy." Sansa breathed a happy sigh of relief. "I know you will like him, he has a very strong sense of honor."

"That's quite a compliment." Daddy pulled into the parking lot of their apartment building and parked the car.

"I mean it sincerely." Sansa quickly took off her seatbelt and grabbed her purse. "I have to go get ready." She pushed open the door but stopped to smile and his nervous expression. "Love you, daddy."

"Love you, honey," he nodded his head as his face relaxed, returning her smile. Sansa practically ran
into the apartment lobby and threw herself into the elevator, grinning all the while. She felt certain that everything would work out, once she and Sandor had her father's full support. The only clue he gave about where they were going today was to 'dress warmly'. It took the customary three hours to get ready but when she was done, she hurried downstairs to find the Skylark waiting for her.

"Hey," he greeted her with averted eyes as she got into the car. Sandor still seemed to feel some shame or guilt about her birthday, even though she already forgave him. Things had been tense between them ever since that day but Sansa refused to let it get to her and chose to look on the bright side.

"Hey, yourself," she pulled the car door closed and he started driving. "So, do I at least get to know where my 'do-over birthday' will take place?" Sandor insisted on having another birthday celebration since he ruined the first one. She compromised by asking him to take her somewhere special after she got her driver's license.

"Nope," he grinned at her and it went a long way to helping her relax. "It's a surprise."

"I hate surprises!" Sansa pouted and crossed her arms, even though it made her happy to have him teasing her again. It seemed all he could do lately was apologize or stare at her like she was terminally ill.

"Too fucking bad," he teased, "I love them." They headed in the direction of the mall and Sansa started making guesses about where they were going. Sandor remained tight-lipped as ever. Eventually, they pulled into the parking lot of an outside strip mall that held an ice skating rink.

"Oh my gods, I love ice skating!" Sansa should have worked that out long before she guessed 'petting zoo'. "I did not even know there was a rink in the city!"

"I remembered you said it was still too hot and it didn't feel like winter," Sandor parked the Skylark. "Stay put," he ordered and got out to jog around the car, opening her door for her. Sansa already completely forgave him for his despicable hateful mean-hearted Ferris wheel dumping but she enjoyed his remorse just a tiny bit.

"You can ice skate?" Sansa tried to picture it but couldn't stop imagining Sandor doing a perfect butterfly spin. She chuckled to herself as she slipped her hand into his and they walked towards the building.

"Never done it in my life," he laughed "but I rollerbladed as a kid." Sandor opened the front door for her and they walked together to the half-wall built around the rink. "I came here before to check the place out first and it killed my original plan for your birthday." He shrugged before leaning against the rail on top of the wall. "They don't have skates in my size." Oh pooh, there went her idealistic imaginings of them skating while holding hands.

"That is so unfair," she grumbled, "your romantic plans were ruined because of big feet." Sansa patted Sandor's shoulder in commiseration. "I've been there," she sighed and leaned on the rail next to him. "More times than I could count, I've seen some cute little shoes but they wouldn't fit my massive feet even with a crowbar."

"Your feet are tiny," he bumped her shoulder with his. Sandor was so large in comparison that everything about her seemed small next to him.

"And that is just another reason why we are perfect." Sansa wrapped her hands around his arm and tilted her head against his shoulder. "I just thought of a Winterfest gift for you." If she bought him skates in his size then they could come back here and skate together.
"Ugh," he groaned, "I hate Winterfest."

"How can you hate the most wonderful holiday of the year?!" She lifted her head to stare incredulously at him.

"Little bird," he raised his brow, "why do you think I hate 'family' holidays?" Sansa had just about enough of Sandor's horrible family!

"This year will be different," she vowed. "Don't think of it as a 'family' holiday..." Sansa gave him her most charming of smiles. "It can be the most romantic day of the year."

"How 'bout," he tucked a hand under her chin, "we make this the most romantic day of the year?" Sandor brushed his lips briefly over hers before pulling back and jerking his chin towards the skate rental counter. "Go, put on some skates, and show me how it's done." Sansa beamed at him before turning around to get some skates from the counter and then sat on a bench to pull them on. He sat next to her and she described the basics on how to ice skate as she laced up. Once the skates were on, he helped her to stand and walk the rink.

"Ah," she smiled as she glided onto the ice, feeling happy but a little homesick. There was a lake on their estate in Winterfell and they used to go skating ever Winterfest morning before opening presents. Sandor leaned against the rail to watch her weave in between the other skaters, most of them couples. Sansa showed off a few basic spins that took her years to get right and then returned to where he stood. "I am having fun but I must have adjusted to the southern climate already." Sansa leaned against the railing and pouted. "I'm cold."

"Can't have that," he rubbed his hands over her arms. "Should I take you somewhere, get you warmed up?" The playful quirk of his brows made Sandor seem just like his old cocky self. Either he was learning to let go of his worry... or getting better at hiding it from her.

"Sounds good to me," she grinned as she pushed away from the rail to skate to the rink exit. Sansa sat down on a nearby bench and Sandor knelt down in front of her to remove her skates.

"Sandor...?"

"Hmm?" He looked up after pulling off the second skate.

"I told daddy about you today," she kept her voice even and tried to look less nervous than she felt. "He wants to meet you, I thought we could study at my apartment for the Spanish final."

"I'll come," he agreed, "if you will learn self-defense and start carrying pepper spray."

"I wish you were being overly cautious," she sighed. "Fine, I will do whatever it takes to assure you I am safe."

"I can't tell you how sorry I am," his head hung forward as he focused on putting her shoes back on.

"Then don't," she stroked her hand over his hair, "that's not what I want to hear anyway..." Sandor looked up, his dark eyes stirring with a torrent of emotions.

"I love you," every time he said it sounded even more resolute then the last. Even though it was painful when he tried to dump her, Sansa knew he did so to protect her. Since then, Sandor finally let go of his inability to express his love for her.

"That sounds better every time you say it." Sansa smiled even as Sandor rolled his eyes and moved to sit next to her. "Everything will be alright, my love." She put her arms around his waist and rested her cheek against his chest. "Let's go get some pasta," she peeked up at him, "and then go home."
"Home?" He raised his brow questioningly.

"I mean the shop," she corrected her slip. "Though I should get home early so daddy will have a good impression of you..." Sansa grinned and released her hold on him to stand up, holding out her hand for him to take. "Let's skip the date and go straight for desert."

"That's my girl," he accepted her hand with a grin and they walked out the ice rink hand-in-hand. Sansa truly believed, with all her heart, as long as they held onto each other everything would work out in the end.

Chapter End Notes

FIFTY! Fifty mother-flipping chapters?!? Whaat?! I'm not really sure when I'm stopping, this could just go on forever! Dun-dun-duuuun!

Next up! Has Arya's plotting and scheming paid off?! Find out in the next chapter!
Win or Lose

ARYA

Operation: Get Some was working even better than Arya ever dreamed. Dad was completely charmed by Sheri and even allowed her to come over a second time last week. The girl was a genius, quick on her feet and impossibly good at reading people. Together they decided to find out if the groundwork they laid would get her out of the house this weekend. Friday morning, over breakfast and coffee, she set things in motion.

"Dad," she set her fork down and folded her hands on the table. "I really need a favor and I will do literally anything."

"I'm listening." Dad folded and set the business section of the newspaper aside, turning his focus on her.

"Sheri and I have almost finished our History project," she informed him. "But we haven't had enough time at school to work on it because we don't have the same lunch period."

"She can come over again next week." Dad gave her a dubious look and crossed his arms. Arya expected some resistance from him and already had her defense prepared.

"I'm sorta nervous about getting it completely done on time but Sheri is practically a mess." Arya paused dramatically, letting her head hang forward and heaving a sad sigh. "She doesn't have a lot of confidence about public speaking because of the facial scars. You don't know dad... most people just look past her like she's invisible. But she's really smart, kind, and actually a lot of fun. Sheri is the first friend I've made since... the grounding incident. To be honest, I had been crazy lonely before I met her."

"She is a very nice girl, I'm glad you made a good friend." Dad pretended like he was standing firm but she could see he was wavering.

"For just one night," she held up one finger and gave her father a pleading look. "Can I please sleep over at her house so we can finish? We could just do our parts separately but the point of school projects are to work together. Besides, I really like her and want to be better friends. Also, she said her parents built an addition that is basically a movie theater."

"I've seen it," he chuckled while shaking his head. "To hear Stan brag about it, you would think it was his child."

"So can I, please...?" Arya clasped her hands together under her chin and opened her eyes as wide as they would go. "Sheri already asked her mom and Mrs. B said for you to call her - if you have any questions or concerns. She is even willing to pick me up after school. You can come straight home and relax all by yourself..."

"Fine," he relented, "just this once I will give you a furlough from your grounding. I expect your undying gratitude"
"Thank you, sir." Arya saluted her father and then jumped up from her seat to give him a tight hug. "I won't forget this!" She gathered up her dirty dishes and started dancing towards the kitchen. "BORN FREE!!" Dad laughed at her awful singing as he resumed reading his paper. "As free as the wind blows!"

"Gods, Arya," Sansa poked her head around the wall to scowl at her. "Quit that awful screeching!"

"As FREE as the GRASS GROWS!" Arya sang even louder, though to her own ears it did sound really terrible. "BORN FREE!!" Once she rinsed her dishes and put them in the dishwasher, she ran to her room. She flopped onto her bed and reached over to unplug her phone from the charger.

'The plan worked', she texted Gendry first and then sent the same message to Sheri.

'I feel like James Bond', Sheri replied first.

'Never doubted you would pull it off', Gendry's text came a few seconds later. It had been an eighth hell to be away from him so much but yesterday she made sure to fill him in on the entire plan. Almost their entire relationship was lived through their phones but at least Arya could read the texts when she got lonely. Tonight she would not waste a single moment sleeping - even if his dumb ass fell asleep, she would stay up all night to watch him.

School seemed to take forever, by the time the last period came around Arya thought she might die of boredom. She watched the seconds tick by like minutes. One second before the bell was scheduled to ring - she sprinted to the classroom door. FREEDOM! At least for one glorious night she and Gendry would have each other again. Then she remembered... Sheri was in the same last-period class so she waited for the girl to catch up and they walked together to the weirwood.

Sheri's mom picked them up, she seemed an odd woman, but at least she was interesting. They pulled up in front of a gorgeous mansion made of dark stone and surrounded by wrought iron gates. Arya tried not to gawk at the place while Sheri led her back to her bedroom.

"Alright," Sheri closed the door and kept her voice down. "Phase one is complete."

"Let me just tell Gendry to meet me at the rendezvous point," she pulled out her cell and followed through. Arya grinned as she replaced the phone in her pocket. "He'll text me when he gets here. I can't thank you enough, Sheri."

"Of course you can," Sheri grinned back. "Help find someone to take me to the Winter Formal."

"Ugh," she groaned, "you really want to go to that hell?"

"I've never been to a dance before," Sheri's smile fell.

"Neither have I," Arya admitted, "I think it would be more fun if you came along." She stuck out her hand to make a deal. "Leave it to me, I'll find you a guy to take you to the dance." Sheri grinned and accepted her handshake before they set the rest of the plan into motion. There was a spare blow-up mattress, which they laid parallel with the TV in the bedroom. Then they used several pillows and a doll to make it seem like someone was lying in the bed facing the television. If anyone looked in, it would seem like both girls were watching a movie.

'Your chariot awaits', Gendry's text finally came and Arya put her phone away to pull Sheri in for a tight hug.

"You're one of the good ones, Sheri," she pulled away and looked the girl in her clear blue eyes. They actually reminded her of Gendry's eyes. "Next time we are going to have a real sleepover and
stay up all night telling ghost stories."

"I think after tonight," Sheri winked, "you will have better stories to tell."

"Bold girl," Arya chuckled, "you had us all fooled with that innocent face."

"Let's get you out of here," Sheri smiled as she took Arya’s hand and they peeked out the door together. "Coast is clear," she whispered, "follow me." Arya followed, for once thinking it was lucky they were both such small girls. They quickly ducked behind a large stand holding a gaudy hideous vase as Mr. Baratheon walked past with his eyes glued to an open folder. Both girls exhaled a quiet breath before creeping to the end of the long hallway. The final room was a small bathroom, which happened to have a door leading outside. "Do you know the rest of the way?"

"Don't worry," Arya smirked at Sheri’s worried expression. "I memorized the pictures and notes you gave me and you'd be amazed how much information you can find out on the internet. I know there's a side gate by the Zen garden. Seriously, who does the decorating?"

"Mom is," Sheri grimaced before laughing, "eclectic."

"At least it's interesting," Arya conceded. "You're a true friend, Sheri."

"Live it up for the rest of us," Sheri grinned and waved goodbye to Arya as she slipped out the back door. She hugged the side of the house until she saw the garden and crossed the rock stepping stones jutting out of the sand-covered ground. Finally, she made it to the gate and saw Gendry’s Lincoln parked exactly where she told him to be. So obedient, that kind of behavior should be richly rewarded. He saw her sprinting towards the car and leaned over to push the passenger door open and she jumped inside before slamming it shut.

"Drive!" Arya pointed forwards and Gendry stepped on the gas to take them straight to Kings Forest. Not bothering to grab any gear, they raced to the clearing. Both were already tearing at each other's clothes when they fell onto the hard ground. Well, he did anyway - she might have possibly tackled him before kicking her pants off. Their joint efforts got just enough clothes off so that she could put the stupid time-wasting condom on. "Gods," she sighed in relief as she sank all the way down onto his hard cock. "I thought - really thought - I might actually die."

"I missed you too, Arry," he groaned, lifting his hips to thrust deeper and filling her completely. His rough hands slid over her hips to find her waist under the sweater she still wore. "I wish we never had to be apart."

"Wouldn't it be awesome," she rolled her hips, drawing a gasp from Gendry. "If we could stay like this forever?" Arya leaned forward to rest her chest on his, pulling up her sweater and his shirt so their skin was touching.

"Might make," his voice hitched as she started sliding against his smooth skin. "Forging a bit difficult." Arya rolled her eyes at his blacksmithing obsession and pushed his shirt higher to nip and kiss his chest and neck.

"We have all night to take it slow," she looked up to see his blue eyes trained on her. "Right now, what I really want is for you to fuck me as hard and fast as possible." Arya gasped when their positions were suddenly reversed and then screamed when he thrust once hard and deep. How did it keep getting better?!" Like that, milady?" Gendry grinned down at her with a smug expression on his handsome face.

"I love it," she growled, "again!" Arya bucked her hips up impatiently and he matched her motion,
plunging hard into her. "More," she begged and commanded at once, "faster - now!" Her hand clung to his flexing shoulders as he obeyed with enthusiasm. In between her screaming, she could hear his voice murmuring beautiful things in her ear. About how much he loved her - needed her - belonged to her. It was enough to send her over the edge before they'd barely begun. It got hard to breathe as her whole body started shaking from the pent-up need to release.

"I'll always want you," he panted, "Arya." That did it.

"FUCK!" She screamed like she was going over a steep dive on a roller coaster - long and loud. A firestorm of pleasure tore through her body and seemed to last forever until Gendry finally slowed his motions. He didn't stop, continuing to push and pull at a languid pace, drawing out every aftershock as she shivered beneath him. When he finally pumped his release into her, Arya had a new appreciation for the pulsing sensation. "Well done," she wheezed her sincere praise as she pushed him off her.

"Well," he chuckled breathlessly before rolling onto his side, "that's out of the way." Gendry propped up on one arm to look down at her, his smile lop-sided and hair sticking up everywhere. "I love you so much."

"Love you," she lifted her lips to meet his. "Love you," she kissed him again, "love you." Then Gendry pushed her back and held the side of her face as he moved his mouth over hers in that soft tender way he liked. Arya sat up, shoving him down on the ground, and stripped her sweater over her head. "Okay that's enough rest, let's do it again!"

**GENDRY**

Probably the best thing about Arya was that she could be kneeling stark naked on the dirty ground and it didn't bother her one bit. She was doing her best to make him naked while he mostly just laughed at her inpatient grumbling.

"Hurry up, stupid." Arya yanked off both of his boots while he struggled to pull his shirt over his head. When he finally succeeded, he was confronted with Arya's open palm. "Gimme the condom."

"Condom?" It was like a bucket of ice water poured over Gendry's head. "You only had one?" She narrowed her eyes at him as her hand fell to her lap. "Because I forgot to grab some..."

"You - didn't even get - one?!" Her eyes were smoldering with the barely contained rage and Gendry gulped hard, fearing for his life. "And we wasted mine on a QUICKIE!?"

"You sure you don't have another...?" Even as he asked, he knew he was only digging his own grave.

"What - the fuck - do you think I'm saying?!" Her upper lip curled into a sneer and her nostrils flared with a sharp exhale.

"Godsdammit," he pressed his first against his forehead and squeezed his eyes shut before turning back to her with a shrug. "We could just-"

"Why would I snack," she punched him in the chest, "when I can feast?!" Arya stood up and started gathering her clothes to pull them on. "We're going to your place and getting the whole fucking box!"

"Arya..." Gendry followed her example and started getting dressed as she ignored him. "Arry, I'm sorry!" She started walking towards the car and he followed after her, keeping a safe distance. "Don't be mad." Arya refused to even look at him, just marched forward with single-minded determination.
They got into the Lincoln and he pulled out of the parking spot to head towards his place.

"Drive - faster - now." She seethed the order and Gendry had just about enough of her bad attitude! It's not like he did it on purpose!

"Then put on your bloody seatbelt!" The words slipped out before you could even stop them and Gendry slowly turned his head to see her furious expression. "Oh gods, Arya, I'm so sorry! Please-" Then a miracle happened, she reached up to grab the seatbelt and pulled it across her body to buckle it in place. "Did you just..."

"Shut up," she gritted through her teeth, "and put your foot down." Gendry figured it was safer to do as he was told and accelerated faster to get them to his apartment in record time. They raced up the stairs in silence and he unlocked the door, opening it to find a most unpleasant scene on the sofa.

"Whoa!" Arya burst out laughing as his mother leapt up off the guy she was straddling on their couch. Thank all the gods in all the heavens they were both dressed. "Oh my gods!!" She continued to laugh at the incredibly awkward situation while Gendry and his mom stared at one another.

"Gendry!" Mom finally spoke. "Uh, I... thought you were camping."

"Wait - this is your son?" The guy on the couch stood up and waved a finger between them. When mom nodded, the guy looked up to the ceiling and started laughing.

"What?" Mom crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at the guy.

"I've been thinkin' this whole time," the guy grinned at her, "your son was a little kid." He rubbed the back of his neck and sighed with obvious relief. "Gods I'm terrible with kids." The man crossed the room to stand in front of Gendry and held out his hand. "Well, I'm Bronn. I've been seeing your mom for a few weeks."

"Right..." Gendry still felt a bit dazed as he accepted Bronn's handshake. "I'm Gendry." He turned around to close the door as Arya continued to giggle behind her hand. "Sorry I guess-" A sudden thought occurred to him and Gendry stepped around Bronn to confront his mother. "Wait a minute, is this revenge?!"

"I - thought - you were camping!" Mom practically squeaked her protest, gesturing wildly. "You're supposed to be camping! If I was going to get 'revenge' it would be a pail-"

"Of water over the door," he finished for her before shaking his head. "Mom, I learned how to disable those ten years ago." Her jaw fell open but it was high time she stopped that old gag: Gendry was actually kinda proud when he thought she stepped up her game. "Then I just take a shower before you get home and let you laugh at me."

"Really," she gaped in disbelief, "for ten years?" Then mom put her hand over her heart and smiled at him "Honey, you still let me laugh at you - that's so sweet." She sucked in a breath through her teeth and looked around the room "Well, anyone hungry?"

"I'm just famished!" Arya stuck her tongue out at Gendry as she walked past to follow his mom into the kitchen.

"Come on," mom waved for them to follow, "Bronn you too - and Gendry honey, put the tea on." There was no arguing with mom once she told him to start the kettle: tea was kinda a big deal to her. This 'Bronn' guy and Arya sat at the table while him and mom got some food together. It was definitely the weirdest situation he'd ever been in but mom looked over and smiled happily. She'd been alone for far too long and Gendry never realized before how hard that was for her.
"So!" Arya was having too much fun torturing mom's new beau. "You're dating Gendry's mom - how's that going?"

"Well enough," the man seemed perfectly relaxed, "I guess." Bronn had no idea Arry was just getting started and Gendry grinned though he should've put a stop to it.

"And she didn't tell you how old her son was?" Arya leaned forward on the table to continue grilling the man. "That seems like an important bit of information.

"We, uh," Bronn coughed, "didn't talk much." Ugh, bloody hells no: he didn't want to hear that!

"I can relate," she chuckled and quirked her brows at the pointed look Gendry was giving her. "So, how did you two crazy kids meet?"

"At a bar," Bronn sat up a bit straighter and cleared his throat. Oh, it just gets better and better: Gendry forced himself to focus on making the bloody tea.

"Classy," she was really enjoying herself. "So, I'm going to ask you a question - and it's a really serious question. Are you ready?"

"Sure, kid." Bonn seemed charmed rather than annoyed by Arry's pestering. "Let me have it."

"What - is Gendry's mom's name?!" She held up her hand like it was holding a microphone.

"Cecylya...?" Bronn sounded a little too uncertain of the answer. Gendry pulled too hard on one tea bag package and ripped it open, spilling tea leaves everywhere.

"Is that correct?!?!" Arya turned towards Gendry and held her fist out to him like he was on a game show.

"Yeah," he finished cleaning the mess and raised his brows at her. "Have you not known my mom's name this whole time?" Gendry was sure he'd mentioned it several times: Arry never paid attention to anything he said.

"I object to this line of questioning!" Arya slammed down her invisible microphone on the table and crossed her arms. "What is this, the Spanish Inquisition?" Gendry laughed at her scowling expression. "Fine," she pursed her lips, "what's my mother's name, Mr. Smarty-

"Catelyn Tully Stark," he interrupted, "your father is Ned, short for Eddard. Your siblings are Robb, Sansa, Bran, and Rickon." Gendry set four teacups and the kettle on the table with a grin. "And I'm pretty sure you have a cousin named Robin or Robert."

"Fine," she sneered as she poured herself a cup, "you win."

"I won," Gendry gasped and covered his mouth, acting like he just won a million bucks. "I never won before!" He grabbed mom into a hug while she rolled her eyes and pushed him away. "I won!"

"Don't get used to it!" Arya's pout turned into a smile as mom laid out two trays of muffins and sandwiches. Mom always loved to play hostess when she could: she says the greatest joy in life is feeding those you love. "Guess what prize you won, Gendry?" She popped a chunk of muffin in her mouth and spoke with her mouth full. "I'm thinking camping is a stupid idea. Let's stay up all night watching classic horror movies - right here."

"That sounds like fun," mom sat down next to Bronn and Gendry sat between her and Arya. "Doesn't it, Bronn?"
"Sounds great..." Bronn raised his cup to Arya, acknowledging her manipulation skills. That guy was impossibly relaxed about everything: guess there were worse traits to have.

"Join us, Ms. Waters," Arya grinned like a Cheshire cat, "the more the merrier." Gendry could practically see horns growing from her forehead.

"That's so formal," mom waved a hand, "just call me Cece."

"Cece, we should spend more time together." There on Arry's face was the most evil smile that a pretty girl ever did make, she might be small, but her ability for revenge was mighty. Gendry smirked at her, knowing she'd never hold out all night, but he saw challenge flashing in her eyes. If she thought herself capable of breaking his ironclad willpower then she could go right ahead and try. He'd give her three hours tops before she started begging and then he would win twice in one day. No way he was gonna lose out on a prize like that!

It turned out Bronn was an alright guy, not that anyone was good enough for mom: at least he made her laugh. They ate and drank their fill before retiring to the living room while Gendry put in mom's favorite, 'The Ape Man'. She loved anything starring Louise Currie because people remarked on their similar appearance frequently. Arya cuddled up by his side as the movie played, tracing circles over his chest with her fingertips. He retaliated by stroking his fingers through her hair and then running them down her neck. The movie wasn't even through the opening credits when she gave up.

"Alright!" Arya jumped off the couch and stormed towards the door. "You win - let's go!"

"Bye mom," Gary tossed a wave over his shoulder, "we're going camping."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Arya turned around and glared daggers at him. "Again!" Then he remembered why they came back in the first place. Gendry hurried to his room to stuff his pockets full of condoms to be on the extra-safe side. He avoided eye contact with mom or her new guy as he walked to the door.

"Kids..." Mom looked between him and Arya with a worried frown. "Be safe."

"Copy you loud and clear, Cece." Arya saluted mom with a grin then snapped a pair of finger-guns at them. "You two have fun now." Gendry rolled his eyes at her inappropriate teasing and yanked her out the door. "That," she cackled, "was the funniest thing that ever happened - ever!"

"Did you go through all that work to sneak out," he scoffed, "just to be mean to me?" Arya's smug expression fell as Gendry continued to give her a hard disappointed stare.

"I didn't..." Her eyes opened wide as she shook her head. "I'm sorry."

"I'm kidding!" Gendry ruffled her hair as he laughed and she swatted his hand away. "You should of seen your face!" He smirked at her pouting and he grabbed her shoulders. "Aw, poor little Arry loves me so much. Were you really, real-ly sorry?"

"You gonna pay for that," she pushed past him to start down the stairs and he followed her, still laughing.

"We'll see who pays in the end," he called as she marched around the car and yanked the door open with terrifying strength.

"Oh, it's on - you're gonna be begging for mercy!" Arya's face was set with determination as he got into the driver's side. She raised one brow in challenge but he only smiled at her adorableness. "To the forge - step on it!"
"As milady commands!" Gendry knew trying to make his boat-like car go any faster was just burning gas. But she threw her head back and howled like a wolf as they peeled out of the parking lot. She was wild and it made him crazier about her. He had to wonder: would he ever stop falling even harder for Arya?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to Carolinee for helping me lean in a more Bronn-ward direction. He was the first and only contender in my mind but I appreciated the support. I think Gendry handled it all rather well - he's a good kid. <3
First Meetings, Again

ARYA

Choices were limited and time was running out to find Sheri a date to the Winter Formal. Arya was determined and a little desperate as she walked into the empty room. Pod and Hot Pie were the only unattached boys in the group and... Well, Hot Pie was certainly a nice kid but he was bound to say something insensitive about Sheri's face.

"Hey, buddy!" Arya walked across the empty room and turned an empty chair around to sit down next to Pod.

"What's up?" He greeted her with a friendly smile.

"So," she leaned against the table with a hopefully persuasive expression. "I noticed you didn't bring a girl to Sam's wedding."

"Yeah?" He looked somewhat dubious of her line of questioning.

"Well, you never have a girl around..." Arya was floundering - she didn't know anything about matchmaking! "Are you like really picky about looks or something?"

"Is this going somewhere?" Pod leaned back and crossed his arms.

"I have this friend who is really nice and sweet and smart... she's interesting." Arya braced her elbows on the table and tucked her clasped hands under her chin. "All she wants is to go to the Winter Formal and you need a date."

"I don't think I'll go."

"Nonsense," she interrupted his protest with her well-rehearsed arguments. "This is your last year, you should go! I'm not asking you to marry the girl - go have some fun. Show a nice girl a good time, the practice couldn't hurt."

"Okay," he shrugged.

"Really?" Arya blinked at Pod in surprise - that was easy. "Oh, well I'm awesome then. Okay, just..." She sighed and avoided Pod's eyes as she admitted the catch. "She has some scars on one side of her face - but they look totally badass! She looks half-Dragonborn or something. Is that a deal breaker?"

"She still 'nice and sweet and smart'?" Pod smiled at her, confirming Arya's suspicion that he really was a great guy.

"Yep," she grinned at him.

"Then I'm in," Pod agreed a lot faster than she had even dared hope. Who's the most badass matchmaker in all of Kings High?!
"Cool," she got up from her seat, "because I told her to meet me here today." Arya pushed past Gendry as he was walking into the room.

"Hello, milady-"

"Move it, stupid," she ignored him.

"Are you still mad?" Gendry followed her out into the hallway as she was waiting for Sheri. "Arry!"

"Sheri!" Arya waved the girl over and then pointed at Gendry. "You briefly met before - this is my ridiculous hot boyfriend, Gendry."

"How do you do?" Sheri bowed her head a little, letting her hair fall over her face.

"Alright," Gendry replied glumly, "I guess."

"This is Sheri - you know, the girl who helped us." Arya elbowed Gendry in his ribs.

"It is an honor to meet you," Gendry grinned and opened the door for Sheri. "What brings you to our humble empty room?"

"Arya said you all play a really fun game and invited me to sit in." Sheri glanced around, observing everything as she walked through the door towards the empty room.

"Recruiting members?" Gendry rubbed a hand over Arya's hair. "My little Arry is growing up."

"Can it!" She knocked his hand away and glared at him. "I still haven't forgiven you."

"It was one little slip!" He gave her piteous look that suddenly turned annoyed. "Besides, it's dangerous not to wear your seatbelt."

"I choose," she poked a finger into her chest. "When and where and how to - or not to - wear whatever safety harnesses are available to me." Arya pointed at Gendry. "Not you."

"Yes, milady," He hung his head with a heavy sigh. "I was wrong, you were right: you're always right." The real reason she was ignoring him wasn't because she was still angry about the seatbelt incident. It would almost be easier if they never saw or touched each other - it only made her miss him more once they were apart. Feeling guilty for her piss-poor attitude, Arya slipped her hand into his and turned her eyes up at him.

"Let's skip the game today," she tugged on his hand with a smile. Gendry's expression was caught between confused and tempted. He rode her shifting moods with hardly any trouble at all - just one of his numerous good qualities.

"You brought your friend," he nodded at Sheri, who stood off to the side trying to look invisible. "And we can't just abandon the group."

"But I miss you so much," she whined.

"You didn't get enough?" He grinned and quirked his brows at her, immediately setting her skin on fire with the need to be close to him.

"Never..." Arya was quickly losing a battle of wills with herself. If she asked just right, Gendry would do practically anything for her. "Ugh - life is so harsh," she forced herself to turn away from him and retreated into the empty room. "Sheri, come meet the gang. That's Torgo, Hot Pie, my cousin Jon, and this..." She pointed to everyone in the group as she named them without much
enthusiasm then she led Sheri over to stand by Pod. "This is Rick Payne, even his name sounds cool. He's hands-down the coolest guy in the group."

"Hey!" Gendry protested.

"I reiterate - the coolest guy." Arya waved a hand at Sheri she introduced her. "Rick, this is Sheri - the most badass girl in the whole school."

"Arya..." Sheri blushed and fidgeted next to her.

"Oh, besides myself of course." Arya put her hand to her chest before jerking a thumb at her shy friend. "She may look all sweet and innocent, but Sheri is a real firecracker."

"Nice to meet you, Sheri." Pod stood up and extended his hand, wearing a rather charming smile.

"Likewise, Rick." Sheri accepted his handshake with a full blush blooming in her good cheek.

"My friends call me Pod," he sat back down and pulled out an empty chair next to him. "You could sit next to me. I bet I can explain this game better than Arry."

"He totally can - have fun!" Arya left the two kids to their own devices and moved to sit in her seat next to Gendry.

"What are you up to?" He leaned close to whisper in her ear and a shiver ran up her spine - Arya barely restrained herself from attacking him.

"I always thought matchmaking was stupid," she looked up to see Sheri and Pod getting along with each other. "But, what the heck, everyone should have what we have."

"Nobody has what we have." Gendry pressed a soft kiss to her cheek and just that chaste peck made her ravenous for much more. She hoped to eventually get used to him and not feel quite so insatiably greedy for his touch - it seemed the opposite was true. The more she had of Gendry, the more she wanted.

"Godsdamn, I miss you." Arya squeezed his knee under the table and his fingers slipped under the hem of her shirt to tickle the small of her back. Just when she was about to command him to take her somewhere, Dany and Drogo walked into the room. "Ah, our fearless leader and his ladylove finally arrive!" They walked silently to their seats, clearly a walk of shame, the two looked like they been through a windstorm. "What have they been up to - I wonder."

"Oh," Dany looked to Sheri in surprise, "we seem to have a new addition."

"Arya invited me to watch the game," Sheri smiled nervously.

"You are welcome to join in," Dany invited but Sheri shook her head with a panicked expression. "Alright, then let's get started. You are outside the dwelling of The Keeper..."

"I don't understand why we have to see this 'keeper' anyway!" Arry complained loudly as she looked at the deceptively quaint round door covering a cave's entrance.

"Prophecy says-"

"Bored!" Arry cut the blabbermouth off and marched towards the door. "Let's just go kill things already."

"I cannot enter," The Protector sat down on a rock outside the cave.
"Fine with me," Arry sneered at The Protector - sick of his pacifism.

"Do you have to antagonize the god-man?" Gendry chided her like she was a child, stepping through the doorway first.

"He started it," she sulked as the cave opened wider to a small chamber. Everyone froze in shock at the scene that lay before them. It was pure carnage - a group of four adventurers of various races lay in drying pools of their blood. Their mangled bodies were completely stripped and there was no sign of what killed them. Clearly, they lost some battle and were stripped of their valuables. "Old Gods save us..." Arry rounded on Grey Worm - hoping he had some kind of explanation.

"The Keeper," Grey Worm approached one body and hovered his hand over it before pulling away quickly like he was burned. "Is not to be trifled with."

"And here I thought this would be an easy mission," Pod sauntered past the pile of bodies to continue through the cave.

"What did this?" Snow moved to stand next to Grey Worm and Hot Pie stuck close to the Rogue with a terrified expression. Arry kept her new knife tightly clasped in her hands as her eyes darted around to the shadows surrounding them. Drogo suddenly lit a torch, filling the cave with light.

"There is a powerful darkness here," Grey Worm murmured before shaking his head and moving to follow Pod. They continued through the cave in silence before they came to a fork, both paths covered with round doors. One door was red wood with a gold inlaid design and the other was simple, built from rough grey wood. "We must choose carefully-"

"Boring!" Arry pushed through the rough door and found herself standing in front of a rope bridge crossing a great precipice. A quick look to her left revealed the other door had no bridge, only a steep drop to the bottom. "Whew - that was easy." Even the light from Drogo's torch could not reach the bottom of the endless blackness. She forged ahead, leading the group across the sturdy bridge to another round door, larger than the previous ones. It suddenly swung open and they were greeted by a Dwarf wearing a polite smile.

"Welcome, patrons!" The courteous Dwarf waved them inside and closed the door after them. Inside was a... What the fuck?! It was a shop! Shelves covered the walls, all filled with various items of every kind. "What can I interest you in?"

"The Protector sent us," Gendry stood up straight and moved to the front of the group. "He told us you would give us what we needed."

"Ah," the shopkeeper smiled wider, "The Keeper 'gives' nothing, I'm a man of commerce." He walked over to one shelf and picked up a golden hammer. "This, for example, can never be damaged - no matter how hard it is pounded." Gendry's mouth fell open as he stared at the hammer.

"Is that..." He shook his head to clear his daze. "It can't be!" Snow approached and glared at the shopkeeper but the Dwarf only ignored him.

"I only deal in genuine artifacts, my friend." The Keeper held out the hammer for Gendry to see but Arry yanked the besotted Blacksmith by the hand.

"A tough customer," the shopkeeper sighed as he replaced the hammer. "I see you found something interesting." They all looked over to see Hot Pie reaching up to a ladle high up on a shelf. "That ladle..."
will keep any stew steaming hot until the last bowlful." Then the Dwarf looked to Pod. "Or can I interest you in a flask that never empties - always full to the brim with the finest elven ale?"

"We cannot buy any of these items," Grey Worm gritted through his teeth, seeming to be in pain. "They are all cursed."

"That part of the price?" Arry sneered at the smiling shopkeeper who moved past her to stand in front of Grey Worm with something in his hands.

"This..." The Dwarf held up a thin stick and Grey Worm's eyes widened in recognition. "You may like this, a rune-inscribed spruce wand with a core made of kelpie bone."

"The kelpies are extinct," Grey Worm reached for the wand but the shopkeeper snatched it away. "That's why it's so expensive," he held out his hand, "but I can give you a bargain..."

"No!" Grey Worm tore his eyes from the wand. "I won't buy anything! None of us will! Give us what we came for." That's when Arry saw it, glinting on the counter... She crept towards the shiny object and felt her fingers twitching to take it even though she didn't know what 'it' was.

"ENOUGH!" Drogo moved forward to tower over the Dwarf, who showed not a hint of fear. "No more games!"

"Half-Orc, Half-Human..." The Keeper grinned up at Drogo. "You don't belong in either world, which is why you have this pitiful group of outcasts following you. Did you tell them who you really are?" Drogo growled in response but Arry was still entranced by the tiny marble that seemed to shine ever brighter. "I have what you want, Orc Prince, an item that will free your beloved from The Devourer... The price is just right."

"Give us what we seek," Grey Worm panted in a furious voice, drawing everyone's attention. When did he get behind the counter?! "Or so help me..." He held up an hourglass and The Keeper gasped and reached for the unadorned item. "I will give my life to break this cursing sandglass."

"You are more powerful than I assumed," The Keeper moved slowly toward Grey Worm and Arry couldn't help it! She filched the pretty sparkly thing and slipped it in her pouch while no one looked. "Rash action is not needed... I will give you what you seek." The Dwarf opened a small box and pulled out a shriveled severed hand of either a Human child or Halfling. Arry gulped at that thought and put her hands behind her back. Grey Worm accepted the hand without touching it, wrapping it in a cloth with reverence. "Now - get out!"

The whole group moved to amscray, leaving the creepy shop without looking back - they almost made it out... A chittering sound announced their arrival - a swarm of large black beetles. They rose like a wave and covered the walls of the cave to surround them. Snow immediately reached out to grab Arry but she stumbled backward and fell over.

"Fucking gross!" Arry screamed as countless beetles fell onto her hair and clothing, biting her all over. Weakness overwhelmed her as she tried to swipe them off. A horrible smell choked her as she felt a hand pulling her up and shoving her back into the center of the group. It seemed like the beetles only wanted her and ignored the others. "Get them off me!" The bugs' sharp legs pricked her skin as they burrowed under her clothes to bite all over her body. She screamed and thrashed but they did not relent, only attacked with more ferocity.

Drogo flew into a rage, roaring a battle cry as he smashed his fists against the cave, causing a cave-in that crushed half the swarm. Hot Pie, Snow, and Gendry blocked Arry from the beetles' assault as
they stomped on the bugs. Pod grabbed Drogo's fallen torch, took a mouthful from his gourd, a blew onto the torch. A stream of flame burst forth and scorched the ground. Just as darkness was about to consume her... She found herself in the bright outdoors, cradled in the arms of The Protector. The rest of the group scrambled out of the door and slammed it shut.

"What," Grey Worm inhaled a ragged breath and as he fell to his knees in front of Arry, "did you take?!"

"I didn't..." Arry shivered in pain from the bites all over her body. "I couldn't help it." Grey Worm turned away from her in disgust as she tried to apologize. She pulled the marble out of her pouch and held it out to him - she didn't want it anymore. "Maybe it can help us." Grey Worm's eyes widened as he reached out for the orb.

"He wasn't bluffing," he suddenly smiled and turned to Drogo. "This is it! This is the way we can free Khaleesi from The Devourer!" Grey Worm turned back to Arry with a remorseful expression. "Even when you mess up, it all seems to work out."

"You saved me," she murmured quietly, "didn't you?" Grey Worm could only use his Dimension Swap power once a day and Arry knew it sapped all his strength.

"As you would have done for me," he smiled. "Do you know what this is?" Arry shook her head as Grey Worm stared down at the marble like it was a great treasure. "It is a soul-keeper, if swallowed by one possessed it will trap the demon inside."

"So," she gave him a weak smile, "I did good?" Grey Worm sighed and shook his head.

"I don't think the rules of 'good' and 'bad' apply to you, Arry Wolfborn." Grey Worm collapsed on the ground, releasing something between a groan and a laugh. "You are lucky."

"That's better than unlucky," she lay beside him as the rest of the group caught their breath. "What is that hand?" Arry really would rather not know but the curiosity was driving her mad! Grey Worm remained silent for a time before finally replying.

"A last resort," he answered gravely. The bell rung and everyone hurried to gather their belongings and started clearing out of the room. Arry walked over to talk to Sheri who was bidding farewell to Pod with a beaming smile.

"That was so thrilling!" Sheri whispered excitedly as she stood up. "And Rick asked me to the dance!" She waggled her head from side to side. "Well, 'as friends' but still... yay!"

"You go, girl." Arya threw an arm around Sheri's shoulders as they headed out of the room together. "He doesn't stand a chance."

"We should get ready for the dance together," Sheri beamed happily, eyes glazed over and dreamy.

"Ugh, Sansa would love that." Arya groaned but then saw the pleading expression on Sheri's face and relented. "Fine - I give! Bye, Sheri!"

"See you, Arya!" She hurried down the hall to her class.

"She's a nice girl." Gendry led Arya back into the empty room, which was actually 'empty' except for them.

"I really like her," she kicked the door closed behind her and wrapped her arms around Gendry's waist. "I think she might be a good influence on me."
"Can't have that: I like you troublesome." Gendry kissed Arya soft and gentle - she let him because he was the only one who had any self-control. If she tried to take over, he would remind her of how careful they had to be - bla-bla-bla. She whimpered a protest when he pulled away, not even close to satisfied.

"Will it really make you happy to go to a stupid dance?" Arya slipped her hand under his shirt to trace grooves between his stomach muscles. "We could have a lot more fun at the forge."

"I actually want," he chuckled as he pulled her hand from under his shirt. "To do normal teenaged things sometimes."

"I think you don't want me as much as I want you." Arya hated having to admit her insecurities but it was even harder to keep them locked inside.

"Sometimes I worry you don't like me as much as I like you." How could he think that! Arya was about to protest when he kissed her again, cutting her off before she could start. "You're my favorite person in the whole world..." He rested his forehead against hers and looked down at her. "Forgive me for wanting to spend time with my lady."

"I have to go..." She reluctantly pulled away, knowing she couldn't take much more of his kisses or adoring gazes.

"If I wanted you any more," he tugged her close again and cupped the side of her face. "I'd go crazy."

"That's where I am," she groaned and fist his shirt in her hands to pull him close. Their breaths mingled as his lips hovered over hers before he lifted his head to huff a breath at the ceiling.

"We can't mess up now," he pulled away reluctantly. "We've made it this far and there's only one month left before you're ungrounded."

"I know," she resolved to stay strong. "I love you and I miss you more than I can say." Arya grabbed his hand and they walked together to the hallway.

"I love you too," he lifted her hand to kiss it as the second bell rung. Arya turned towards her class but Gendry stopped her. "We'll take a spin around the dance floor a few times: then we'll do whatever you want."

"Then I'll see you at the dance," she grimaced. "I'll be the one trying not to die from wearing heels."

"I'll be the one hopelessly in love with you." Gendry pulled her close for one more kiss and seemed to be having just as hard a time letting go as she was.

"I gotta go," she whispered against his lips, saying it more to herself than to him. He released her and Arya didn't look back, just turned around to sprint all the way to class. Only one more month - she chanted repeatedly in her head.

SANSA

The doorbell rang and she leapt up off the couch to beat daddy to the door. Sansa swung it open as fast as she could to see Sandor... wearing his best shirt and looking like a lost puppy. She reached out to take his hand and pulled him into the apartment, perfectly aware daddy was watching their every move.

"Daddy," Sansa let go of his hand to wave at Sandor as if presenting him. "This is Sandor."
"Mr. Stark," Sandor held out his hand to her father.

"Sandor...?" Daddy gave Sandor a questioning look as he accepted the handshake.

"Clegane," he answered in a slightly rougher voice. The tension in the room could be cut with a knife!

"Clegane?" Daddy clearly recognized and had a distaste for the surname. Sansa's stomach lurched with nervousness as their handshake fell apart.

"It's not a common name," Sandor stood up taller and lifted his chin.

"I see," daddy answered vaguely and an uncomfortable quiet settled between them.

"Why don't we all sit at the table?" Sansa clapped her hands together once and forced to smile.
"Should I make some tea or coffee... water?"

"I'll take a cup of whatever you're having, little bird." Sandor nodded at her, his face tight with clear discomfort. Dear gods, she prayed, give him the strength and patience to not curse or be rude!

"Nothing for me, lemoncake." Daddy gave her a quick smile and she hoped that was a good sign. "I have to be up early." She led them both to the table where they sat down together on opposite sides. "So, Sandor, tell me about yourself."

"Not much to tell," Sandor's voice was stiff but at least he was being polite. "I'm a senior at Kings and I play on the basketball team." Sansa pretended not to listen to their conversation as she brewed a pot of coffee.

"Robert Baratheon says you are quite talented." Daddy's mention of Mr. Baratheon increased Sansa's nervousness. When did they talk about Sandor?! "He thinks you have what it takes to go pro."

"It's a dream." Sandor was leaning back in his chair, arms crossed and looking ready to bolt at any minute. "I have to play college ball first." Sansa set his cup of coffee down and hoped the warm drink would help him feel more comfortable.

"Have you decided on a university yet?" Daddy leaned forward to set his clasped hands on the table, scrutinizing Sandor with his dark gray eyes.

"Daddy!" Sansa recovered from her outburst with a nervous giggle and gave daddy a pointed look. "That's a bit much."

"It's fine," Sandor waved a hand like he didn't care. "No, I haven't decided - lot of offers though." Daddy opened his mouth to continue grilling Sandor but Arya popped in to interrupt.

"Giant dude!" She sat down next to Sandor. "I thought I heard your gravelly voice. How's it going, buddy?"

"You know how it goes, wolfgirl." Sandor visibly relaxed with Arya taking the attention on to herself. Sansa could always count on her little sister to steal the spotlight.

"Oh thank gods," Arya rolled her eyes, "that's so much better than 'short stuff'."

"I'll still call you short stuff when I feel like it, tiny girl." Sandor and Arya grinned at each other. Sansa peeked at daddy who was observing the duo with an amused and curious expression.

"Arya and Sandor get along so well," Sansa told daddy. "I almost think they like each other more
"You're mistaking the mutual respect of mortal enemies for affection." Arya crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at Sandor. "We actually hate each other."

"Someday," Sandor sneered down at Arya. "I'm going to wipe that little smirk off your face."

"After the ground runs red with your blood," Arya threatened and Sandor snorted a laugh in response. "Well, I'm bored of you already - catch you later, Sandor." Then she got up from the table and waved goodbye before winking at Sansa.

"Later, kid." Sandor appeared much more relaxed as he chuckled at Arya's retreating before turning back to Sansa. "Can you believe she wants to start weightlifting? Tiny thing would snap like a twig."

"Well," Daddy interrupted before Sansa could respond. "I have never met two sisters less alike than my own daughters. If they both like you... That makes you alright in my book."

"That's good to hear," Sandor exhaled a relieved breath.

"I'll leave you kids to study." Daddy stood up to leave them alone, heading back towards his office.

"That went well," she took his hand between both of hers. "I can tell he really likes you."

"There is definitely something wrong with you Starks." Sandor smirked at her, clearly happier at daddy's acceptance that he was willing to let on. Sansa smiled knowingly and got up to get her Spanish book so they could start studying. They studied for a few hours, mostly just flirting in Spanish because neither of them really needed to study. Eventually Sandor had to leave to help his uncle at the shop and she peeked around before giving him a quick kiss goodbye. She skipped happily back to daddy's office and burst in without knocking.

"So, daddy!" She beamed excitedly as she sat down and clasped her hands under her chin. "Tell me what you really think!"

"He seems a fine young man," Daddy gave her a warm smile. "A little relaxed about his future... but that is the curse of being young." He paused for a moment and Sansa was sitting on the edge of her seat, waiting for the final verdict. "I approve."

"Thank you, daddy!" She got up to move around the desk and threw her arms around his shoulders to give him a tight hug. "I knew you would like him!" Sansa's face felt like it might split as she retook her seat. "I want to bring him over more often from now on, when you are home of course."

"That is just fine with me," he seemed to relax even more.

"You are right about Sandor being a little 'lost'," she admitted, "when it comes to making decisions about his future. I hope after you two know each other better you could offer some advice. Not everyone has such a wonderful father to go to when they need guidance."

"Flattery will get you everything," he was onto her, still smiling indulgently. "What do you want, lemoncake?"

"You saw how well Arya and Sandor get along," she smiled sheepishly. "She's been cooped up in this house for so long and still she hasn't... Well, you know how she gets cabin fever." Sansa frowned, truly bothered by her little sister's forlorn longing for her goofy boyfriend. "We've grown closer since the move and it would really mean a lot to me if she came to the dance." She twirled her hair as she added the clincher. "I would feel more comfortable with her around as a sort of... talkative than either like me."
"Say no more," daddy held up a hand, "you must promise to take full responsibility."

"I promise," she put her hand over her heart. Sansa knew it was the right thing to do, helping her sister to see her boyfriend. Sandor was right, all children sneak a bit behind their parent's back and she thought Gendry was a good influence. He used it sparingly but clearly had the ability to redirect Arya's mischievous behavior.

"Then she is yours for the night," daddy officially agreed. "Can you ask Arya to come in here?" Sansa obeyed her father's request and both girls sat expectantly in front of his desk. "Well, I have good news," he beamed with happiness. "We are all going home for Winterfest!" Sansa stared in shock before turning to see the same expression on Arya's face. "I expected a better reaction."

"I'm just... surprised." Sansa had big plans with Sandor for Winterfest, but she did miss her family.

"Robert got it in his head," daddy rolled his eyes. Why did he want to do business with a man he did not seem to respect? Nostalgia can be a dangerous thing. "That both families should spend the holidays together and..." He sighed, still smiling but looking overly tired. "Frankly I miss your mother and the boys more than I can stand."

"Of course we're happy to go!" Sansa smiled as wide as she could and looked over to Arya's toothy grimace. " Aren't we?"

"Definitely!" Arya looked scary when she faked a smile. "I'm just thrilled! So... the whole Baratheon family is coming?"

"That's right," his answer confirmed Sansa's worst fear. She prayed to wake up from this nightmare but nothing happened.

"Great," Arya tried to force some enthusiasm with a pump of her fist. "Can't wait!" They both got up and immediately shuffled quickly to their room and closed the door behind them. "Fuck me," she hissed through her teeth before collapsing face down on her bed.

"I agree wholeheartedly!" Sansa threw herself onto her bed... She would be spending Winterfest with Joffrey Baratheon. Gods save her!

Chapter End Notes

Usually, I write up my chapter, draft publish it, then do my collages and proofing on my ipad while I walk on my treadmill (it's MacGyver'd out with a breakfast tray and a large ribbon - 'cause I'm awesome like that). Friggin Google Maps App refreshed my stupid page (signing me out) and made me lose all my proofing! Confession: my heart just wasn't in it the second time. Why didn't I save?! So annoying!

JOFF BOMB - DROPPED! Did ya'll forget about that wormy-lipped shit-stain? Oh, he was just biding his time... So, what do you think his Winterfest revenge is going to be? Oh right! I think... I might be wrong but I *think* that the Winter Formal is happening in the next chapter. Is that something you might be interested in? It's cool if you don't think it's a big deal. I might just skip over the whole thing, nobody would even notice. :P
The Winter Formal is Coming.
ARYA

They were all three stuffed into the hall bathroom as she squirmed on the stool Sansa had set in front of the mirror. Her sister and Sheri were either trying to make her pretty or hells-bent on torturing her to death. They forced her into a dress and heels then fuss ed over curling the ends of her short hair before the real pain began... makeup.

"This is ridiculous," Arya gritted through her teeth. She battled with the urge to roll her eyes - for fear that it would earn her an eyeful of liquid eyeliner.

"Arya," Sansa moved her face even more impossibly close, "hold still."

"I've never held so still in my life!" The eyeliner felt cold on Arya's lower lid and she sighed in relief when her sister replaced the cap, only to pick up another container. "That's enough - any more sparkly crap on my face and Gendry won't recognize me."

"You look so pretty," Sheri beamed at Arya's reflection. She and Sansa were already finished getting ready - saving her for last.

"That's because I don't look like myself," she grimaced at her distorted mirror self. Everything was so... glittery. Ugh, when Sansa gets her makeover on - and exacts her price - she goes all the way.

"You are pretty," Sansa smiled, a vision of breathtaking beauty. "I think you are very pretty." She pulled out the sticky shimmering lip-gloss and swiped on another layer across Arya's bottom lip.

"Since when," Arya snorted, "you always called me ugly and 'horseface'." Sheri cleared her throat uncomfortably.

"I'll just go keep your dad company," she quickly left the two sisters alone.

"I never meant it," Sansa's eyes opened wide in surprise - still ridiculously attractive. "We have both have said terrible things to each other..." Her pink lips pouted as she secured the side of Arya's hair with a barrette. "Do you truly think I'm stupid?"

"Not really," Arya swatted Sansa away and jumped up from the stool, "compared to most people anyway."

"I never," Sansa grabbed her wrist and looked Arya in the eye, "thought you were ugly."

"We're wasting time," she broke free of her sister's loose grasp, "let's just go already." Arya watched a tight smile flit over Sansa's disappointed expression. "Wait," she waved a hand at herself, "thanks for this and for helping me get out... I wouldn't want anyone else for my sister." Sansa smiled wide, looking even more stunning and Arya shook her head in awe. "I bet your giant boyfriend passes out when he sees you."

"I certainly hope not," Sansa looked away and blushed - revealing everything with one look.
"Oh shit!" Arya's jaw came unhinged. "Oh-my-gods, you're gonna do it tonight - that's so cliché!"

"Arya," Sansa hissed and blushed even harder, "shut up!"

"Want some advice?" Arya was feeling generous or else she would have mocked Sansa mercilessly.

"Oh gods kill me now,"Sansa closed her eyes and hung her head.

"Don't rush it," she counseled seriously.

"Oh," Sansa's eyes popped open, "that is actually good advice, thank you." She grabbed Arya's hand and they walked out to the living room where dad ambushed them with his camera.

"Just one picture," he snapped at least a dozen before Arya marched towards the door. "Wait, should I pick you girls up tomorrow morning?"

"My mother has already agreed to drive them, Mr. Stark." Sheri was brilliant with their father, never even hesitated for a second. They all hurried out the door and through the hall to ride the elevator downstairs.

"Oh boy," Sansa murmured as she stopped before the glass door entrance. Parked outside was Sandor's gorgeous Skylark waiting for them. "Go ahead... I need a minute." Arya shrugged and pushed through the door and Sheri giggled excitedly on her heels.

"Yo!" Arya threw a hand up when Sandor stepped out of his car to meet them. His eyes darted to the glass doors, clearly looking for Sansa. "Giant dude - what up?! This is my besty, Sheri." When his eyes landed on Sheri, they opened in surprise. They both kind of just stared at each other for an awkward moment. "Hey," she waved a hand between them, "you two okay?"

"It's nice to meet you," Sheri whispered.

"Sure," he turned away to open the car door and moved the front seat forward, "climb on in." Sheri got in first but Arya turned back when Sandor looked past her and gasped. "Wow..." Sansa finally made her grand appearance, gliding across the cement with a serene smile on her face. "You look..." He waved a hand at Sansa with a dumbstruck expression on his mangled face.

"Thank you," Sansa had that starry look in her eyes, "you look amazing."

"Let's move it, people!" Arya interrupted their gooey goggling or else they would stand there forever. "We've got a dance to tear up!" She climbed into the backseat with Sheri before Sandor pushed back the seat and held Sansa's hand to help her get in. Oh gods - could they get any more nauseating? When they arrived at the school, Sandor dropped them off in front of the weirwood tree where Gendry was waiting.

"Ladies," he opened the door to let them out, "you all look lovely." As they walked to the sidewalk, his eyes raked over her new look with a pleased expression. "Arya..."

"Save the mushy stuff," she cut him off, "or I'm dragging you behind that tree. Sansa wouldn't appreciate her hard work being messed up."

"Milady," he held out his arm, "may I escort you to the dance."

"If you must," she groaned and wrapped her fingers around Gendry's arm. Sheri and Sansa waited together for their dates to collect them as Arya and Gendry walked towards the gym. The dance's theme was 'winter love' - whatever that means - there were glittery snowflakes everywhere. "This is
just as bad as I always dreamed it would be."

"Come on, it's..." Gendry waved a hand around the gym and started laughing. "Alright, this is really stupid." He shrugged at her. "Wanna dance?"

"Let's show them how it's done," she grabbed his hand and led him to a free corner of the dance floor. It stood to reason that since they were so good horizontal, they would rock it out vertically as well. Arya was not disappointed - they danced like no one was watching, though practically everyone was. Gendry actually pulled her into a spin to lift her up while onlookers clapped. Then a slow song started and things got awkward. "Let's take a break..."

"Not on your life," he tugged her close with a grin. "I like taking it slow." Oh, she recognized that look in his eyes - they weren't going to last at this dance much longer. His hands curled around her waist to pull her body against his as she held onto his shoulders. Even wearing heels, Arya could not reach his shoulder to rest her head against it to hide her face from him. She hoped the dimness hid her - gods help her, she was blushing. Their feet moved them in a slow circle, as she stared at his loose necktie. "Are you having fun?" He tilted his head down to rest his forehead against hers. "I'll deny it if you tell anyone but..." Arya turned her eyes up to meet his. "I am." Gendry lifted his head, and she took the opportunity to glance around the gym. Sandor and Sansa stood out, his insane height and her impossible beauty. Off to one corner Pod and Sheri were dancing a proper waltz like it weren't no big deal. She turned back to see his bright eyes still gazing adoringly at her. "Looks like everyone else is too."

"So, do you want to stay-?"

"No fucking way!" She grabbed his wrist to drag him off the dance floor. "Let's go!" Gendry laughed as he moved to walk beside her and slipped his rough fingers between hers. They mocked the shitty dance decorations as they walked to the Lincoln. "Do you really like all this shit?" Arya waved a hand at herself once they were inside his car.

"It's nice every now and then," Gendry shrugged, "but not all the time." He had a slightly terrified expression on his face - like he was afraid to give the wrong answer. "I love your eyes: I would hate it if they were always hidden."

"You always say the right things at the right time," she laughed at his relieved expression. Gendry pulled the Lincoln out of the lot as she studied his handsome profile. "Why did you wait so long to get a girl? You could've had anyone, even being a total weirdo who spends his time playing DnD and blacksmithing."

"I was waiting for you," he flashed his half-smile at her - melting her heart just a little bit more.

"There you go again," she sighed and tilted her head against the headrest to watch him. Gendry was so gorgeous, it stole her breath away. Arya got lost in her admiration, only noticing they reached Kings Forest when he parked.

"Wait here," he held up a finger and got out to walk around the car and opened the door. Arya rolled her eyes as she got up - which is why he caught her by surprise when he lifted her into his arms. Gendry kicked the door closed with his foot and started carrying her through the woods.

"This is totally unnecessary," she grumbled, "I could've just taken my shoes off." Arya would die before ever admitting it was sorta nice to be carried.

"That wouldn't be as fun," he moved at a steady pace and did not seem hindered by her weight at all.
When they reached the clearing, she noticed a new addition - a tent. "I thought we needed something more permanent: since we'll be spending a lot of time here soon." Gendry set her down in front of the tent and opened the flap.

"You can be smart sometimes," she smirked at him as she kicked off her shoes and ducked inside. It was a good size, plenty of room to make some magic. Once the tent was zipped closed behind them Arya couldn't wait a second longer. She grasped the collar of Gendry's jacket and pulled the coat off to toss it aside. He turned around, mouth open to say something but she curled her arms around his neck and captured his lips. They stumbled and fell onto the blankets on the ground, breaking apart only to strip their clothes.

"Tell me," he stopped her as she moved to kiss him again.

"You don't need me," she laughed breathlessly, "to tell you how hot you are."

"I need to hear why you love me," his voice was quiet and more serious than usual. "Seriously." In the almost pitch dark of the tent she could just barely make out his furrowed brow.

"Oh..." Arya leaned back in surprise. "You're sorta putting me on the spot - I don't really like mushy stuff, you know that." She laughed and pushed her hair back from her eyes. "You know everything about me and you like it all. Who else would put up with me? You let me boss you around most of the time. But, I can admit, you keep me out of trouble too. I don't need anybody to take care of me but you do it anyway and I like it sometimes. You're like... the perfect shirt."

"A shirt?" He didn't sound all that satisfied with her answer and Arya started to feel really nervous.

"You know," she waved a hand, "when you try something on for the first time and it just... fits right. You fit me right. You think I'm fun and beautiful when other boys would just call me a crazy tomboy. Actually, most would use a lot harsher words. With you, I don't have to pretend I'm not smart or don't have strong opinions. Do you have any idea how rare that is? People are always telling me what I can't do, but you care more about what I want." Arya sighed and looked away in frustration. "I think all of this is sounding really self-absorbed."

"So," his hand trailed down her arm to hold hers, "you love me because I love you? That works."

"Not exactly," she turned back to him as her eyes adjusted to the dim. "I love you because there's no one like you. I didn't dream about the kind of guy I would fall in love with because I didn't think he would exist." Arya shook her head as she laughed, still not quite able to believe her luck. "Yet, here you are - perfect for me."

"That's sounds familiar," his husky laugh set her skin on fire. "We're so lucky, Arry." Gendry lifted her hand to kiss her knuckles. "Not everybody finds their soul mate in high school."

"A lot of people think they do," she was afraid to even say the words out loud.

"We're not like other people," he pressed his lips against hers and Arya could feel him smiling. She curled her fingers around the back of his neck and pulled away.

"Let's not waste tonight," she whispered, "we should make it last as long as we can."

"I can go slow?" Gendry grinned like she just gave him a present.

"Slower than slow - move backwards if possible." Arya curled both arms around his shoulders and pressed her lips against his neck. "Make it last the next three weeks."
"I'll try my best, milady." His hand pushed her back onto the rumbled blankets but he did not follow her down, just trailed his fingers down over her chest and stomach.

Her hands reached out to his chest to feel his racing heart, roaming up over his shoulders to pull him down on top of her. He settled between her legs, his skin hot and soft against hers, and lowered his lips to kiss her tenderly. The dark heightened her other senses and her fingertips felt every corded muscle of his back pulled taut as he held his weight over her.

"Gendry," she murmured against his mouth and bucked her hips impatiently, "not that slow." A burning need to have him was coiling in her stomach, threatening to take over and push them too fast. They needed to take their time, enjoy every second until they had to part again. Gendry reached over her head, she heard him rummaging through their condom box, and rose onto his knees to put the stupid thing on. Gods she really needed to go on the pill - an adventure for another day. His pale skin nearly glowed in the darkness and she hummed with impatience.

"I should have brought a lamp," he lowered onto his forearms once more. "Though you're prettiest in the moonlight; it's too damn cold for that." Gendry covered them with a blanket and rested his full weight on her, spreading the fire in her stomach through her entire body. She slipped an impatient hand between their bodies and lifted her hips so the tip of his cock nudged her entrance. "So impatient," he admonished, unhurriedly pushing inside her. This was the only time she felt truly alive, the rush she was chasing her whole life was only sated by him.

His shoulders curled down as he lowered his lips to hers and Arya tilted her head back, straining to reach his mouth. Gendry slid a hand down her thigh to hook behind her knee, pulling her leg up to thrust deep inside her as his kiss muffled her moans. His one hand continued running along her side, as if trying to memorize her body in the dark. The other hand cupped the back of her head, his rough fingertips touching the her neck. It gave her a feeling of belonging and peace, his calloused hands on her body - like the comfort of coming home.

She let him love her - that's what he was doing, loving her - as much as she wanted to flip him over and ride him until they both passed out. This was nice too, being loved and making love, it was both relaxed and frenzied all at once. Gendry surrounded her, his panted breath hot against her lips as his arms encircled her body to hold her close. Her own breath was ragged, not only crushed under his weight but every slow push and pull of his hips drew the air from her lungs in loud moans. Arya fought to hold onto every sensation and remember every little detail.

Her hands clung to his shoulders as she buried her face into his chest, biting her tongue to keep her from begging him to move faster. Arya felt pulled into a thousand different directions, wanting to touch him everywhere and hold him close at the same time. Instead of telling him how much she loved him, her mouth only cried out against his heated skin. She was losing control, bucking her hips up to meet his quicker, urging him to get carried away too. Gendry pulled of one her hands from his neck and pinned it over her head.

"I love you," he whispered against her ear, "only you... always." His hoarse voice severed whatever ties she had to reality as her body started to vibrate and tingle all over.

"More," she groaned - not sure what she was even demanding. More Gendry, all of him, his skin and voice and body. She wanted to shed her corporeal form and melt into him, merging into one being to spend eternity in the dark together.

"Arya," his voice was tight, "I'll never let you go. You're mine and I'm yours: now and always." Gendry's fingers slipped between hers, holding her hand above her head as he drove into her keeping a steady pace. He overwhelmed her, turning her into a writhing mess beneath him as she whined and begged for 'more' repeatedly. "We belong to each other," he panted, "you have my heart and I never..."
want it back."

She continued to buck against his steady rocking, dragged closer to the edge with every push and pull of his hips. Gendry whispered more beautiful things but her mind was beyond comprehending them. Her whole body trembled with the force of her need to release but it continued to grow, drawing out each surge of pleasure. Arya clung to her life preserver, his body the only solid thing tying her to the world as she drifted away from reality. Like a ship tossed against the rocks, she was dashed into a million splinters and plunged into a gushing inky sea.

White lightning flashed across her eyes as the churning waves of her pleasure culminated into an explosion. Her resulting scream formed his name without coherent intention before devolving into whimpering sobs. Tears spilled from her eyes before she could stop them so Arya hid her face against his chest, even knowing he could feel the wetness. She was still too busy recovering from the intense sensation to feel any shame. Gendry must have come with her because he pulled out of her with a groan and rolled over onto his back.

After he fumbled a bit with the condom - gods those things were annoying - he reached out to pull her close. They lay like that for a good long while, even after their breathing and heart rates returned to normal.

"It still shocks me," he whispered against her hair, "how it just keeps..."

"I know," she chuckled and nuzzled her face against his warm chest. "I can hardly believe how good it is. The gods might get jealous of us and try to split us up."

"Even the gods can't tear us apart," he pulled her tighter. "I'd go to the seven hells and back for you."

"You only have to go through three and a half," she assured him. "I'll always meet you half-way.

Chapter End Notes

So... tired... must post... I kept jumping forward to Sandor's chapter because I'm super excited for Sansan sexy times (my priorities are a somewhat skewed but I've accepted it).

You saw this coming right? I'm not being needlessly cruel (though I enjoy it). The timeline makes demands of us all - of course Arry wanted to leave the dance early!

The Winter Formal is just getting started! Sansa is up next!
The Winter Court

SANSA

The gym glittered with hundreds of blue and white lights strung along every wall and hung down from the ceiling. It was beautiful, everything she ever dreamed of... Streamers and snowflakes turned the large gymnasium into a romantic wintery seventh heaven. With her head tilted against Sandor's chest, Sansa floated like she danced on clouds. They revolved in a slow circle as the music and other students on the dance floor faded into the background. Then the song ended and another more upbeat tune began, spurring Sandor to pull her off the dance floor.

"Why are you so opposed to having fun?" She sulked as he found a patch of wall to lean against. Every time anything even slightly cheerful played, he refused to stay on the floor. Sansa did not truly expect more, but would it kill him to let his guard down?

"This isn't exactly my scene - or jam," he crossed his arms stubbornly. Sansa knew he hated being the center of attention and making a spectacle of himself but... Well, everyone was doing it!

"Let me guess," she raised a brow, "the hound doesn't dance, right?" Sandor smirked down at her and nodded once. "How would I know you don't like to dance? We never listen to music together, that is just strange." Sansa crossed her arms, mimicking his position and pouted up at him.

"Because one of us would hate it," he uncrossed his arms and put his hands on her shoulders to turn her around to face the dance floor. Sandor pulled her back against his chest, wrapping his arms around her. "You like this pop crap but I can't stand it."

"I also like classical music and show tunes..." Sansa realized she was only making his point for him. "I know," she sighed, "you like rock music."

"Death metal," he corrected, "death - metal, not just 'rock'." Sandor's deep chuckle rumbled against her back as his breath tickled her ear and sent a shiver down her spine. "And you would fucking hate it."

"I could try to listen to it," she offered half-heartedly. In truth, the snippets she heard of his music sounded like something out of a nightmare.

"We don't need to listen to the same music," he lowered his lips to murmur in her ear, "to love each other." Her skin felt hot and Sansa knew anyone could plainly see her blushing from hairline to collarbone.

"You are right," she relented. "Anyway, I don't think I would enjoy 'death metal' very much." It was not a big deal they did not like the same music, they were so compatible in every other way. At least he liked to hear her sing... "Oh!" Sansa was suddenly struck with a fabulous idea and she stepped out of his embrace. "Hold that thought," she called over her shoulder, "I'll be right back!" She approached the stage set up for the DJ in the front of the gym and got the green-haired woman's attention.

"Can I request a song?" Sansa spoke as loudly as she could to be heard over the fast-tempo pop song
that had nearly every student hopping on the dance floor.

"Sure, girly," the young woman grinned and smacked her gum, "what can I spin for ya?"

"True Colors," she requested, "by any artist."

"You got it, doll-face!" The woman winked one bright fuchsia eyelid and put her headphones back on. The pop song ended as Sansa made her way back to Sandor and a slow version of 'True Colors' came on just as she stood in front of him.

"They're playing our song," she pointed up and smiled. Sandor rolled his eyes as he pushed off the wall, grabbing her hand to lead her onto the dance floor. He held her tight as they resumed their slow revolving. Sansa felt light as a feather as they swayed to the music but worried she was torturing her pitiable boyfriend. "Is this completely horrible for you?"

"Nah," he tucked a hand under her chin to pull her eyes up to meet his. "I just wish all these dumbass kids weren't here - then it'd be perfect."

"I wish I could hold onto this moment and make it last forever." Sansa took ahold of his hand, replaced in on her waist, and held onto his shoulders to rest her face against his chest. She could feel warmth seeping through his shirt, heard his strong heartbeat, and inhaled his spicy cologne. The song ended too soon and before he could lead her back to the wall, she grabbed onto his wrist. "Let's have our picture taken," she pleaded, "please-please-please!"

"You know I hate that shit," he protested but still followed as she towed him towards the corner set up for photos.

"Just one?" Sansa led him to stand in the line of students waiting to have their photo taken and turned around to give him a hopeful look. "I want a momento to remember this night."

"I won't be forgetting tonight so easily," his voice lowered to a dull growl only the two of them could hear. Sansa blushed and looked around anyway, convinced everyone could see her most secret thoughts.

"You know what I mean..." She averted her eyes shyly and pulled him along as the line moved up. "To remember the dance."

"Fine," he gave in, as she knew he would and Sansa beamed thankfully. They waited in line until their turn was up. Sandor ignored the photographer's instructions, standing sideways to face her instead of the camera. They had their portrait taken and she filled out all of the relevant information on a form after confirming the photo. It bothered her that half of his face was hidden but overall felt quite contented. "Happy?"

"Very happy," she smiled up at him as they walked away, "so happy I could burst. Except..." Sansa stopped and put a hand over her empty stomach and grimaced. "I forgot to eat earlier because I was so focused on getting ready." All this swaying and turning in circles was not a good idea without any food in her.

"Let's go check out the spread," he tilted his head at the buffet table and she nodded eagerly. They walked together to the table laid out with mostly snack foods like cookies and one-bite appetizers. "Punch, little bird?" Sandor held up a cup and ladleful of bright red liquid. "I wouldn't put it past Theon to spike it though."

"I'm parched so I'll take my chances." Sansa collected a few snacks onto a plate and turned around when a soft hand landed on her shoulder. "Missa!" She covered her mouth as she chewed a bite of
"Sansa," Missa gave her an once-over, "you look absolutely stunning!"

"And you look gorgeous!" Sansa meant her compliment sincerely, not many high school kids could pull off Missa's bold yet elegant style.

"It's all Dany and Marge's doing," Missa waved a hand dismissively, "they can make anyone look like a celebrity. I love your dress, it really suits you." Then her mouth fell open as she looked around the gym. "You match the dance decorations!"

"That," Sansa blushed and covered her smiling mouth, "is not a mistake." She might have over-planned this night but she wanted everything to be perfect.

"Clever girl," Missa nodded approvingly. Sandor returned to Sansa's side and handed her a drink. "You look quite dashing yourself."

"She picked it out," Sandor pointed an accusing finger at Sansa, "I just wore what she told me."

"Smart man," Missa grinned at him, "I don't suppose you two are going to Joffrey's after party?" Sansa quickly gulped the punch in her mouth and shook her head vigorously. "Good, then I won't go either, Dany is skipping it too."

"Don't worry - short stuff can take care of herself."

"I will definitely call you," Sansa waved goodbye with a half-eaten cookie in her hand as Missa walked away. "Wow, these are really good." Sandor filched the treat out of her hand and shoved it all in his mouth. That reminded her... "Have you seen Arya?"

"She dragged her nerd out of here over an hour ago," Sandor shrugged and wiped the crumbs off his jacket. Sansa resisted the urge to lecture about keeping his clothes clean and fought back her concern for Arya. "Don't worry - short stuff can take care of herself."

"I'm a big sister," she countered, "it's my job to worry... I strangely love that you two get along so well."

"She's okay," he cleared his throat before shoving another cookie in his mouth.

"You like her, I can tell." Sansa laughed as Sandor picked up the whole tray of cookies like he was claiming them all. "Arya is a singular girl... but such a handful. I plan to ask her to go with me to self-defense classes-"

"Let's not worry about that either tonight, little bird." Sandor's voice sounded normal but his eyes clouded over with dark emotion. "Just worry about us and right now." He set the tray of cookies down and gulped his punch before crumpling his plastic cup to toss it over his shoulder into the wastebasket.

"Sandor..." Sansa was ready to leave and move onto the rest of their night. "If you want-"

"Alright, kids," Mr. Lannister got up on the stage and stood in front of a microphone. "It's the moment you've all been waiting for! The Winter Court!" Cheers erupted from the students and Sansa joined in before grabbing Sandor's hand to move closer. "Mel, if you'll do the honors?"

"Thank you, Jaime." A gorgeous woman with flaming red hair moved in front of the microphone
and opened an envelope. "First, your Winter Queen is... Margaery Tyrell!" Applause and loud cheers rang through the gym as Marge walked onto the stage with her signature beauty queen wave. Mr. Lannister crowned a wreath of blue winter roses onto Margaery’s head as she beamed at the cheering crowd.

"The Winter King is..." Mr. Lannister opened the second envelope. "Joffrey Baratheon!" Sansa did not even pretend to clap for that jerk as he bounded onto the stage with his arms held high. Some boys up front hooted and chanted 'Joff' as he accepted his red velvet and gold crown.

"This year's Winter Princess is..." The redhead beauty paused before reading off the next winner. "Dany Targaryen!" Dany walked up onto the stage with grace to receive her crown of white flowers, which blended into her pale blonde hair.

"And the Winter Prince is... Loras Tyrell!" Loras strolled onto the stage, looking more than handsome in a full tuxedo, and bowed his head to receive a simple golden circlet. The four winners stood next to each other wearing happy smiles. "Let's have a round of applause for this year's Winter Court!" A deafening roar rose from the students as the winners linked hands and raised them over their heads.

"I suppose the results don't surprise anyone," she commented to Sandor once the noise died down. "Wow..." Sansa was stunned by how lovely the girls looked on stage as they straightened each other's crowns. "Marge and Dany look so beautiful." His snort surprised her out of her semi-envious daze. "You don't think so?"

"I can't see anyone but you," he looked down at her with a serious expression.

"Do you want to go now?" Sansa slipped her hand into his and gave it a squeeze.

"If you are ready," his voice rumbled even deeper as his dark eyes bore into hers.

"I'm ready," she held his gaze steady as she said it, not allowing shyness to dull her determination. Without another word, he started to walk towards the gym's exit but Sansa tugged him in the other direction. "I want to do something first," she explained to his puzzled expression. She led him 'their' spot... the place their first met outside coach Tarth's office. "Every morning, when I wake up, I am more grateful that we met on my first day," she turned to face him. "I truly was a lost little bird and I needed more than help to find my way around a big campus."

"I was just in the right place at the right time," his expression was guarded, as if expecting something bad to happen.

"Some people call that fate," she smiled. "Others call it 'luck' and I am not sure what to call it myself. But I am so thankful that I found you and you found me. I think we were both a little lost and still might be wandering but I hope... We can wander while holding each other's hand." Sansa squeezed his hand tightly. "As long as we hold onto each other, we are never truly lost."

"Enough stalling and chirping, little bird," his free hand wrapped around her waist to pull her against his body. "I'm never letting you go." Sandor pulled her hand around his neck and curled his fingers around the back of her neck before capturing her lips. Standing in that exact spot, she had daydreamed about being close to and kissing him and even her dreams could not compare. He overwhelmed all of her senses and weakened her knees so that she slumped against him. Sansa panted breathlessly as he broke the kiss.

"Let's go," she stepped out of his embrace and tucked her hand around his arm as he led her from the gym. They walked at an unhurried pace, her head tilted against his firm shoulder until they reached...
the Skylark. Sandor opened the door and held her hand as she sat down inside and moved her dress so he could close the door. He walked around and got into the driver's seat, putting the key and turning the engine over so the car purred to life. "Let me guess," she groaned, "where we are going is a surprise?"

"You're a smart one," he grinned as he whipped out of the parking spot and onto the open road. "I'll give you a hint - it's where you belong." His hints were even more torturous than not knowing anything at all! She was horrible at guessing games so she refused to play just to spite him.

"You are a cruel boy, Sandor Clegane," she sulked, "you enjoy torturing me."

"Yep," he agreed right away. "And the night is still young." His deep growling sent her heart racing in nervous anticipation. Sansa's palms started to sweat as the silence stretched between them until he finally pulled into a parking lot.

"The Palace?!" Sansa whipped her head to stare at Sandor in shock. "This place is so expensive!"

"I fucking know that better than you," he scoffed before grinning at her. "Don't get all bent out of shape over money. It doesn't mean shit to me unless I can spend it on something worthwhile." Sandor parked the Skylark and turned off the engine before turning his serious eyes onto her. "You're worth every penny and then some - I just want you to be happy." A tear slipped from her eye at his overwhelming generosity, especially in light of his family struggles.

"I don't know what to say," she whimpered as she stared down at his jacket sleeve. "Except... I love you." The back of his finger wiped away her happy tear and lifted her chin up.

"I won't always say or do the right thing." he rasped in a tight voice. "I'll fuck up again, probably before the night is through." Sandor caressed her jaw and slid his warm palm over her cheek. "But I will always do my best - I swear. Because I love you more than my own life." Sansa could not help the few more tears that squeezed from her eyes. "Do you have to cry over everything, little bird?"

"Yes," she sniffled, "because I am too happy... I might burst if I hold it back." Sansa turned her watery eyes up at him and smiled. "I have waited my whole life for this night; I don't want to wait a moment longer." Sandor grinned and they both got out of the car and hurried to meet each other, holding hands as they walked into the lobby. He checked them in and they walked together to the elevator. She trembled nervously as the golden doors slid open and they both stepped inside.

"I'm nervous," she whispered even though they were alone.

"We don't have to-"

"Sorry!" Sansa spun her whole body towards him in a panic and hung onto his arm. "I used the wrong word," she panted, "I meant that I'm anxious, excited... eager." Sandor raised his brow and she blushed. "And a bit nervous too, I suppose."

"Me too," he turned to face her, wrapping his hands around her upper arms and stepping close. "Did I tell you? You're so beautiful - you always are - tonight you are stunning. I keep forgetting that you are mine." His lips lowered softly to hers, kissing her with more tenderness than she had ever experienced. Sansa wrapped her arms around his waist and her heart pounded from the anticipation his gentle kiss created. Neither of them noticed the doors sliding open but they both turned at the loud gasp from the other side.

Two people, an older couple were waiting, the woman stared in horror at Sandor's face. Sansa felt him stiffed beside her but she did not bother being polite, grabbing his hand to brush past the couple.
They hurried hand-in-hand to the room, letting go only so he could push the key card into the lock and open the door. The room was beautiful and she breezed inside, wandering around the opulent space with her jaw hanging open. He came up behind her as she moved to the window to gape at the night cityscape and turned her to face him.

"I know," his serious expression surprised her. "There are guys out there who deserve you more than I do." He did not give her a chance to argue. "None of them could ever want you as much as me."

"I don't see anyone but you, Sandor." Sansa wrapped her arms around his neck and stood on her tiptoes. "I only want you." He lowered his head so that their lips could meet for a brief instant before she tilted her head back to meet his eyes. "We deserve each other."

"Ready?" The word wheezed from his mouth.

"Almost," she smiled, "there's one more thing I want to do first."

Chapter End Notes

I might just be really tired but I possibly just went through a time warp.

The Winter Formal isn't over yet!
The buffet table had nearly been picked clean but he noshed on whatever he could find to re-energize. Little Sheri might be small but her energy seemed endless as they twirled around the dance floor. A few times during the night, he caught a glimpse of coach wandering around the gym, working as a chaperone. He wanted to go talk to her so badly but thought he would probably just be torturing himself, seeing her all dressed up.

"Rick," she tapped him on the shoulder. He gulped down the cookie in his mouth and turned away from the buffet to see coach standing behind him. She was nothing less than statuesque in a silver blouse and dark gray slacks. Gods, she was beautiful...

"Coach," he managed to stop gaping and gave her an astonished smile. "You look... wow." Rick Payne: the silver-tongued, or not.

"Oh, come off it," she lightly pushed his shoulder and rolled her eyes, "you're not so bad yourself." His heart nearly exploded though her words were hardly a true compliment. "I couldn't believe it when I saw you and your date twirling around the floor."

"I have a few secrets," he smiled wide and forced himself to stop fidgeting with his coat. "You and I could take a turn around the dance floor: it would be nice to lead you around the gym for once." Pod held his breath as he waited for her answer.

"Instead of being clobbered by me?" She smirked before looking around the gym. "I would but I doubt the other chaperones would approve. I only came over to tell you I have a gift for you: a thank you for all you do."

"You didn't have to do that." Pod rubbed the side of his face and hoped she couldn't tell he was blushing.

"Nonsense," she huffed a breathy laugh, "you've done more for me than other any student aide would." She leaned against the desk and crossed her arms. "Coach Selmy has his head buried in his notebooks or he would recognize your efforts as well." Pod saw no reason to inform her that he spent twice as much time helping her. "This is just a small token of my appreciation... I don't know what I will do once you graduate."

"During the winter break I could come by and give you a full rundown on my filing system." Pod
hoped he did not look too eager.

"I can't ask you to give up your vacation time for me." The pleading expression on her face did not match her words.

"I want to," he insisted. "I really admire and look up to you, coach." That was as close as he could come to revealing his true feelings for her.

"Nearly everyone looks up to me." She grinned at her little joke, not taking him seriously: coach never took him seriously.

"I mean it," Pod stared up into her bright blue eyes. "You truly care about your students. I'm just glad that I am able to help in some small way."

"Alright you twisted my arm," she relented with the relieved sigh. "But I assure you that it won't be easy."

"Nothing worthwhile is." He stepped closer, thinking: even if the consequences were dire, it might be worth it to kiss her just once. She looked so damn beautiful, her eyes sparkling with happiness. But his courage failed him when she pushed up off the desk and looked down to straighten her blouse.

"Best get back to the dance," she sighed. "I can't imagine the gossip... Actually, I can." Coach grimaced and shuddered as she walked to the door. Pod tried not to take it personally: and failed.

"Coach," he caught her wrist to turn her back to face him, "thanks again." Pod held up the box containing his gift and she gave him a wide smile, nodding her head once before heading back to return to the dance. Sheri was sitting in a chair against the wall and watching the dwindling number of dancers on the floor. "Sorry to disappear on you."

"I needed a break anyway," She waved her hand, dismissing his apology. "I still can't believe you are such a fantastic dancer."

"My grandmother always said..." He raised the pitch of his voice in imitation of his grandmother. "Ballroom dancing is the way to win a lady's heart."

"She sounds like a very smart woman," Sheri giggled at his imitation.

"And you?" Pod leaned against the wall beside her.

"I have always had an interest in dance." She stood up to stand beside him, leaning one shoulder against the wall to face him. "I also know a bit of jazz-tap and some ballet."

"A girl of many skills," he smiled down at her.

"You have no idea," Sheri winked and grinned.

"Did you want to go to an after-party?" Pod made the offer but even to his own ears, his voice sounded reluctant.

"Parties are not really my 'thing' but I would go if you wanted." Sheri blushed and turned back to face the dance floor. "I don't want to go home yet."

"Let's stay until the last song." Pod held out his hand to escort her out on the floor. "Make them throw us out."
"Brilliant idea, as usual." She accepted his hand with a confident smile. "Let's go show everyone up." They stepped onto the floor and Pod curled his fingers around her tiny waist as she rested her small hand on his shoulder. Since the dance was dying down, more space opened up and they waltzed around the dance floor. Sheri was light on her feet and followed his lead without any trouble.

"You should join us for the next game, after winter break." Pod extended his arm to spin her around and then pulled her back in, not missing a beat. His grandmother would be so proud. "You would really add some wit to the group."

"And beauty," she quipped and he missed a step. "Sorry, I self-deprecate too much."

"Beauty is relative," he argued as they recovered from his misstep easily. "To the right person, you could be the most beautiful girl in the world. I have someone like that, not many people think she is pretty but to me she is perfect." Pod never admitted to anyone that he secretly admired someone but Sheri was shockingly easy to talk to.

"Oh, you have someone you like." She couldn't hide her disappointment and part of him was flattered. Sheri was one of the nicest and most interesting people he'd ever met and if his heart were free, he would probably ask her out again. But leading on a sweet girl like her was too low: she deserved someone who wouldn't secretly pine for someone else.

"It's totally one-sided," he sighed and laughed at himself. "It's like a bad habit I can't break... I know she'll never look at me the same way."

"Then she's blind," she looked him straight in the eye.

"Maybe," he nodded, "or just too damned noble." Pod smiled at her confused expression but did not explain further. "I think you are awesome, but don't want to lead you on, Sheri. At least, not off the dance floor."

"Of course not," she insisted with an easy smile, "we are here as 'friends' and that is more than enough for me." Sheri squeezed his shoulder to emphasize her words. "I like you, Rick Payne. If you would consider me a friend then I am honored."

"Same here," he returned her happy expression before lowering her into a dip. "So, will you join our group?" Since Sam was gone, there was a distinct lack of kindness in the empty room, which Sheri would be sure to fill.

"I think I will," she agreed. Pod pulled her up as the song ended but neither of them released each other, he intended to show Sheri a good time until the gym doors closed. They were just going to dance the night away until somebody stopped them.

**MARGAERY**

Loras - the traitor - got a text more than an hour ago and ran out with a goofy smile on his face, as if she didn't know exactly what he was up to. Missa allowed herself to be trampled all over by her pretty date on the dance floor, only sparing a moment to introduce him. Joff kept fleeing her side to 'hang' with his 'boys' and honestly, she didn't even miss him... much. Dany, she was supposed to be her best friend, yet she too was abandoning her!

"Darling," Marge whined pitifully, "you have to come to the party!" Dany just shook her head, ignoring Margaery's pleas. "After parties are the reason proms exist!"

"Not this time, Marge." Dany got that faraway look in her eyes as she gazed at her well-built date.
"Drogo and I have a long drive back to the ranch."

"You sound like a farmer's wife," she scowled. Margaery knew she was being childish but... it just wasn't fair! This was supposed to be the best night of her life, but it felt so hollow. She won the title of Winter Queen but would gladly give it up to not feel so utterly alone.

"Would that be such a terrible thing?" Dany had changed over the last several weeks and Marge could not help but feel a bit left out. Or possibly a 'ton' left out - what's so great about horses anyway?!

"I suppose not..." She really was happy for her friend and would not find fault in whatever brought about the positive changes. "I just miss you, Dany."

"We'll get together over the break," Dany smiled beautifully, "just you and me." She pulled Margaery in for one last hug. "Then we'll drag Missa out and force her to give us all the juicy details about her progress with Torgo."

"Gods, I couldn't believe it!" Marge huffed out a laugh. "Toto has to be the prettiest boy I've ever seen - Missa certainly has an eye for beauty. And you..." She slid her eyes to her friend's tall dark and muscled lover. "Oh me oh my, Jogo certainly is a hunk of man-meat." Where Joff was sleek and elegant like a sports car, Jogo was built like a truck... A very sexy truck.

"He's much more than that," Dany bit her lip as she gazed at her stoic lover. Oh dear - she recognized that look.

"I think you might be in love, Dany girl." Marge poked her friend in the shoulder, giving her a knowing look.

"I won't say that I'm not," Dany beamed as her fair cheeks turned pink. "I will see you later on this week, I'll call you." She blew a kiss goodbye as she walked to meet her date, leaving Marge standing alone in a crowded room.

"Sure you will," she murmured the words to herself, feeling a bit like a wadded up used tissue. Dany was always ready to cry on her shoulder but refused to listen to any of her Joffrey woes. It served her right, everyone was sick of her on-again-off-again relationship - even her. Her eyes traveled to Joff, standing in the center of his clique and laughing about something. She straightened her spine and put on her best smile before walking over to the group.

"Where were you?" Joff narrowed his eyes at her and waved his hand to dismiss his friends.

"Did you miss me already?" Marge wrapped her arm around his and stood beside him. "I was saying goodbye to Dany."

"She's not coming to the party?" He raised his brow in disbelief and scoffed a laugh as he shook his head. "Your friends are boring."

"You promised," Marge reminded him for the hundredth time, "to stop speaking ill of my girls."

"Fine," he rolled his eyes. "This place is dead." Joff gave her the most charming smile - he really did look like royalty despite the cheapness of his crown. "Should we get out of here, my queen?"

"A brilliant idea, my king." She returned his smile and they walked together towards the limo waiting for them. "Joff, it's killing me..." She stopped him before they reached the limo but could not meet his eyes. "Why did you dump me last time?" Marge had been holding that question in for so long she could barely think about anything else.
"What does that matter?" Joff hated having to explain himself. "We're back, aren't we? You're always so stuck on what happened before."

"I just don't want to lose you again," she explained, "if it was something I did-"

"It was me, not you." He always used those lines on her but they sounded less sincere every time.

"I hate-"

"You're ruining my good mood," he sulked.

"Sorry," she whispered, bowing her head. Then his fingers came under her chin, lifting her eyes to see him smiling once more. That handsome face caught her heart every time. His smiles won her forgiveness and erased all memory of being hurt in the first place. No boy had the right to be so devastatingly handsome, golden, and perfect.

"You know..." He quirked his brows and ran his green eyes over her. "I've never fucked a queen in a limo before."

"There's a first time for everything," she smirked and led the way, knowing he was watching her hips swaying as she walked. Joff was not one for romance or poetry but he came close whenever he vocalized his appreciation of her 'assets'. Maybe their relationship wasn't a 'dream come true' but nobody ever gets exactly the kind of love they dreamed of.

**MISSANDEI**

The dance was a smashing success, or at least considerably better than the wedding they attended. Since then they had been on a date almost every weekend but it was like pulling teeth to get him to touch her. At least, on the dance floor she had an excuse hold onto him far too tightly.

"I hope you had as much fun as I did." Missa beamed happily, as they slowly walked out of the gym hand-in-hand.

"I hope your feet heal from me stomping all over them." Torgo groaned and rubbed a hand over his face before pushing his glasses higher up on the bridge of his nose.

"You don't weigh much." She tugged on his hand and gave him a reassuring smile when he looked at her. Missa knew that the only reason he was so terrible at dancing was because she made him nervous. "Torgo, I wouldn't want to dance with anyone else. Even if my feet do throb something awful."

"I'm hopeless," he whimpered and hung his head. "A hopeless and uncoordinated Grade A nerd."

"You are an adorable nerd," she assured him, "besides as your tutor it was my responsibility to instruct you." Though she knew little on the subject of dating herself, she still knew more than Torgo. "I don't want to go home," she stopped when they headed for the parking lot, "or to an after party."

"Come this way," he changed his direction, pulling her along to walk behind the gym to the football field. Missa's shoes would not forgive her for treading through the dirty grass but she felt curious about what he was up to.

"Are we going to play football?" Missa gave Torgo a quizzical look. "I'm afraid my attire is not appropriate."
"There's a new moon tonight," He informed her as they sat down on the lowest seat of the bleachers. "We can see more stars because it is darker." Torgo quickly pointed at the sky. "There, a shooting star, did you see?" She watched the meteoroid as it entered the atmosphere and made a wish, even though she knew it was silly. A hunk of rock in space did not grant wishes, no matter how hot it burned, but it never hurt to try.

"That was lovely," she sighed and glanced around the twinkling sky to look for another.

"Not as lovely as you, Missa." Torgo took ahold of her hand and she turned to face his serious expression. "Your eyes shine brighter than any stars."

"I doubt," Missa smiled, "that is scientifically possible."

"Can I kiss you?" The words rushed out of his mouth, his nervousness as plain as the glasses on his face. Apparently, wishes do come true once in a while. Of course, much more data on the subject would have to be gathered before reaching a certain conclusion.

"You had better," she closed her eyes and leaned forward. First, his hand slid over her cheek and his fingers curling behind her neck before his soft lips pressed lightly against hers. Torgo held the kiss for an extended moment before pulling away, letting his fingers trail down her arm to find her hand again. Missa opened her eyes to see him smiling shyly and looking down at their clasped hands.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"You don't have to thank me," she chided playfully. "I enjoyed it as well."

"No, I mean..." Torgo turned away from her, leaning forward with his hands braced on the seat. "If you hadn't pushed me, I would have pined for you from afar. I never would have found the courage to ask you out."

"I noticed," she sighed, "and it was silly for me to wait so long." Missa tugged on his shoulder, urging him to face her once more. "One of the things I like most about you is your shyness, yet I kept expecting you to make the first move. Clearly, my logic was flawed."

"Can I kiss you again?" His words were barely more than a whisper but Missa heard every word.

"You don't have to ask," she braced her hands on his shoulders and scooted closer. This time she did not close her eyes but watched as he lowered his face to hers, wearing a nervous expression. Missa wondered if patience was quite the virtue everyone touted it to be and decided to perform an... experiment. She slid her hands to the back of his neck, drawing his soft lower lip between her own and tasting him with the tip of her tongue. He gasped, hesitating only an instant before imitating her and just the very tips of their tongues touched.

They broke apart and turned away from each other, both panting for breath and Missa assumed his heart was racing too. She turned her head sideways and peeked at him, catching him peeking at her. He started laughing and she joined in, not really sure what they were laughing about. Nevertheless, she felt more ridiculously happy than she could ever remember being. Torgo huffed out a deep breath and very carefully put his arm around her to hold her waist and she tilted her head on his shoulder. There was nowhere else in the universe she would rather be.

Chapter End Notes
Ah! First Marge chapter! You can't really blame the girl for being willfully blind to Joff's evilness - he's so freaking hot! When he sits all squiffy on his throne I just want to punch him in the face: with my mouth. I'm super pissed at him because I know what a dill-hole he is about to be to poor Sansa. Stupid Joff... being so blonde, hot and even more evil (Draco Malfoy syndrome... actually I think Spike started it).

Aren't Missa and Torgo just the cutest thing to ever happen with their tentative little kissy times?! So cute! And poor Poddy boy, so enamored of someone he can't have and blind to the sweet girl in front of him. Sheri seems to be taking it all in stride and I can't want to add her to the game!

This is the fic that never ends... it just goes on and on my friends!
Bubbly Bubbles

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bubbly Bubbles

SANDOR

His heart was thundering like a runaway train as Sansa led him to the back of the room and into the bathroom. Sandor wondered what the little bird was up to as she flicked the light on and placed her purse on the counter. She spun around to put her hands together under her chin, turning her big blue eyes up at him.

"Let's take..." A wide smile spread over Sansa's pretty face. "A bubble bath!"

"You've got to be shitting me," he grumbled as he eyed the large tub behind her.

"You don't want to?" Her pink lower lip jutted out into a pretty pout. A vision of Sansa naked, wet, and surrounded by bubbles flashed through his mind.

"Hold on - I'm a fucking idiot." Sandor thwacked the heel of his palm against his forehead. "There's not many things I want more than taking a bubble bath with you." Sansa's happy expression returned before she spun around, making a silent request for him to unzip her dress. He pinched the tiny zipper and slid it down, running his fingers down along her back as her pale skin was exposed.

"Thank you..." She carefully removed the dress and used a hanger to hang it on the back of the door. Sansa turned around to face him, hands behind her back as she peeked up at him. "Well?" It amazed him that she needed reassurance - there was a mirror right next to her... The dark blue lace of her lingerie made her flawless skin look even more snowy white.

"The dress was nice," he grinned, "but this is better." Sansa blushed and a ducked her head as her lips curled into a pleased smile. She turned towards the mirror and pulled a package out of her purse, some kind of wipe to remove her makeup. Then she took down her hair, pulling out little pins and letting the long tresses fall around her shoulders. Sandor was mesmerized, leaning against the wall and watching her perform these simple routine actions with such effortless grace. When she finished, she faced him with a playfully annoyed expression.

"You are overdressed, lover, let me help." She walked behind him to help him remove his jacket and gave it the same careful treatment as her dress. Sansa returned in front of him and he watched her as she unbuttoned his shirt. He shrugged the shirt off while she unbuckled his belt and unzipped his pants to let them fall on his feet. Sandor stepped out of his shoes, moving towards her but she smiled and darted out of his reach to start drawing the bath. "Bubbles," she sang as she poured the soap into the water stream, "bubbly bubbles, la-la-la."

"Chirping as usual," he muttered to himself. Sandor couldn't help but laugh at the contrast her childish singing made with her sexy lingerie.

"Are you laughing at me?" She turned to face him with a hurt expression - over-sensitive as usual.

"You're too fucking cute," he sat down on the edge of the giant tub next to her. "It makes me happy so I laugh. That's what most people do - crybaby."
"Crybaby? Cute?!" Sansa stood up to put her hands on her hips to glare down at him. "Can't you think of any better descriptors?" When she looked down at him, all angry and feisty it just made her even hotter.

"Sexy, gorgeous, perfect..." He put his hands to her waist and tugged her closer to stand between his knees. "Is that better?"

"You could go on." She braced her hands on his shoulders, her anger already pacified.

"Dazzling," he spoke the first word that came to mind.

"Oh, that's a good one," she smiled as she leaned closer, creating a red curtain of hair around them. "Do I dazzle you, Sandor?"

"Every time," he murmured before capturing her lips. Sandor lowered his fingers down to hook the hem her panties and slid them down over her hips to fall around her feet. She let go of his shoulders to remove her bra then stepped over the side of the tub to get in. Sansa sat down in her mountain of bubbles with a giggle, scooping up a handful to blow at him.

"Don't pretend you don't like bubbles too," she grinned like a happy kid as she reached over to turn the water off. "Everyone likes bubbles." Cute and sexy at the same time - only his little bird could do it without even trying.

"Nobody likes bubbles more than you, little bird." He rolled his eyes as he stripped his briefs then climbed into the tub to sit beside her. She scooted back to settle between his legs and rested her back against his chest. The sound of popping bubbles filled the silence as she swirled and molded the white foam. "This is the first time I've fit in a bathtub since I was a little kid."

"Even I have trouble fitting into a normal bathtub," she lifted one slim calf out of the bubbles, "these long legs get in the way."

"They are never in the way," he chuckled, moving the damp ends of her hair away from her neck to press a kiss to her shoulder. "Your legs were one of the first things I noticed about you-" She pinched his knee with her cruel little nails. "Ouch, let me finish! Your hair was first, I walked in and had this urge to reach out and touch it." Sandor could remember every detail about that day, the strong effect she had - and still had on him. "Then you turned around, those pretty eyes opened wide with fear." Her eyes drew him in like a dumbass moth to a blue flame.

"I wasn't afraid," she protested, "I was embarrassed." She rubbed the pinched spot on his knee apologetically. "Then I was mortified because I kept staring at your arms and chest like a pervert." Sansa rolled around onto her stomach, swirling the bubbles and turning the water around her. "I was right," her expression turned smug, "you look exactly like I pictured."

"You wanted me, huh?" Sandor held onto her waist with one hand and used the other to tuck her hair behind her ear.

"From the first moment I saw you," she scooped a bit of white fluff and busied herself by washing his chest. "I've never felt so... attracted to anyone before." Sansa glanced up at him with a teasingly angry expression. "You know I joined the cheer squad to get your attention... I have worked very hard to get us to this point," she scowled. "I think some appreciation is in order."

"What does mi pajarito want?" He watched as she put a finger to her chin in contemplation, leaving a bit of froth when she pointed at her head.

"I want you to wash my hair." She reached over his shoulder to the corner of the tub to hand him a
small bottle of shampoo.

"I've never done..." He started to protest when a memory broke into his mind, slamming into him like a fist to the jaw. His little sister was crying because Greg had pushed her into the mud and no one was around to clean her up except him. Sandor remembered her dirt-streaked tears and washing her dark curls as gently as he could. Sansa noticed his hesitation, her happy expression turned worried. "It's been a long time."

"You washed someone's hair before?" Her brows knitted with concern and confusion - Sansa didn't even know he ever had a sister.

"It's not important," he shook his head and spun a finger, "turn around."

"Someday," she sulked as she turned around, "you are going to tell me every secret until I know everything about you." Sansa sat up straight as he poured a glob of shampoo into his hand. He massaged the shampoo into her hair, working up a good lather. "Mmm, that feels good." She continued to hum and sigh in contentment as he washed the long tresses and then Sansa arched her back to dip her hair into the sudsy water. Sandor couldn't take any more torment and she gasped when he slid one hand down to cup her breast.

Soapy water cascaded from her hair as she sat up and turned around to face him - unmistakable hunger in her eyes. It couldn't be real - none of it - but he didn't care anymore. Maybe he died, Greg finally finished him off, and this was one of the seven heavens. She felt real enough, that's all that mattered, her soft skin was hot and slick from the sudsy water. Her eyelashes fluttered closed as he traced the lines and curves of her body, leaving trails of suds that slid down over her skin. The pleased sigh that escaped her parted lips pulled him out of his daze.

"Every time..." He moved aside the strands of wet hair sticking to her shoulders - still disbelieving she was his. "Dazzling." Her pleased smile instantly transformed her back from a soaked siren to his sweet girl. Sansa leaned forward to curl an arm around his neck and pressed her smiling lips to his. The sliding of her smooth slippery skin against his drew a deep groan from his throat as he wrapped his arms around her. Sandor swallowed hard when he felt her hand between their bodies lightly grasp his throbbing cock.

Sansa’s fingers wrapped more firmly around his erection as her tongue slipped between his lips. Her mouth tasted hot and sweet as he cupped the back of her head to return the kiss. The slow short tugs turned into longer and faster pulls, her thumb swiping the bottom of his head as her soft chest pressed against his. It did not take long for him to get close, falling apart under her touch. Sandor curled forward and buried his face into her wet hair, shuddering as he came.

"I love you," she was murmuring softly in his ear. Sansa released his cock to pull him close, petting a hand over Sandor’s hair in long soothing strokes. The water cooled as he caught his breath but her body was warm as she held him tight. "I'm ready when you are finished resting..."

"Done," he sat up, pushing her up by her shoulders so he could stand and grab a robe off the hook.

"Already?" Sansa looked surprised, water running down her body as she stood up. "After I... finish, I can barely move!"

"I'm not a weak little bird," he grinned as he wrapped the robe around her shoulders. "I'm a virile young man - or haven't you noticed?" She narrowed her eyes but could not hide the smile tugging at her lips.

"Oh," her eyes darted down, "I noticed." Sandor chuckled at her eager expression and pulled the
other robe on - it fit like a glove, a really tight glove that barely closed. "Sandor," she laughed at him, "you're just too big for this little world." Sansa tugged on his belt to help him close the robe and then she stepped out of the tub while he held her hand. He followed her as she grabbed a towel off the rack to dry the ends of her hair. She walked straight to the bed and crawled onto it to sit cross-legged in the middle, still toweling her wet hair.

"I made sure to get the biggest bed they had," he commented as he sat down beside her, trying to fill the silence. She tossed the damp towel aside and moved closer to him.

"You did perfectly, Sandor." Sansa picked up his hand, held it between hers, and peered into his eyes. "I'm so glad we waited to do this right... I don't have a single doubt in my mind." She'd seen him naked, watched him come, held him while he cried and it was still hard as fuck to 'share his feelings' with her.

"I wish I could say the same." Sandor looked down at his hand between hers - he was huge while she was small and fragile. "I'm scared of hurting you."

"What can I do?" She tilted her head into his vision.

"You shouldn't be comforting me," he scoffed, "that's backwards."

"Why," Sansa rolled her beautiful eyes, "because I'm a girl? That's an antiquated way of thinking; we are both doing this for the first time." She gave him an encouraging smile. "Tell me what I can do to make you more comfortable."

"Be on top?" Sandor held his breath as he watched the surprise and anxiety pass over her pretty features. It'd be pure torture to be the cause of any pain to her but more tolerable if she was in control.

"Oh, well..." She nodded slowly and looked away as if considering it before meeting his gaze with a nervous smile. "I can do that."

"We don't have to do it my way," he assured her, "just because I say so."

"I think," she glanced around the room and smiled wide, "we are doing this my way. I want you; the position does not matter to me." Sansa bit her lip as her eyes flickered to the door. "But... do you mind if I turn the light off?"

"Good idea," he stood up to walk to the light switch, if he saw her then he might not last long at all. He flicked the switch to 'off' and the room was shadowed in darkness, the only light coming from the bathroom door. Then he remembered they still needed one more thing, turning to point a finger at her. "Gimme a second." Sandor found the few packets of condoms in his inside jacket pocket before returning to her side.

"Oh right," she blew out a breath as he brandished the condoms. Sandor set the extra two packages - a guy can dream - aside but she stopped him from opening the first. "Wait..." Even in the dark, he could see her blushing. "Will you kiss me first?" He tossed the packet over his shoulder and pulled her close to kiss her, moving his mouth over hers until she was panting for breath. "I meant-"

"I know what you meant," he yanked her robe down over her shoulders and tasted the lingering soap on her heated skin. Her pulse raced under his lips as his hands found the belt of her robe and pulled the dammed thing out of his way. She whimpered as he lifted her to lie back on the center of the bed. Sandor braced a hand against the mattress and curled his arm around her waist to prop her up against the
pillows.

Sandor stretched out on his stomach, his feet dangling off the bed. His hands curled around her thighs as he lowered his mouth to the wet heat between her legs. If she'd let him, he would live between her thighs - the way she tasted, smelled, and the noises she made were pure heaven. He barely had a chance to enjoy her before she was whimpering and tugging him back up.

"I need you now," she begged pitifully and he pulled away reluctantly, moving up to lie beside her and putting on the condom as quick as he could. She released a shuddering sigh before pushing up onto her knees to brace her hands on his chest and straddled his hips. His heart pounded as she curled her fingers around his cock and shifted back and forth uncertainly. It took forever for her to find a position she liked before she slowly sank down. Her slick heat enveloped the very tip of him and she gasped, freezing perfectly still.

"We can stop - just let me know if it hurts." His hands slid up her legs to hold onto her waist, feeling her body trembling. "Are you afraid?" Regret prickled his mind - wondering if a few drinks would've helped ease things along.

"I'm not afraid, Sandor." Her voice was strained but her words were determined. "I don't feel scared of anything when I'm with you, maybe that makes me naive but it's true." She lowered a bit more, moving so slowly that it took every bit of his willpower not to thrust up into her.

"You're perfect, Sansa," he gritted through his clenched teeth. She continued to lower slowly onto him, her tight heat pulsing around his cock. For a minute there, he thought he might actually pass out until she pushed all the way down with a wheezed cry. "Are you okay?"

"It didn't hurt much," she heaved a sigh as she sank down onto his chest, her hands curling around his ribs. "It was just exhausting." Sansa continued to tremble on top of him - panting quietly as he pulled the blanket over her and ran his hand along her back. She suddenly clenched around his cock and he thrust up without thinking.

"Sorry-"

"Again," she demanded and arched her chest against him, crying out when he fulfilled her request. Sansa pushed against him again, writhing as his hand lowered to the small of her back to help her match his thrusts. She was hot and tight as his cock slipped in and out, squeezing around him as she made urgent little noises. "Oh gods, Sandor..." Her body shook as she struggled to keep pace with him. "I can't..." Her words trailed off into a frustrated moan. "It feels so good," she whimpered as her sharp nails bit into his ribs.

Sandor reversed their position, rolling onto his forearm to hold his weight over her as he plunged deep inside her tight heat. She cried out, lifted her hips to meet his second thrust, and pulled him down all the way on top of her. Her heels locked behind his knees as her hands clutched his sides and her whole body arched against him. With each thrust her cries grew louder and longer, pushing him closer to the edge.

"Come for me," he growled softly in her ear and she whined in response, bucking her hips against his. "I love you, Sansa." That did it - she gasped once, her whole body locking up before releasing a high-pitched cry. Her song grew in volume as she fluttered around his cock. Sandor was pulled into his own release, which rippled through his body like nothing he ever felt before. She slumped back into the mattress and he followed down on top of her shivering body. He worried that she was being crushed but she clung to him tightly as her breathing slowed.

"I love you too," she gasped breathlessly. Sandor disentangled her weakening limbs before
collapsing down beside her. She quickly tucked herself by his side, wrapping one hand around his arm and the other around his waist. The condom was a pain in the ass to pull off but luckily, there was a trash can next to the bed so he didn't have to get up. He rolled onto his side and gathered her into his arms, pulling the blanket over them. "Before I forget again," she covered her yawn, "I am going to Winterfell to see my family for Winterfest."

"Good," he idly stroked her damp hair, "I know you miss them."

"But now I'll miss you..." She curled up against the side, tightening around his waist. "You'll be all alone for Winterfest."

"It's just another day, little bird." Sandor knew holidays were important to her but every day with her felt like a gift - he didn't need anything more.

"It was going to be a special day," she hugged him tightly. "I had big plans."

"We'll do it all when you get back," he assured her.

"Promise?" Sansa propped up on her elbow to look down at him expectantly.

"I hate promises," he reminded her. "If I say I'm gonna do something, I mean it."

"I know," she smiled and pressed a soft kiss to his lips, "that is one of your best qualities."

"Oh, what's the best?" Sandor pulled her back down and tightened his hold on her.

"Mmm..." She traced her fingers over his chest and pointed in the center. "Here."

"My chest?" He knew what she meant but couldn't pass up teasing her.

"Your heart," she corrected. "My man has the biggest heart..." Her words trailed off as she put her hand over her mouth to cover a yawn.

"Quit chirping - sleep," he pulled the blanket over her shoulder.

"Dream sweet," she mumbled as she drifted off, "my love." Sansa always fell asleep just like that - as if she didn't have a care in the world. No matter how he explained it to her, she refused to take their problems seriously. Actually, he was relieved she would be out of town for a little while... he had some things to deal with. She was the first one to see him as more than a violent brute - the hound - but he might have to become something much worse to protect her.

Chapter End Notes

Yesterday kicked my ass - it's my own damn fault, I haven't been getting enough sleep. I made the 'responsible' decision to get to bed early last night and I'm still all busted up but at least I can see and use my hands (essential for writing fanfic). I would KILL for a computer program that could use voice commands without needing visuals... There really should more (better and affordable) accessibility to technology for people who need it. Where is the Star Trek future I was promised?! Take my money!!! I've thought about doing an audio version of my fanfic but I suck at reading out loud, especially smut - I just start giggling like an idiot. That's the first thing I'm going to do if I ever get published someday. I would want audio and braille version of my books to be available
on day one, even if I had to shell out the dough myself. Who would I want to read my books... Dame Judi Dench or Morgan Freeman would be too expensive... Ah! The soothing voice of Russell Brand!
Dreams

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dreams

JON

Three horns sounded: the danger was coming though Snow knew not what, only that he had to run from his impending doom. He tried calling out to Sam to keep up, noticing his friend had fallen behind, but his voice was carried away on the blustery wind. They sprinted as far and fast as their legs could carry them but the danger only drew nearer. Their lives would be lost if they stopped running...

"Wake up, sleepyhead." Ygritte's pretty smirk came into focus, her bright red curls wild around her head. He remembered they were in the backseat of his car, in the parking lot at school. "Should I be worried that you are calling for my cousin's husband in your sleep?" She woke him from the strangest dream: he and Sam were running through the woods of Winterfell. Jon couldn't remember if they running towards or away from something but he couldn't shake the sense of foreboding.

"Ugh," he rubbed his blurry eyes and sat up, "did we even go to the dance?" His watch revealed it was already morning: they must've fallen asleep hours ago. Jon had a vague recollection of twinkling lights and twirling Ygritte around the gym.

"I think we did pop in for a minute," she grinned before snuggling closer to his side. "Then you said something about my lips." They barely made it through four songs before Ygritte pulled him back to his car. Luckily, it was cold outside and their heavy breathing fogged the windows.

"That," he returned her grin, "I do remember." Jon reached out to trace her lower lip and the tip her tongue darted out. "It's all coming back to me." Ygritte launched at him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, and crushing her lips against his. He held onto her hips as she climbed on top of him, grinding down against his hardening cock. She panted breathlessly as she pulled away, pushing her wild hair out of her face.

"Jon," she grabbed the front of his shirt. "This is crazy - dance night is 'the' night to lose your virginity..." Ygritte's eyes burned bright with lust even in the dark. "Don't make me wait anymore."

"You promised not to push me," he pulled her hand from his shirt. "I never hid it from you, I've always been honest." She huffed out a breath, pushing him as she slid off his lap and scooted to the opposite side of the backseat.

"Do you really even like me?" The sharp look she gave him left him speechless, his mind scrambling to answer her question.

"Of course I do!" Jon reached out for her hand but she snatched it away and gave him a cold look.

"But you don't want me," she sneered and sat back to cross her arms. "I'm not good enough to be your first."

"You know that's not it," he assured her. "I swore to myself-"

"I swore to myself I'd never to cocaine again," she huffed a laugh, "but I did it." Ygritte shook her
head and jutted her chin a little higher. "Life moves on. People break promises to themselves, even when it doesn't make any sense. I'm not asking you to do anything that would hurt you!"

"You've done cocaine?" Jon was still hung up on that confession.

"Yes - I just said that - it was nasty." Ygritte scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Come on, it's no big deal." She huffed back against the seat and kicked her boot against the driver's seat. "You're just changing the subject! You say you don't wanna risk having a kid - I say you're full of shit! There's about a dozen different ways to prevent that from happening." She gestured wide with her arm, glaring at him as she jerked her thumb at herself. "Is it that you don't trust me? I don't want a fucking kid either!"

"It's late," he sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I should take you home." Jon didn't want to have to constantly explain or defend himself to her. Either Ygritte accepted him the way he was or she didn't.

"Sure, whatever," she threw her door open and they both got out of the car to get into the front seat. "Of course we aren't going to talk about it - because you don't have a leg to stand on." Ygritte didn't seem to have a problem continuing the conversation without him. "I'm the one taking all the risk..." Jon let her rant as he turned the ignition over and pulled out of the emptied school parking lot. "Fuck it, never mind." They rode the rest of the way to her house in silence and he parked out front.

"Ygritte..." Jon wanted to fix this tenseness that settled over them but he didn't have the faintest idea what to say.

"Look," she spoke first, "I need some time to think..." Ygritte wouldn't look at him. "I'll call you."

"I'm sorry, Ygritte." Jon didn't really feel like he should have to apologize but he couldn't stand her being so upset with him.

"There's nothing to be sorry for," she sighed, "I think we might just be too different. You're so uptight about everything and it's stressing me out. You're probably sick of me too..." Jon was struck dumb by her words or else he would've argued: he was happier with her than he'd ever been. "If we keep trying to force this, I might just end up hating you."

"Shit," he inhaled a shuddering breath, "I didn't know it was that bad." Jon felt like all the air was sucked out of his lungs and replaced with lead. His mind screamed at him to say something to stop whatever was happening... Was she dumping him?

"It's not all bad - I'm having fun and I like being with you," she glanced at him before looking away again. "But I don't..." Ygritte leaned forward to brace her elbows on her knees and wrapped her hands around her upper arms. "This relationship makes me feel bad about myself, like I'm not good enough. For the first time, I care more about what a boy thinks about me than my own thoughts. That's not right - I can't deal with that."

"I don't know what to say," his hands gripped the wheel. This whole thing blindsided him: Jon had no idea she was so unhappy.

"I just need a few days to refocus." Ygritte gave him a tight smile and he just stared at her in disbelief. "I'll call you," she got out and slammed the car door on their conversation. He watched her walk up to her house and go inside without looking back once.

"Fuck," he whispered to himself. "What just happened?" His mind churned with uncertainty as he drove back home, the night traffic passing by in a blur of lights. Jon always believed his personal
vow of celibacy was protecting himself from becoming a father too soon. Was he really 'full of shit' like Ygritte accused him of being? Was he just pushing her away because he was afraid? He shook his head to clear his thoughts as he slid the key into the apartment's lock and turned it over to open the door quietly.

"I need you, Lyanna." A man's voice came from the living room and Jon froze. "It has always been you - only you - all my life." The voice was unfamiliar and he closed the door as quietly as he could, wondering if he could sneak past.

"Stop this," mom snapped at the man. "We both know perfectly well that love cannot change anything. If you want to see Jon there is nothing I can do to stop you." His heart stopped beating but somehow all the blood in his body rushed into his head. "He's practically grown, he doesn't need you coming into his life and confusing him."

"He's my son-"

"He's my son!" Mom's voice was tight but fierce. "I gave birth to him and I raised him. If anything, Ned raised him as a father should." Jon leaned against the door, covering his mouth to muffle the sound of his heavy breathing.

"Because you never let me-"

"You should be taking care of your wife," she spit the word with vehemence, "and other children." It was like a punch in the gut, though the news that Jon had sibling shouldn't have been a surprise.

"Elia is getting treatment," the man pleaded pitifully. "I plan to ask for a divorce once she is well. You know we've been separated for years."

"You abandoned her," mom's voice broke, "like you abandoned me."

"I didn't have..."

"A choice?" Mom gave one sharp laugh. "There is always a choice, Ray. You chose the easy way, listen to mommy and daddy - marry who they tell you. I was fool enough back then to believe all your promises. I haven't 'kept' Jon from you - if you really loved him you would do anything to be in his life."

"I'm here now," he pleaded, "telling you that I still love you. I never stopped..."

"I almost died to give birth to Jon," she said it like an accusation. "Ned was beside me, the whole time, telling me to hang on and live for him... My Jon - my son is everything to me. I thought I loved you Ray, but I only knew true love when the doctor put him in my arms. You missed that because you wanted more."

"There is nothing I want more than you, Lyanna." The man's voice was barely more than a whisper and Jon strained to hear. "I only tried to do what I thought you wanted."

"You thought I wanted..." Mom's words trailed off into a pitiful imitation of laughter: broken and hollow. "I worshiped you," her voice grew cold, "and you taught me that love isn't enough. I would still love you to this day if you had only let me. But your father called you to his side and you left without even fighting for me. That's all in the past now... I will ask Jon if he wants to see you. Go now, before he comes home."

"I'm here," Jon stepped around the entryway and into the living room with his eyes trained on the man kneeling in front of his mother...
white. All the times he tried to picture him never came close to the man who knelt on the floor with a tortured expression.

"Jon," mom gasped as she turned towards him, "how long...?"

"I'm dead tired," he huffed a laugh, "too tired for all this." Jon waved a hand at the man who was supposedly his father and moved to trudge past them before stopping. "Mom... I love you," he couldn't look at her as he said it. "You were always more than enough."

"I love you too, Jon." Mom stood up and so did the man, both of them looking at him.

"Wait," Jon called after the man when he turned to leave. There were question he needed answered, no matter how painful it might be to hear. "What's your name?"

"Rhaegar Targaryen," he answered tightly, "Ray for short."

"Ray?" Jon nodded his head. "I always wondered." He walked to the coffee table to grab a scrap of paper and scribbled on it before passing it to 'Ray'. "Here's my number, call me or don't, it won't make much of a difference to me."

"I will," Ray's dark purple eyes locked with Jon's.

"I won't hold my breath," he broke the staring contest and walked back to his room to collapse on his bed. Jon remembered his dream, the off-putting uneasyness that he could not shake started to seem like a premonition. In one night he possibly lost his girlfriend and found the long-lost father he stopped wondering about years ago. The gods, if they even exist, certainly do have some sense of humor.

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DANY

The long drive was lulling her to sleep and Drogo was not exactly one for making idle conversion to keep her awake. Dany had fun at the dance but she could tell it wasn't his cup of tea, much more at home on the ranch. For most of the night, she just wanted to be alone with him. It was expected of her to accept the Winter Princess crown but after that, she saw no reason to stay.

"I suppose," she sighed as she pulled the flower crown from her head. "I am always cursed to be the princess and never the queen." Dany admired the flowers: there were at least a hundred other girls who would have appreciated the wreath more than her.

"No," he replied.

"No?" She turned towards him with a grin, knowing he was teasing her with his one-word answer. "Am I the queen of your heart then?"

"No," he repeated: the barest hint of a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. Dany loved it when he started being playful, it was so out of character.

"Drogo," she scowled, "if you say 'no' one more time you will regret it."

"You are a warrior," he stated simply.

"That," she blinked in surprise, "is such a sweet thing to say." Dany smiled at him, fighting her tiredness as she muffled a yawn. "You hardly string together two words but when you do... You are amazing." Her heavy eyelids won, shutting out the world as the rumbling truck rocked her to sleep. She woke up to Drogo opening her door and unbuckling her seatbelt to gather her into his arms like
a sleeping child.

"You don't have to-" He ignored her weak protest and lifted her into his arms to carry her. "Mmm," she rested her head against his shoulder, "you are going to spoil me." Dany nearly fell asleep again as he carried her into the dark house and back into his room before setting her down. Drogo stood behind her to remove her dress and let it fall to the floor; she was too tired to care about hanging the dress. She crawled into his bed as she removed her bra and fell onto her back to wriggle out of her panties.

The sound of his clothes falling to the floor kept her conscious before he lay down beside her, his palm sliding over her stomach. To make room for him, she scooted over and rolled onto her side. Drogo pulled the blanket over her and she burrowed underneath it, wishing she wasn't too tired to have sex. But he was likely just as exhausted so it would just have to wait until morning... something to look forward to. The warmth of his body heated the blankets and soon she was drifting off again. Dany lifted her head so one of his arms could serve as her pillow as the other encircled her and his hard body pressed against the length of hers. His face nuzzled into her hair as his hand lowered to caress down her hip and slipping his fingers between her thighs. He lifted her leg over his and stroked up her thigh, setting her skin on fire. She moaned and arched her back, pushing against his hard cock as molten heat flowed down her spine. Drogo buried his face against her neck nipping under her ear before pressing his lips down his neck.

His fingers lightly teased between her legs, spreading her slickness, and making her yearn for more. Her body trembled and writhed under his gentle torture until he pulled his hand away to position his hardness at her entrance. Dany gasped as he pushed himself all the way inside her, bracing her hand against the mattress and fisting the sheets. Drogo's arm held her and his fingers curled around her hip to pull her flush to him. She rolled her hips and ached against him, sending waves of pleasure through her body.

Her head lifted to turn towards his face, seeking his lips and he lifted up onto his forearm to delve into her mouth. His tongue slid along hers before pulling away to suckle her lower lip only to dive back in, matching his thrusts. Dany reached one hand back to grip his thigh, feeling the strong muscle flexing with each pull and push of his hips. She tore her mouth away from his to let out a strained cry when his hand returned between her legs to tease her slick pulsing flesh. The combination of his fingers stroking and his cock plunging deeper stole be breath away.

"Oh gods," she wheezed, bucking her hips to match his thrusts increasing in tempo. Drogo murmured encouragement in her ear, his deep voice bringing her to the edge of her climax. "Drogo!" Stars exploded behind her eyelids as heat cascaded down over her stomach, waves of pleasure crashing over her. She arched against his body as she felt him joining her in ecstasy, pumping deep inside her with a groan. If she thought she was tired before... he certainly knew how to put a girl to bed.

"Atthirarido chek," he wished her pleasant dreams as his arms enfolded her. "Zhey jalan atthirari anni."

Chapter End Notes
And that wraps up the night of the Winter Formal - I hope the chapters matched the build-up! Now I'm all twitchy to write more Sansan smut but first - Winterfest with the Starks. The girls are going home. And Sandor has some things to take care of...

I think I just hit 200,000 words - which just seems like a lot to me. I feel good about it.
GENDRY

She screamed like a banshee, straight into his ear, but he would rather go deaf from it than not hear that beautiful sound. Her hands clawed into his back as he pumped the last of his release deep inside her before loosening his tight grip. It was indescribable: like the whole world disappeared and it was only them. But time wasn't passing at a normal rate, sometimes faster and other times not moving at all. Gendry would swear it should already be sunup but the gods seemed to take mercy on them and let the night last forever.

"How," he wheezed, "does it keep getting better!!" Gendry rolled onto his back and struggled to catch his breath before pulling off the condom to chuck it into the trash bag.

"I'm good like that," she chuckled breathlessly and slapped her palm against his chest, "you did alright." Arya groaned and stretched, taking up much more room than a tiny person should need. "Imagine if we really had time to dedicate ourselves - we might have the best sex ever." She heaved a regretful sigh. "Too bad we can't make a living doing it - we're so damn talented."

"Sure beats washing dishes," he linked his hands behind his head, staring up at the stars through an open flap in the roof of the tent. Somehow even washing dishes became a happy event since he met Arya, gave him a chance to daydream about her. Gendry would think about their future: what kind of life they would make together. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"Ugh, gag alert!" Arya propped up on her elbow to smirk down at him. "What are you, my guidance counselor?" She stuck her tongue out in a disgusted expression and crossed her eyes. "Could you possibly ask a more stupid question?"

"Come on," he coaxed with a smile, wrapping a hand around her narrow waist and pulling her close. "I want to know what my little Arry dreams of being." Arya rolled her eyes but he could see her resistance falling before she laid her head on his chest. "Should I guess? Ninja? Pirate? International girl of mystery? Robot space pirate ninja who moonlights as a spy?"

"Please, no more! I give!" Arya surrendered too easily, a sign that she really wanted to tell him. "I kinda," she trailed her fingers over his chest, "sorta, maybe want to be a private investigator. Catching bad guys who do fucked up things," her voice turned cold. "Like hit-and-run on a little kid."

"Your brother?" Gendry felt her head nodding 'yes' and he tightened his hold on her. Arya didn't like to talk about Bran's accident but when she did, a murderous edge crept into her voice. "That makes sense: I could totally see you doing that." He kept his tone light as he pictured her chasing down and cuffing some bail-jumper. "Busting criminals with your own brand of justice." The criminal world would never be the same with Arya Stark on the job. "Why not a cop?"

"Jurisdiction and going 'by the book' are so not my style." Arya leaned over his chest and did her best to look nonchalant. "I might a tiny bit curious what you want to do." Gendry had to walk on eggshells whenever the topic of his future came up, none of his answers ever seemed to satisfy her.
Arry was worse than mom sometimes.

"Same thing I do now, I guess," he shrugged. "I'll just work full-time and save up for..." He almost said 'our wedding' but thought it best to leave those discussions off for a few more years. "You know, whatever. Plenty of local colleges to get my basic credits and I'll know better what I want to do in a few years."

"Because you'll be waiting around," she sat up facing away from him, "for me to grow up." Arya just didn't get it: he didn't care how he made a living as long as she stayed by his side. "That's not a real answer." She had him too built up in her head, thinking she was holding him back when really she gave his life purpose. Before she barreled into his life, Gendry was going nowhere and fast. Back then he cared more about the next DnD game before worrying about his future.

"What else would I do?" Gendry sat up behind her and pressed a kiss to her shoulder. "This is what I love, being here with you." She twisted her body to face him, eyes wide and uncertain. "I just want to please milady and forge some metals," he smiled at her, "I'm a simple guy." He could see the inspiration cover her features, her lips parted and she gazed off at nothingness.

"You could forge professionally," she suggested excitedly. "Make custom weapons, armor, and jewelry and sell them online." Gendry had thought about something like that but doubted he'd ever make enough money to live off. It was worth a shot...

"Would you help me make a website?" He knew about as much about web design as he did about working on cars: nothing. Ask him how to forge steel and work leather, he'd have an answer. Web design was about five hundred years too advanced for him.

"Once I'm done being grounded," she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "I will make you the most badass website." Arya leaned her head back with a confident smirk on her face. "I was born coding html."

"Your poor mother," he chuckled and leaned forward to kiss her but Arya suddenly pushed him back.

"Oh shit, that reminds me." Arya groaned and rubbed her hand over her face. "I'm visiting my family for winter break, I'll be gone until the weekend after Winterfest." Gendry didn't expect to see her much over the break anyway without their Monday games.

"Then we'll only have about two more weeks of grounding," he pointed out the bright side. "I can deal with that. Mom and I will just have to celebrate Winterfest without you."

"Your new papa Bronn will be there too," she teased and he ruffled her hair in retaliation.

"I'll miss you," he kissed the tip of her nose, "have fun seeing your family." His lips pressed against each of her cheeks and then her smiling lips. "I know you miss them."

"You're right - don't get a big head about it." She poked him in the side of his head before her happy expression fell. "I'll really miss you."

"Call me whenever you miss me," he pressed a soft kiss to her lips. "I have to give your gift early then." Gendry rummaged around through the blankets to find his shorts, pulling them on before unzipping the tent. It was chilly outside so he jogged to the forge to pull out Arya's gift and hurried back to the tent. After zipping the flap closed, he knelt before her and handed her the rolled up leather. "Milady, for you." She gave him a curious look as she unrolled the leather to reveal the small rapier and scabbard.
"Oh my gods..." The look of pure awe on her face was worth the hours of work it took to fashion the weapon. "A sword?" She grasped the handle and tested the balance as he sat back to watch her play with her new toy. "It's stunning."

"You really like it?" Gendry hoped for this kind of reaction but it still felt pretty damn good to be appreciated. Not every girl... Most girls... No girl but Arya would ever want a sword for Winterfest. That's why she was his and he was hers: not every bloke on the block has his own medieval forge. Blacksmiths get all the ladies... Or rather the girls who refuse to be 'ladies'.

"I love it - it's the best gift anyone has ever given me." Arya turned her eyes up at him with an expression of disbelief. "You really get me, Gendry."


"Love you, Gendry." She carefully sheathed the sword and placed it against the side of the tent before pulling him down for a rare cuddle. As he drew a blanket over them, her warm little body fitted against his and Gendry thought: this is the life. A guy couldn't ask for more than a tent and his one true love by his side. Everyone just gets caught up in the rat race of life, fancy cars and giant empty houses... "Why the fuck aren't you naked?!"

"Sorry, milady." He quickly rolled onto his back and removed the offending underwear before turning to gather her into his embrace. Under the blanket was comfortable despite the cold air outside the tent, they made their own heat. Her soft thighs cradled his cock and he was surprised at her self-control. She wriggled and rubbed against him but didn't push him back. His little Arry was finally learning patience, which he did promise to teach her. Back then, he had a slightly different mode of education in mind: this was more fun.

"I wish you could come with me," she murmured. "You would love Winterfell and my brothers are really cool."

"Not so sure how they would feel about me," he grimaced, imagining Robb as a younger version of her father. Or a bigger version of Jon: either way not a fun mental image. "I don't know how many pairs of grey eyes I can stand giving me the Stark death stare."

"Bran would like you," she assured him, "and Rickon would like you if you made him a toy. Mom... well, at least her eyes are blue."

"Your sister's death stare is twice as icy," he shivered from the memory of Sansa's warning to treat her sister right. Those Starks really knew how to put the fear of the gods into a guy but Arya was more than worth it.

"Sansa is a wimp," she scoffed but Gendry wasn't buying it. Sansa might be polite and soft-spoken but she had the same... grit that Arry had. The girls liked to pretend they had nothing in common. But they were more alike than dissimilar: both were honest, loyal, and determined.

"Wimps don't date the hound," he countered and immediately felt her body stiffen. "What?"

"I dismissed it as high school bullshit before... Do you think there's something to all those rumors about him?" Arya's question gave him pause because he wondered the same thing himself. Gendry was never one to listen to gossip but the whole school knew the hound was the last guy to fuck with. But after getting to know him a little bit, he seemed a nice enough fellow and obviously head over heels for Arry's pretty sister.

"Are any rumors ever completely true?" Two years ago, there was some hullabaloo about the older
Clegane but back then, Gendry didn't 'socialize' much. That was around the time there was that big fight at school, between Sandor and some other ball player. "A lot of people saw him beat the shit out of somebody once but I don't know how it got started, just heard about it later." The rumors said it was because the other kid mocked the hound's face. "Could be the guy deserved it, like Gilly's dad."

"I know Sansa," the tone of her voice was clearly worried though she'd never admit it. "She only likes to see the best in people." Arya shook her head against his shoulder. "I just can't shake the feeling that he's a good guy - I usually trust my gut. I'm getting all twitchy to start digging around but it's none of my business and I'm so close to not being grounded." She inhaled deeply and then exhaled slowly. "Please talk me out of it."

"If it makes you feel better, Drogo is..." Gendry searched for the right word. "Well he's a bit odd but I think he's a good judge of character." At least, as Drogo's friend, that's what he hoped. "He wouldn't be friends with a total asshole."

"You told me to stay away from the hound, remember?" Arya was talking about the night they crashed Joffrey Baratheon's party.

"Better safe than sorry," he tightened his arm around her. "I didn't want to risk you mouthing off to the wrong guy." Gendry could just picture her saying something and getting herself into a fight: no matter how big the other guy was.

"Oh," she raised her head and lifted her brows, 'I'm 'mouthy', huh?"

"You know you are," he smirked up at her. "You mouth is bigger than all the rest of you."

"I'm suddenly so very tired..." She rolled on her side, pulling all the covers with her and leaving him naked to the cold. "Must be all the mouthing off I do."

"I like your mouthing off," he leaned over her to murmur in her ear. "Makes me wanna kiss you." Arya flipped over and ran her eyes over him with a hungry expression.

"You had enough rest yet?" Her hand wound around the back of his neck to start pulling him down.

"Nope," he flopped onto his back spread-eagle, "you'll have to do the work this time." Arya huffed out a laugh as she sat up, stretching her arms up and looking back at him over her shoulder with a grin.

"Challenge accepted," she crawled over him to straddle his thighs. "I'm better at it than you anyway."

"No arguments here," his hand gripped her hips as she leaned over him to grab a condom and deftly opened the packet and covered his cock. Bloody hells, she was getting better at it than him! Guess nobody really 'wins' or loses at sex but if he had to pick a 'winner', it'd be her every time. Her soft chest molded against his and she curled an arm around his neck to brush her lips over his. "Arry, after this we should sleep." Her other hand slipped between their bodies to grasp his cock and she sat back, sinking down to envelop him inside her.

"We'll sleep when we're dead," her voice was husky as her dark hair fell into her eyes, both of her hands braced on his chest. "Now were gonna live." Gendry loved watching Arya looking down on him, her heavy-lidded eyes burning with possession. Gasped breaths turned to moans through her parted lips as she rolled her hips against his. Gods damn him: he should've got a bloody lamp! He sat up to claim her panting lips, wrapping his arms around her waist and crossing his legs under her.
Her hips stilled and her fingers tangled in his hair, distracted by her determination to devour his mouth. Arya nipped and sucked at his lips before thrusting her tongue into his mouth. He braced one arm around her waist and used his other hand to support her neck, tilting her back to break the kiss. His lips trailed down her neck, pressing kisses past her collarbone, and hovered his mouth over the tip of her breast. She moaned and pulled his hair as his breath teased the stiff peak and her whole body trembled in response.

"Please," she sobbed and rolled her hips as she arched her back towards him even more. The sound of Arya begging was even more beautiful than her screaming; he intended to hear plenty of both this time. His mouth closed around her breast and his tongue swirled around the stiff peak as she screamed in response. Her nails dug into the back of his neck as she writhed in his arms like she didn't know whether to escape or let him hold her still. "More," she demanded in a stronger voice and moaned as he suckled harder.

He removed his hand from behind her neck to cup her other breast with his, kneading softly as her hands reached back to clutch his thighs. Her body arched into a perfect bow, curling around his arm as her head hung back. The sound of her gasping moans grew louder as his lips and fingertips teased her sent lust ripping through his body. His cock throbbed as she pulsed around it, nearly breaking his willpower and urging him to roll her onto her back and drive into her. Instead, he lowered his hand from her breast down between her legs.

"Oh gods, more please," Arya only ever prayed during sex: one of her many endearing qualities. His fingers traced her slick flesh as she cried out incoherently and twisted her hips against his fingers. Gendry pulled her back up, drawing her lips to his. She curled an arm around his neck and rose up slightly on her knees only to drop back down, using his body as leverage to repeat the motion. He squeezed his eyes shut and dug his fingers into her hips to help her increase the pace. He opened his mouth against hers and felt her tongue slide over his lips.

He tightened her grip on her hips and sucked her tongue in time with the swaying motion of her hips. Arya broke the kiss first, inhaling a ragged breath and turned into a high-pitched cry as her motions before more erratic. She rested her brow against his as her cries grew louder and it was making it hard to hold himself back. Gendry could feel she was getting close but his control snapped and his hands pulled her hips down to release deep inside her. A brief instant of silence broke as she threw her head back and screamed, grinding down against him wildly.

Gendry fell back against the blankets and she followed on top of him, both of them gasping and shivering. He could still feel her fluttering around his cock as she twitched and whimpered against his chest. Arya heaved a sigh before lifting her hips to let him slip out and slithered up his body to press a kiss to his neck.

"Yep," she murmured, "keeps getting better." Arya slipped down by his side and yawned against his shoulder. "You may sleep now."

"Generous of you," he blew out a breath before chucking the condom and tucking them in as he pulled her close. "I wish we didn't need sleep to live."

"Yeah," she mumbled against his chest. "But this is the best way."

"Right as usual," he kissed her forehead. "Goodnight, Arya."

"Goodnight, Gendry." She snuggled even closer, hooking one leg around his and they fell asleep tangled up with each other: as it should be.
How did it get so late?! I've been trying to perfect my male POV smut (I know, perfection is impossible - so far). It's difficult because I've never known the joy of having a penis to make love to a woman with. Thus is the nature of humanity, cursed to only know the joys of sex through the perspective of one gender. Where's my Freaky Friday?! I would skip the whole life lesson and just bang-bang-bangity-bang. Com'on, that's what anyone would do if they suddenly had a penis! Or maybe that's just me.

Okay, that's my cue to exit: night-night Zzzzzz....
The orange morning sun shone through the curtains but Sansa did not want to get up yet. She felt too warm, safe, and comfortable to ever want to move. As consciousness forced its way into her mind, she became aware of Sandor's fingers stroking through her hair. It felt nice so she kept her eyes closed and resisted the urge to snuggle against his warm body.

"You're awake," he accused softly and Sansa shook her head in denial as a smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "Don't lie to me, little bird." His hand lowered to cup her jaw and she let her eyes blink open, adjusting to the warm hint of light peeking into the room.

"Good morning," she whispered for fear of croaking like a frog. It was so embarrassing to be seen first thing in the morning before she washed her puffy face with cold water. Sandor gazed down at her like she was something precious and it made her stomach flutter. "Did you sleep at all?" He slowly pulled the sheet down to uncover her chest, letting his fingertips skim over her sensitive skin.

"You know how much I paid for this room?" His voice was low as he admired her body, something she was still unused to. "I can sleep back at the shop." Sandor glanced back up to her face and grinned when he noticed she was blushing, which only made her redden more. His fingers traced under her breast and over her ribs.

"So you," her breath hitched as his fingers rolled over the hardened peak, "just watched me all night?"

"Is that okay?" Sandor stroked his fingertips up the side of her face and tucked her hair behind her ear.

"It's sweet," she smiled up at him but turned away when he leaned in for a kiss. "Let me just..." Sansa shimmied out of the bed and resisted the impulse to take the sheet with her. "I'll be right back." She felt his eyes following her as she went into the bathroom and rested against the door as it closed behind her. Her reflection stared back at her, naked, flushed, and unfamiliar. The woman who gaped back at her could no longer be called a girl and she smiled at herself and covered her blushing cheeks.

After splashing some cold water on her face and attending a few other morning needs, she went back out into the room. Sandor was sitting against the headboard, his arm resting over one raised knee, looking calm and collected. Sansa knew it was ridiculous to feel shy but he almost seemed... unaffected.

"You're quiet," she climbed back into bed, resting back against the headboard, and covered her legs with the sheet.

"Don't worry," he took her hand, "I'm just tired." His eyes traveled over her uncovered chest before giving her a questioning look. "Not too tired."

"Um, I'm a bit..." Sansa averted her eyes and tried to think of a way to be honest without worrying
"I hurt you," he said it almost like an accusation and she quickly shook her head in denial. "Don't try to deny it."

"Not so badly that..." Sansa retook his hand and turned to face him. "Next time will be easier, you'll see."

"I should've gone slower," his brow was furrowed in distress and he could not meet her eyes.

"I thought it was wonderful," she scooted towards him and rested her head on his shoulder. "When I get back after Winterfest, I would like very much to have you again." Sansa trailed a hand down his stomach and stopped at the sheet. "I could..."

"No," he pulled her arm across his body and held her, "let's just stay like this a while." Sandor kissed the top of her head. "Call me every day when you're gone or I'll be worried."

"I will," she promised. "Besides, won't I be safer somewhere else?"

"I'll keep you safe," he held her tighter.

"After I get back," she sat up to look him in the eye, "we are going to figure everything out. You can trust my father."

"We'll talk about it when you get back," he hugged her down against his chest.

"We can't keep putting it off," she scolded. "I know you're worried about me but I'm worried about you too."

"You're so perfect," he pulled her chin up and pressed a soft kiss to her lips, "so beautiful."

"You are trying to distract me," she accused with a smile.

"Is it working?" Sandor grinned down at her.

"Might be," she quirked her brows, "could be." Sansa gasped when he hauled her on top of him and kissed her until she was panting and breathless. "We should get going," she pulled away reluctantly. "I told Arya we would meet in an hour. Unless you..."

"What?" Sandor gave her a irritated look.

"Steal me away," she fluttered her lashes with an innocent expression.

"Don't tempt me," he growled before claiming her lips again. Sansa wondered just how much she had to tempt him before he followed through. She did not care where they went... she never wanted to leave his side again.

ARYA

Some damn chirping birds woke her up a full fifteen minutes before her alarm was set to go off. Well, if she had to be awake then he needed to get the fuck up too - Arya flung his arm off her chest. Nothing, not even a peep, the boy could sleep through a hurricane.

"Get up," she kicked his leg, "we're gonna be late." Gendry reached out for her and pulled her close, trapping her under his muscled arm no matter how she struggled. "Sansa will give me her icy death stare."
"Let's just never leave and live here," he buried his face against her hair and she gave up trying to fight him. "They won't find us." Arya was tempted by his offer, nuzzling her face against his warm chest - she could live in a tent to wake up like this. "We'll hunt and forage in the woods for food."

"I need internet to live," she sulked and squirmed against his body. "Maybe I don't... Alright, let's go before we become forest people." Arya wiggled out of his hold and grabbed her change of clothes to pull them on. Gendry, gloriously naked, distracted her by opening the skylight and then burst out laughing when he looked at her.

"Oh my gods!" He fell down on the ground, shaking with laughter. "Bloody hells! Your face is covered in glitter!"

"Shut up, stupid!" Arya pointed at the glittery smudges all over his handsome grinning face. "You think you don't have makeup all over your face?"

"You still look beautiful," he grabbed her hand and pulled her close to kiss her.

"Get dressed, dumbass." Arya shoved him back onto the ground and his happy expression fell, making her feel guilty. "We don't have time to get distracted... so don't touch me." She turned away to find and pack up last night's clothes as he got dressed. He was still pulling on his pants when she unzipped the tent and started walking to the car.

"Arry," he hurried to her side and slipped his hand in hers, "is this okay?"

"Yeah," she squeezed his hand and slowed her pace as they walked to the Lincoln. They were barely out of the parking lot before she slumped against the door and fell fast asleep, only waking when he gently nudged her.

"We're here," he murmured and she crawled across the seat to wrap her arms around his neck. "Miss you," Gendry squeezed her tightly before pulling her away and straitening her bangs. "Call me."

"I will," she promised, "every day." Arya wiped at one of the glittery smudges under his eye but it only smeared the makeup. "I'll miss you more so you better pick up or you'll regret it when I get back." She kissed him hard and grabbed her stuff before crawling over him to get out of his side and slamming the door behind her. "Never look back - it would be too hard to leave him if she hesitated to even a second."

"What's that?" Sansa pointed down at the rapier covered in leather.

"None of your business," Arya ignored her question as she led the way to the side gate where Sheri was waiting.

"Fine," Sansa tossed her hair over her shoulder, "I don't actually care."

"Still walking straight?" Arya couldn't pass up a golden opportunity to tease her sister.

"Shut up, Arya," she hissed as they approached the gate. "Gods, you're still such a child."

"So cranky," Arya knocked lightly on the gate. "The big guy not that great? I'll give him some pointers."

"Don't you dare!" Sansa turned beet red as Sheri swung the gate open with an envious expression.

"You two are so lucky." Sheri beamed - clearly a morning person. "I wish I had a reason to make elaborate ruses to sneak out... and a sister."
"They're overrated," Arya scoffed, earning her an elbow from Sansa. Sheri led them down the hall and back to her room where the air mattress was already laid out.

"I'm beat," Arya shoved the doll and pillows out of the way as she collapsed onto the air mattress.

"I could sleep," Sansa yawned and lay down next to her.

"I'll go make some pancakes," Sheri whispered as she backed towards the door. "And wake you up when they're done."

"I love you," Arya called after Sheri. "She's a good kid," she mumbled, pulling a sheet over her shoulder.

"Hush," Sansa threw her arm around Arya. "Let me sleep." They both cuddled up with each other and instantly fell into a deep slumber.

SHIREEN

"Arya," she murmured softly to the sisters who were snuggled together on the air mattress. "Sansa, I made pancakes." They both stirred and let go of each other to sit up.

"Coffee," Arya groaned like a zombie as she sat up with glazed unseeing eyes. "Must - have - caffeine."

"There is plenty of coffee," she assured, biting her lip to keep from laughing.

"Take me to it," a predatory glint shone in Arya's eyes as they snapped to Sheri's face.

"Thank you, Sheri." Sansa smiled graciously, looking tousled and pretty even after just waking up. "You are too nice." Both girls got out of bed to follow Sheri out of the room and down the hall towards the breakfast nook.

"I love to cook," she chatted with Sansa as Arya trudged behind in a semi-conscious state. "But I never have anyone to cook for."

"I guess being an only child can be lonely," Sansa empathized.

"It has its perks sometimes," Sheri admitted. It was hard to even imagine having to share her parent's disinterested attention with someone else.

"I can guess," Sansa peeked back at Arya before winking at Sheri as they walked into dinette. "Oh my gods," she froze in the doorway to see the 'war room' theme her mother used to decorate the breakfast room.

"Coffee..." Arya beelined straight to the coffee maker and filled a steaming mug with several heaping tablespoons of sugar. "Oh yeah," she sighed after taking a sip, "Colombian dark roast with a hint of vanilla." Sheri moved around her friend to pour herself a cup while Sansa placed the plates and flatware.

"Sansa," she called as she poured herself a cup, "how do you take it?" Sheri added a drop of milk and a teaspoon of sugar in her coffee.

"Lots of milk," she replied while straightening a napkin, "if you have it."

"Coming right up," she fought the urge to grin like a silly fool. Something about being with the Stark sisters made her feel more at home in her own house than ever before. They sat down on opposite
sides of the table while Sheri sat between them at the head, setting down her and Sansa's cups.

"Oh gods, Sheri," Arya forked a chocolate chip pancake off on of three stacks and stuck the whole thing in her mouth. "This is so fucking good!" She looked over her shoulder towards the doorway, groping blindly for the syrup. "Aren't your parents going to eat?" Sansa selected three pancakes of each type and arranged them on her plate before cutting a small bite with her butter knife.

"Mother doesn't wake up this early and never eats breakfast." Sheri helped herself to some pancakes as she spoke. "She's on a juice cleanse or something. Dad is already at work - somebody has to run the company-" She slapped her hand over her mouth and shot a worried look between the two sisters. "Oh no," she mumbled, "I should not have said that.”

"No," Sansa waved a hand in dismissal, "that is quite all right." She nodded towards her sister, who was still stuffing her mouth full of pancakes after drowning them in syrup. "Neither of us has a very high opinion of your uncle."

"I think he's a fucking idiot," Arya added with her mouth full. "If you don't mind my saying so."

"Arya," Sansa scolded, "don't be disgusting at the breakfast table."

"So," Arya gulped her food and grinned at her older sister. "I can be disgusting when we're not eating breakfast?" Sansa rolled her eyes and scoffed before turning a smile on Sheri.

"Forgive her rudeness," she shot another glare at her little sister. "Please continue."

"Dad works like a madman," Sheri dropped her fork, suddenly having no appetite. "Uncle Robert never recognizes his efforts nor even considered passing the company to my father." She crossed her arms and glared down at her half-eaten banana pancake. "Joffrey would be a terrible CEO."

"Joffrey is terrible in general," Sansa muttered before taking a sip of her coffee.

"I wish you could come with us for Winterfest," Arya took a break from stuffing her face to sit back in her chair. "You're the only good member of your family that I've met."

"Myrcella is nice," Sansa vouched and Shireen agreed for the most part. Myrcella had a tendency to be a bit dense about how her family and the world operated. She thought everyone liked her because she deserved it but really, she was just lucky to be born rich and pretty. If Sheri had been born to a poor family, her condition might have killed her because they would not be able to afford the treatments. If only modern medicine could have saved her face along with her life... An existence with half a face is only half a life.

"If you really mean it," Sheri hesitated, feeling presumptuous and never quite sure when Arya was joking. "I could ask my father if I can come."

"I would love it if you came," Sansa answered for her sister, who was busy trying to fit two pancakes in her mouth at once. Arya nodded vigorously and made some unintelligible noises.

"Sansa," she hesitated and averted her eyes, "can I ask you a personal question... about your boyfriend?"

"Go ahead," Sansa leaned forward on the table, her full attention of Sheri.

"His face," she gestured at her own destroyed cheek, "it doesn't bother you?" Sansa blinked a few times and nodded slowly.
"I'm not unaffected by it," she paused as if trying to find the right words. "Most of the time it's just his face, that's the way he looks. At times, I feel sorry he had to go through the pain of being scarred and the rejection he has faced. More often, I'm in awe of his bravery and ability to keep going even when I know it's hard for him."

"I wish someone could look at me like that." Sheri tried and failed to imitate a light-hearted smile.

"Everyone feels that way," Sansa insisted in a stronger voice. "We all want someone who will look past our outer selves and see who we truly are on the inside. I know it's not the same but to some people, I'm just a pretty face without a brain in my head. Sandor rejected me at first and it hurt a lot so I had to be brave to follow my heart. Love isn't something that just happens; you have to work for it."

"Wow sis," Arya wiped her mouth and started a slow clap, "nice speech." Then she faced Sheri with a mischievous smile. "Do you like Pod?"

"I think he is fun and handsome," she shrugged and turned her attention back to her food. "For now I'm okay being friends, I never even had a boy for a friend before."

"If you join us around the table," Arya resumed attacking her food. "You will get a whole gang of guys for friends and even a pretty cheerleader."

"I was surprised to see Dany Targaryen at the game." Sheri laughed as she poured a drizzle of syrup over her pancakes. "We all have our little secrets."

"Dany Targaryen?" Sansa's bright blue eyes opened wide in surprise, darting between Arya and Sheri. "You have to tell me."

"There's nothing to tell," Arya rolled her eyes and continued to eat. "Me and Gendry and the guys you met at the wedding all play DnD together once a week. Dany joined the group a little before Sam left." She pointed her fork at her older sister. "You can't tell anyone, she swore us all to secrecy."

"I see..." Sansa stared down at the table and twirled her hair before looking back up at Arya. "Of course, I won't tell anyone. How is she?"

"Dany?" Arya raised a confused brow. "Fine, I guess."

"Seems pretty happy," Sheri added, "with her boyfriend."

"She's got weird taste in men," Arya chuckled. "Actually, I think I might be the only one with normal taste - which is weird."

"Goofy Gendry isn't at all 'normal'," Sansa contended wryly.

"You're right - thank the gods." Arya grinned at her sister with a mouthful of food and syrup on her face, earning a disgusted eye roll from Sansa.

"This is the most fun I've ever had at breakfast," Sheri confessed.

"I want to trade you with my sister," Sansa offered before glaring at her sister. "Arya, you stay here and Sheri can come home with me." She turned to Sheri with a conspiratorial smirk. "I will sneak you away in my purse. Daddy won't mind, he already adores you."

"No way," Arya protested, "this house gives me the willies."
"The best I can do," Sheri hoped her desperation did not show on her face, "is ask to come with you both to Winterfell."

"I really hope you can," Sansa smiled over the rim of her coffee cup.

"Call me as soon as you ask," Arya commanded before consuming another enormous mouthful. 
"Gods, Sheri, this is so good! Sansa, you can stay here - Sheri was my friend first."

"No loyalty," Sansa tsked and shook her head, "that's your problem."

"You started it!" Arya glared across the table at her older sister.

"Did not," Sansa returned the glare with an icy stare of her own and Sheri just grinned happily as she scooped up another bite of pancake.

Chapter End Notes

The dangerous thing about organizing my timeline... I just re-outlined the next ~20 chapters, leading up to 'Maiden's Day' (my modern Westerosi version of Valentine's Day). Anyway, I got caught up writing Missa and Torgo going on the cutest date and I ended up with no chapter to post yesterday! I just have no patience! Before I get caught up in any more holidays I need to finish Winterfest (obviously based on Christmas). But I have this really cute beach chapter planned... NO! No summer until winter is over!!! But the swimsuit I picked for Sansa is so cute... Stop it! Bad fanfic author/collagist!
The airport was bustling with people as they got out of the plane and walked to the end of the gate where non-passengers waited.

"There's Robb!" Arya pushed between Dad and Sansa to run ahead, shouting and waving her hands. "Robb!!" He grinned and held his arms open for her to jump into, lifting her up to move out of the way before setting her down on her feet.

"Arya," he measured the top of her head against his chest, "I think you got taller." Robb looked over Arya's head and smiled even wider. "Sansa, please stop growing."

"I try my best," she shoved Arya out of the way to pull Robb into a long embrace.

"Dad..." Robb let go of his sniffling sister to hug his father and both girls wrapped their arms around them.

"How are thing here?" Dad let go of Robb and they led their group away from the gate.

"As well as can be expected," Robb took Sansa's carry-on bag and slung it over his shoulder. "Mom misses you but she pretends it doesn't bother her. Bran is getting along a little better every day. Rickon is getting wilder." He looked back to smile at Arya, noticing quiet little Sheri walking beside her. "And who is this?"

"Sheri Baratheon," she bobbed her head and blushed, "nice to meet you."

"And you as well," he flashed that 'charming smile' thing he was so good at and turned back to dad. "I thought the Baratheons were coming on a later flight?"

"They are taking the company jet and a car service is picking them up," Dad's distaste for the Baratheons' show of wealth was obvious. "Sheri is Robert's niece."

"I see," Robb nodded, appearing to agree with dad's opinion and they both fell into an awkward silence.

"Too bad Jon couldn't come," Arya changed the subject, "it's just not Winterfest without him."

"Lyanna couldn't get the time off work," Dad explained but she could tell he was holding something back. "Next year we will all be together again in Kings Landing."

"You wouldn't believe it," Arya moved up by Robb's side, lugging her carry-on bag. "There's not a flake of snow down there."

"Of course I believe it," he laughed at her, "it's the south."

"I mean it's weird," she punched him in the arm and avoided his return jab as they walked into the parking garage. They approached the car and he opened the trunk to the SUV before to load the
"What I can't believe is Sansa growing even more," Robb grinned over at their sister. "I think you're taller than me now!"

"No, I'm not!" Sansa sulked as Robb unlocked the car door and opened it for her while dad loaded his suitcase.

"She's still tiny compared to her new boyfriend." Arya tossed her bag into the trunk without much care. The only item she really cared about should have already arrived at the house.

"Arya!" Sansa glared as Arya climbed in to sit next to her.

"Boyfriend?" Robb sat in the front passenger seat, his expression caught halfway between amused and disturbed.

"He's part giant," Arya informed him seriously.

"He is very sweet and a good person," Sansa replied in a clipped tone.

"Your verdict Dad?" Robb waited for dad's opinion as he got into the driver's side and turned over the ignition.

"I like him," he glanced up to smile at Sansa in the rear-view mirror before adjusting it. "Mind you, he's not what I thought Sansa's first boyfriend would look like."

"He looks like a serial killer," Arya added helpfully.

"Arya!" Sansa sounded like a squeaky wheel when she got mad - it was hilarious.

"What?!" She put her hands up in surrender. "I meant it in a good way." Dad chuckled as he pulled out of the parking spot and started descending.

"I think Sandor is uniquely handsome," Sheri chimed in.

"Thank you, Sheri." Sansa tilted her head past Arya to smile at Sheri.

"Come on, let's see it then." Robb turned back and held out his hand to Sansa, who only gave him a questioning look. "Don't tell me you haven't got a picture."

"Here," she pulled her phone out and handed it to Robb, "that's at last week's Winter Formal."

"Holy gods!" Robb laughed. "He's huge! I bet it looks hilarious when he stands next to Arya."

"Hey," Arya objected his mocking. "My height is perfectly average for my age! I could still grow!"

Sheri mostly kept quiet while they all chattered, catching up on the months spent apart until they pulled up in front of the house. Arya's stomach fluttered with excitement as the door opened and her mother stepped out. As soon as the car was parked, she and Sansa rushed their mother to be enfolded in her embrace

"Oh, my baby girls." Mom kissed both of their heads. "I missed you so much. Come on," she pulled them towards the house, "it's cold out here. Robb," she called over her shoulder, "help your father bring in the bags!" She squeezed Arya's shoulders tightly before letting go to open the door and lead them inside. "You've both grown so much."

"I missed you mom," she flashed an apologetic smile, "but I want to see Bran..." Arya's eyes looked
past mom to his room to see the door opening.

"Go ahead," mom gave permission as Arya was already walking away but a small form jumped in her way.

"ARYA!!" Rickon shrieked, throwing his arms around her as Bran rolled out of his room with a smile.

"RICKON!!" Arya shouted down at her little brother. "Tell me where to find Bran or surrender your life!"

"I'll never tell!" Rickon jumped back and assumed a karate stance.

"Oh, you'll talk." Arya fell into form and held her hands up. "Take this!" She chopped down at him, going slow enough so he could block. "And this!"

"I surrender myself," Bran interrupted their horseplay, "to save my baby brother."

"I'm not a baby... DAD!!" Rickon completely forgot they existed and ran towards their father.

"Bran..." Arya moved to hug Bran and cursed herself for getting misty eyed. "I missed you." She pulled back and cleared her throat to ease the tightness. "You look good." The family was having a beautiful tearful reunion behind her but she only had eyes for her closest brother.

"I look like I'm in a wheelchair," he joked cheerfully. Somebody took her brother's ability to walk but never could destroy his indomitable optimism. "I can't tell from down here if you've grown taller."

"Then I'm a lot taller now," she teased before noticing Sheri standing awkwardly off to the side. The littlest Stark was chattering and hanging off her hand. "I brought a friend with me, come meet her."

"Rickon, stop pestering my friend." Arya walked and Bran rolled behind her to save her friend. "Rickon, stop pestering my friend."

"She's my friend now!" Rickon grasped Sheri's wrist with both hands.

"I've never been so popular." Sheri always had a good attitude about everything - which made Arya realize she was a lot like Bran in that way. They were both optimists and she wondered if that came from having brushes with death.

"Clearly, these are my brothers - Rickon and Bran." Arya made the introductions as she pulled Rickon away from Sheri. "And this is my best friend Sheri, she's Robert Baratheon's niece but don't hold it against her."

"Kids, help me set up for dinner." Mom called over her shoulder as she and dad ascended the stairs together. "Your father and I have things to discuss." All five Stark children replied 'yes, mom' as their parents disappeared into their bedroom.

"Discuss?" Arya rolled her eyes and smirked down at Bran. "Even Rickon doesn't fall for that one anymore. As long as they don't make any more siblings, they can have all the 'discussions' they want."

"It's sweet that your parents are so loving," Sheri commented - ever cheerful. They all worked together to set up the formal dining table as well as the 'kids table' Arya would be forced to sit at. When the job was finished, Bran approached Arya... Actually, it seemed more like he was talking to Sheri.
"Want to play some games in my room?" Bran smiled at Sheri - it almost looked like the charming smile Robb perfected.

"What do you have?" Sheri answered with a shy smile. "Tekken?"

"Which one?" Bran smirked confidently and wheeled around to lead Sheri back to his room without waiting for Arya's answer.

"I can whip you in any of them," Sheri challenged as she followed Bran. Well... that was unexpected but right on, way to go for both of them.

"You two go ahead," she called after them, "I have a call to make." They didn't even pay attention as she slipped out the front door and walked around the side of the house. The call only rang once before he picked up.

"Hey," she spoke first, "I just got in."

"How's your family?" Gendry was always so caring and there was no one around to be embarrassed in front of so she grinned happily.

"They're all fine," she turned towards the wall and scraped the toe of her boot against the bricks. "I miss you like crazy already but can't talk long - just didn't want you to worry."

"I'm about to take a shower anyway," he assured her, cruelly bringing up mental images of him naked and wet... and steamy. Arya groaned and tilted her head against the wall, hearing muffled laughter from the other line. "Have fun, be safe, and I'll see you soon. Love you."

"Love you," she echoed softly, "bye." Arya waited until the call ended before lifted her head to see her brother standing nearby. "Hey, Robb! What are you - how's it - what's up?!"

"You better not be making trouble, Arya." He narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms before leaning against the brick wall.

"I was taught by the best," she leaned beside him.

"How is everything going in Kings Landing?" Robb was fishing for info but thankfully not about her - Arya resisted the urge to let out a relieved sigh. "Dad won't even talk about the merger with me, nothing more than vague assurances."

"Robert Baratheon is a total dumbass, that's not news." Arya purposefully kept out of the loop because she did not want to get into trouble. And she'd been a tiny bit distracted by a sexy blacksmith - still, she heard things. "Dad wants that brand recognition but he clearly hates the way the company is run. There's rumors about thugs who are on the Baratheon payroll but I haven't heard or seen anything concrete."

"Keep your ear to the ground," he shoved against the wall and started back towards the house. "Mom tries to hide it but every time she gets off the phone with dad, she knits like crazy."

"She always knits when she's nervous." Arya put her hands in her pockets as she walked by his side. "I can do some digging-"

"No," he grabbed her arm to stop her, "I don't want you to get in trouble again. Just keep me in the loop."

"You got it," she answered seriously and Robb let her go after giving her a hard stare. They went
inside in silence and Arya walked into the kitchen to wait. The reason she called Gendry wasn’t just
to check in - she needed a confidence boost. Dad would never - ever - agree to let her date an
eighteen-year-old man. But mom could be a soft touch... If only she knew how to pretend to be
sweet and kiss ass like Sansa. She didn’t have to wait long before mom came walking into the
kitchen with a big smile on her face. Hopefully, her good mood would help.

"Mom," she moved in for another hug, "I missed you so much."

"I missed you too," she returned the tight embrace. "You haven’t been the affectionate in years.
Before I forget, a package arrived for you and I put it on your bed." Arya grinned against her
mother's shoulder - Bran was going to shit himself when he saw the sword!

"Thanks, mom. I really missed you a lot," she pulled back and removed her coat to fold it on the
back of a stool by the island. "While I was gone, I realized a girl needs her mother." Arya busied
herself with washing down the countertop. "There's something I need to talk to you about because I
know you can understand better than dad."

"Is this about that boy you got in trouble with?" Mom lifted a knowing brow.

"Yes," she answered honestly and set down the dishrag. "Mom, he's the best friend I've ever had."
Arya clasped her hands together and gave her mother a pleading look. "Please, I need help to
convince dad to relax his dating rule."

"I'm sorry, Arya." Mom shook her head and picked up the rag to continue cleaning. "The rules we
make are for your own good. You are too young to worry about boys and dating when you have
other things to focus on."

"My grades are fine," she argued.

"School is important," mom acknowledged. "But so is making friends and discovering who you are
as an individual. When you are older, you will understand. Arya, have you..." Her icy blue eyes
narrowed on Arya's face. "Are you seeing this boy behind your father's back?"

"How could I?!" Arya faked as much astonished outrage as she could muster. "I've been grounded."
Mom appeared slightly appeased but still suspicious. "I just hoped if I did my time quietly, you
would both cut me some slack."

"This isn't a punishment," mom insisted.

"It sure feels like one," she scoffed - actually losing her temper. "Neither of you have ever
recognized that I'm not like your average fourteen year old - I'm a helluva lot smarter! But you would
rather me be more concerned with how I 'behave' and dress than the really important things."

"I wish I could convince you that is not true," mom's eyes looked tired - she was always exhausted
by her younger daughter. "I love you, Arya."

"No, you love who I could be." Arya sometimes hated being smart enough to see through her
parents so easily. "You see 'potential' in me but I'm never going to be like Sansa." They didn't even
have the perfect daughter in Sansa but they were so willing to believe her innocent smiles. She
couldn't even begrudge her older sister for taking advantage of their eagerness to be duped.

"Arya..." Mom started to say more but Arya had enough - she walked away, grabbing her jacket and
heading straight for the door. If they wanted to be lied to then that's what she'd do. Never look back,
she reminded herself, or else someone might see the hurt little girl under her tough act.
Bran's bedroom looked like an office space, small and without a closet. It was conveniently located on the first floor next to the handicap accessible bathroom. Sheri guessed he was used to being 'accommodated' so she decided not to go easy on him. Her character finished his with a throw and he dropped his controller, throwing his head back with a whimper.

"Are you sick of being crushed by me?" Sheri got up from his bed, the only place to sit, and turned off the console before sitting back down. They had been at it for what felt like hours and it didn't seem like Arya or anyone else was coming. In between games, she learned a lot about Bran and revealed quite a bit about herself. She found him easy to talk to, knowing he would never judge her based on appearance because he too was an outsider.

"How did you get so good?" Bran unlocked his wheelchair to turn towards her.

"I spend a lot of time alone" she admitted, sensing a kindred spirit in Bran. Healthy people don't understand why lonely people sometimes prefer isolation - easier than facing society. "Button combinations are a matter of reflexes and muscle memory. You guard too often and it makes it easy to do high-damage throws." She noticed him trying not to stare and answered his unspoken question. "Greyscale."

"Huh?" He blinked in surprise and met her eyes again - his were hazel around the pupil and faded to grey towards the ring. They were the most interesting and serious eyes she had ever seen, resembling a once bright that fire had been snuffed out leaving only smoldering ashes.

"My face," she explained, "was caused by a rare form of Greyscale."

"I thought," he scratched his temple with a confused expression. "Babies are vaccinated against that."

"They are," she shrugged, "but it cannot be administered if the child has immune deficiencies. 'Deficient' is how I was born, or else I would have never contracted the disease. With proper treatment I survived but my face did not."

"At least you can walk," he gave her a pointed look before glancing down at his legs.

"Is it a competition?" Sheri smirked and crossed her arms.

"No," he smiled, "but if it was I would win."

"Are we having a pity party?" Sheri leaned back on her elbow and tucked her knees to lie on her side facing him. "I have them all the time but usually alone."

"Misery loves company." Bran rolled closer until his knees hit the side of the bed and really looked at her face. "I think it's not that bad," his eyes returned to hers. "People stare, huh? I get that."

"It's worse when they look away." Sheri held his gaze as she pushed her hair back over her shoulder, not hiding anything. Bran looked at her without pity but also free of the professional detachment of doctors... It was almost like he was studying a piece of fine art, trying to find a hidden message within the craters and scars on her cheek.

"Does it hurt?" He broke the silence and made Sheri realize she was studying him just as closely.

"Not at all," she gave him a reassuring smile, "it feels numb most of the time and kinda heavy... You can touch if you are curious." Sheri did not know where her sudden bravery came from - it even
surprised her how much she wanted to be touched. Nobody aside from doctors, not even her parents, ever touched her face. Bran raised a hesitant hand to stroke her cheek with the back of his fingers.

"Huh," he pulled his hand away, "it's harder than I thought."

"And you?" She nodded at his legs. "Does it hurt?"

"I don't feel anything in my legs," he laughed bitterly. "But, yeah emotionally it hurts more than I can bear." Bran looked up with a bemused but somewhat happy expression. "You are incredibly easy to talk to... my shrink is going to be jealous."

"We're the same," she admitted her innermost thoughts about the kinship she felt with him. "We both remind healthy people that one illness or accident can make them just like us."

"Actually," he glanced at the door before grinning at her, "I think they forgot about us."

"I'm used to that," she returned his grin. "But I don't mind, I enjoy spending time with you - not something I say to everybody."

"I'm the same," he nodded, "and I enjoy being with you too." Bran was nothing like she expected from the way his sisters described him. They described the way he was before the accident, untamed and full of spirit. He spoke with calm intelligence, without a hint of arrogance, and Arya failed to mention how handsome he was.

"What?" His eyes narrowed at her. "I can tell you want to ask me something but you are embarrassed." Uh-oh, it was like he could read her mind or something! "Trust me... I've been humiliated too many times to feel ashamed."

"Can you have sex?" Sheri blurted it out before she could stop herself but Bran just threw his head back and laughed.

"Wow," he put his hand over his chest as his mirth calmed, "you just jump right in, don't you? I like that." Bran actually blushed, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand and staring at her snowflake printed socks. "I think so, I can... you know, get interested." He grimaced and shook his head, releasing a scoffed laugh. "Mom goes with me to all my doctor's appointments and hovers like I'm about to break. So I don't bring up anything remotely related to sex and neither does anyone else."

"I can totally understand," she commiserated. "Gods forbid the doctors advocate for their patient's happiness rather than their parents' comfort." Bran huffed a frustrated breath and they stewed for a few seconds in their shared fury. "In theory, I can have sex but I can't have kids." At this rate, by the time dinner started, Sheri would have shared every deep dark secret she had. She used to think two people having an 'instant connection' only happened in the movies.

"You never know," he tried to cheer her up, "there might be a treatment someday." Bran was holding back, she could tell he wanted to believe he would walk again someday. Sheri guessed what his doctors likely told him - to accept it and learn to live disabled. It was hypocritical and surreal to owe her life to the practitioners of medicine while resenting their failings. He was one of the few people who could actually understand.

"I don't mind," she feigned nonchalance, "I've always known that I can't give birth so it doesn't bother me." It used to, she didn't say, make her feel like her life was pointless and she still feared dying alone without family or love. "Like you don't obsess every day with your inability to become pregnant because you never were able. I didn't lose anything and if I want kids someday I can adopt. There are plenty of children who need homes - especially disabled and disfigured kids."
"I think I'd like to do that too," he actually looked to be considering it. "The world is so terrifying that I can't imagine bringing a kid into it. But adopting a kid who already exists would feel like the right thing to do." They shared a moment during which they only stared at each other without the need to fill the silence. DING-DONG! The doorbell pierced through the bubble of quiet that had briefly shrouded them from the outside world.

"That will be my dear extended family," Sheri rolled her eyes and flopped down on the bed. "Go tell everyone I'm sick."

"No way," he protested as he turned his wheels. "If I have to suffer than so do you." Bran rolled to the door and held it open as Sheri hopped up to walk through it.

"Thank you," she passed him and led the way to the dining room. Her uncle and his family were being greeted by the Starks in the foyer so Sheri went the other way. Ever since they were little, Joffrey always found some way to mock her face so she'd rather avoid him. She looked around for Arya but could not see her amongst the crowd greeting each other.

"Sit by me!" Rickon ran up to her and tugged on her wrist as soon as she approached the table.

"She can sit between us," Bran offered.

"Don't hog Sheri, Bran!" Rickon glared at his older brother, looking cute instead of intimidating. "I'm going to marry her when I grow up!"

"My first offer of marriage," Sheri bit back the urge to laugh and put a hand over her heart to show her sincerity. "Thank you Rickon."

"I'm serious!" He stood with his hands on his hips and a look of determination on his adorable face. "I'll take care of you and kill anyone who tries to hurt you - like a good husband should."

"Ask me again in ten years," she smiled down at him and patted his curls.

"I will," his eyes narrowed seriously before turning to pull out her chair. "And we can live here in Winterfell." Rickon scrambled up in his chair and unfolded his napkin to shove one corner into his collar.

"He's adorable," she whispered to Bran as she took her seat between the two brothers.

"He has good taste for a little kid," Bran flashed a roguish grin that made her heart skip a beat. Oh... So that's what mutual attraction feels like.

Chapter End Notes

Tragically, I might not get a chance to post a chapter tomorrow (because 'reasons' that suck too much to mention) - shit icing meet shit cake.

I don't say this enough: thanks to my commenters for all the support. Challenging myself to write this fic every day has been really fun and rewarding and I can't do it without you all cheering for me.

It means more to me than I can say. I mean, I could say it but it would sound like some sappy Hallmark bullshit. Nobody needs or wants that.
The Tall Man

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Tall Man

SANSA

Despite freezing temperatures and heavy snowfall, the Winterfell mall bustled with excited holiday shoppers. Mother and Mrs. Baratheon seemed to be holding their own contest, trying to one-up each other with the gifts they bought. At first, Sansa thought the bodyguard Mr. Trant was scary but with his arms full of shopping bags, he looked less intimidating. She, Myrcella, and Sheri did their best to stay out of the way while the adults exchanged terrifying fake smiles. The girls got permission to get some hot chocolate and made a quick getaway.

"I hate shopping with my mom," Myrcella confessed, "she gets a little intense." They sat down at a table with their hot beverages.

"Anything to get away from Joffrey," Sheri sulked before giving Myrcella a half-smile. "No offense, but I would go shopping with the Stranger if it meant any time out of his company."

"I don't know," Myrcella sighed. "He's especially hostile this year... Maybe things are not going well with Margaery."

"Good," Sansa set down her drink, "she is too nice for him. I don't know how you and Tom can be so sweet while Joff..."

"Both of my parents spoil him," Myrcella shrugged as if she didn't even believe her explanation. "But I think they spoil me just as much." Sansa bit her tongue before disagreeing, seeing first-hand how both Mr. and Mrs. Baratheon doted on their eldest. Joffrey could do no wrong in their eyes and they praised him constantly.

"It's too bad Arya didn't want to come," Sheri changed the subject after an extended pause.

"She's not the shopping type," Sansa laughed. "I usually buy her a few things but she never wears them. Besides, it's good for her and Bran to have some time together. They used to be inseparable."

"Bran is really nice," Sheri blushed and looked down at her hot chocolate. "I hope the rest of your family moves to Kings Landing soon. I promised to show him around campus when he starts at Kings next year."

"That's nice of you," Sansa was delighted that her brother and Sheri were getting along so well. "Bran would be lucky to have you around. I'll be a junior next year and Sandor will be gone..."

"Oh, poor Sansa," Myrcella patted her hand in comfort.

"Sorry... ignore my sulking." She shook her head and forced a smile, internally scolding herself for bringing down the mood. "I get overly preoccupied with my own problems."

"You are entitled to feel sad," Sheri comforted her. "I'm sure it can't be easy to be away from him. Of course this holiday vacation makes you think about being separated next year." She hit the nail on the head with that assessment, the time apart was only a preview of how hard a long-distance
relationship would be.

"Love is hard work," she blew out a breath to bolster her resolve to stay strong. "But it is more than worth it." Sheri's comforting smile reminded her of the gift Sansa wanted to buy for the younger girl. "There is something in that shop I want," she waved her hand at the jewelry store. "Will you two wait for me here?" They both nodded and continued drinking their hot chocolates while she walked to the store. The barrette that Sheri had been staring at was a little overpriced but it was pretty and would suit her dark hair.

As she left the shop, Sansa felt her mood completely lifted. She beamed down at the small gift bag with satisfaction, imagining Sheri's happy expression when she opened it. Something big and hard collided into her, sending her stumbling back and knocking the gift out of her hand. She would have fallen down if not for the strong hands that gripped her upper arms.

"I'm sorry," she said on instinct before staring up at the largest man she had ever seen. He stood even taller than Sandor's amazing height! Her heart dropped into her stomach as she immediately thought of Gregor Clegane.

"No, it was my fault." He smiled apologetically and released her to bend down, retrieving her gift. "I wasn't watching where I was going." Sansa accepted the gift bag and tried not to gape up at him. "Happy Winterfest," he smiled again before moving around her to continue past as she watched him leave. It was just an innocent accident caused by two people not paying close enough attention. There was no reason to be unsettled and she chided herself for being paranoid before rejoining the girls.

"Are you okay?" Sheri looked her over with a concerned expression. "You look a little pale."

"I'm fine," Sansa smiled reassuringly but her mind stayed on the tall man for the rest of the shopping trip. Even on the ride home, she stared out the window at the massive piles of snow, full of distracting worry. It was ridiculous to imagine she was in any danger but Sandor was vulnerable and alone back in Kings Landing. Her worries mounted by the time they pulled up at the house and she went straight to her room.

She took out her phone, pulled her jacket off, and removed her boots. Sansa dropped her coat and purse onto the high back chair she used for reading. Her phone background was the picture taken at the Winter Formal. For a moment she gazed longingly as Sandor's image before calling her number one contact. As the phone rang, Sansa debated telling him about the tall man. It would not help either of them to make him needlessly worried or reveal her paranoia.

"Hey," he answered the call, "how's my girl?" His deep voice filled her stomach with butterflies and made her warm all over.

"Hello lover," she stretched out on her bed and crossed her ankles. "Do you miss me terribly?"

"You know I miss you," he replied bluntly. "You freeze your ass off yet?"

"My behind is still in place," she grinned wide and bit her lip, anticipating some flirting and innuendo.

"That's good," his response was short and unexpectedly indifferent. Something was not right, Sandor sounded more than distracted, almost troubled.

"Are you busy?" Sansa reached down to pick up Lady, the stuffed wolf, and held her in one arm. "Nah, I'm at work but it's a slow day." Sandor held something back, she knew him well enough to
recognize that, but she also knew he would not be pushed into revealing what. "You know I'm not really big on talking on the phone."

"It doesn't make you happy to hear my voice?" Sansa spread the sulking on thick because she could not use his weakness for her eyes. She turned on her side and squeezed Lady to her chest while he stayed quiet for a long moment. It was killing her to bite her tongue and not beg him to tell her what was wrong. Sandor still needed her to be patient and wait for him to learn how to trust her completely, it could not be forced.

"It makes me miss you more," he replied softly and Sansa felt heat blooming in her cheeks.

"That is so sweet," she beamed joyfully, "my man is lonesome for me." Sansa would not admit it but he was right, hearing his voice made her heart squeeze with pining to be with him. "I will make it up to you when I come back."

"Describe it to me," he teased and her face flushed even hotter. "How will you 'make it up' to me?"

"It's too embarrassing to say over the phone." She buried her blushing face against Lady's polyester fur, listening to his deep rumbling chuckle.

"Tell me how much you miss me." Sandor asked the impossible, there was not enough hours in the day to describe how much she missed him. Everything reminded her of Sandor, even if it sounded silly and cheesy... every song she heard made her think of him. When her mother made pasta for dinner, the smell brought her right back to their date at her favorite restaurant. The snow made her remember wanting to build a snowman with him and then watch her siblings wage a snowball war.

"So much..." Her eyes longed to see him, her fingers wanted to feel him, and her hair yearned to be stroked. Every part of her missed him so much more than she could have imagined. "I never want to get out of bed because I dream about you every night."

"And what am I doing in your dreams?" By the tone of his voice, Sandor clearly already assumed what kind of dreams she was having.

"Embarrassing things," she whispered as a smile tugged on her lips.

"You're killing me," he groaned pitifully, revealing he pined for her just as much as she wanted to be with him.

"When I get back," her smile stretched into a full grin, "can we go see the bridge again?"

"It'll be cold," he warned half-heartedly.

"You can keep me warm," she murmured.

"Cruel little bird," he accused before huffing long a sigh. "I should get back to work."

"And I should be spending time with my family," she echoed the reluctance she heard in his voice. "I love you."

"You know I love you," he stated matter-of-factly. His dispassionate tone did not bother her... that was just his way. "Stay safe and come back to me."

"I will," she promised, "bye." He hung up without saying goodbye but instead of being hurt by it, Sansa had a sudden thought. Maybe Sandor did not like to say goodbye because he was afraid it might be forever. Every time she peeled back the protective layers Sandor surrounded himself with,
there was always a wall. She could see it when she said she loved him, the flicker of disbelief. It would take a long time for her to overcome that last wall but she would never stop trying.

**SANDOR**

He set his phone down and stared at the handgun lying next to it - black, dangerous, and far too easy to get. It was a nine-millimeter semiautomatic single-action eight-round pistol. The size and light weight made it easy to handle and conceal. The fixed iron sights would make taking down his target quick and effortless. Guns were really terrifying - just point and click to kill - but they evened the playing field. No matter how big Greg was... even his thick skull couldn't stop a bullet.

It would be so easy to eliminate all of his problems with one squeeze of a trigger. Sandor knew how to handle a gun, dad used to take him to the range sometimes and they all used to go hunting back in the day. But this gun wasn't for hunting deer or ducks, its only purpose was to hunt monsters. Should he kill Greg? That question haunted his mind since he got the piece. On the one hand, Greg's death would keep Sansa safe but it could mean spending the rest of his life in prison.

He chuckled as he imagined Sansa tearfully promising to wait as he was hauled off in handcuffs. Mr. Stark would definitely rescind his approval. But if he got away with it, then all his troubles would be over and he could finally be free of the fear that controlled his life. The weapon was heavy in his hand but balanced and easy to aim. All he had to do was get close, aim the fixed iron sights, fire one shot to the temple and then get rid of the gun. Could he do it - become a murderer? Was it even 'murder' to kill a monster?

"San!" Uncle Vlador called from the store, interrupting his dark thoughts. "Get out here!" Sandor quickly hid the gun in his duffel bag.

"Coming!" He covered the gun in gym clothes and stuffed the bag out of sight. Sandor left the office, freezing in his tracks when he saw who waited for him. "Dad..."

"He's all yours, Zahn." Vlad walked past Sandor toward the office, muttering under his breath. "This is why I didn't have kids..."

"How're you holding up?" Dad leaned against the counter, looking pale and slightly shaky - how he always looked when he cut back on drinking. This time of year, he liked to make a show of pretending to turn his life around but it never stuck. Come this time next month he would hit the bottle even harder and stay drunk for another year.

"Fine," Sandor approached the counter and kept busy by wiping it down with a rag. "Waddaya want?"

"It's Winterfest tomorrow," dad stated the obvious but he didn't mean to remind Sandor of the holiday.

"I know that," he answered gruffly - Winterfest was never celebrated in his family. At least... not after mom made the holiday her own memorial day, along with her youngest child. They shared a moment of tense silence, both likely thinking of the same thing but neither willing to talk about it. There was a time Sandor could barely remember, when his father was always laughing and fun. That part of him must've died with his wife and daughter - he guessed they all died that day.

"I found that regulator you were looking for," dad broke the silence. His voice was strained, quivering slightly and he cleared his throat to cover it up. "Thought I'd help you throw it in."

"I don't need help," Sandor threw down his rag and crossed his arms, sneering in defiance. "I never
"I have to get back to work." He turned his back on dad to organize the small impulse purchase items around the register. Dad didn't take the hint and leave, just leaned against the counter and stood still - except for the trembling he tried to hide. The old man was going to kill himself if he didn't quit drinking once and for all but that would never happen.

"He's gone," dad added quietly, drawing Sandor's full attention. "Mr. Baratheon hired him on for some out of town work - I don't know where." He braced his hands on the counter and hung his head. "I didn't think you would just leave-"

"When's he coming back?" Sandor didn't know whether to panic because his murderous plans had to be put on hold or celebrate his good fortune.

"Not for a year," dad huffed a heavy sigh and Sandor's heart soared at his stroke of luck. "It ain't right that I paid for a house and my son doesn't live there." The offer was tempting as all hells - sleeping in his own bed, not having to shower off where the fucking dogs were washed... Nope, he couldn't go crawling back after begging his uncle to put him up.

"I'm fine where I am," he maintained but even his own mind argued with his assertion. His definition of 'fine' basically meant 'not living in a car' - might be setting the bar a bit low.

"You're living in a fucking pet shop," dad gestured around like he was making his case. "Don't tell me this isn't throwing off your game." He was right about that, as much as he hated to admit it Sandor was exhausted and his game was suffering. It might kill his chances to get into a good school if he started slipping up.

"I'm saving up get a place," he glanced around, avoiding dad's eyes. Neither of them was ignorant about how much it cost to live in Kings Landing, even if he found a roommate who would accept him. Sandor would have to get a second job that would accommodate working at the pet shop and basketball practice and games. If that job existed, he hadn't found it yet. Besides, he blew a big chunk of his savings on staying a night at The Palace but it was worth every penny.

"Did I raise you to waste money?" Dad didn't do a whole lot of raising but Sandor bit his tongue, sorely tempted by the prospect of living inside a real house again. "Come home - I'm not gonna ask again." What's the worst that could happen? He could get kicked out or he might leave... then he would just be right back at the shop.

"Fine," he relented, "I'll be there tonight." Sandor stared hard into his father's shifting eyes. "I don't wanna be anywhere near him - if he comes around again... just warn me first."

"See you then." Dad nodded once in farewell and turned around to walk out of the shop. This situation might actually work out for the best because Sandor would know exactly if and when Greg came back. It would also give him time to work up the nerve to end a life - not an easy thing to do. Killing would make him into a murderer, even if his brother was a black-hearted monster. Honestly, he didn't want to do it, but he wouldn't hesitate if it came down to Sansa's safety. At least she was safe in Winterfell for the time being.
Maybe I'm too old to lock myself into my room and listen to obnoxiously loud music... I know I'll still love to headbang when I'm a cute little old lady.

Best Kittie song ever:  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=9IEbEGrpQ4g
(It is known.)

It took a long time to think up Vlador and Zahndor for Sandor's uncle and dad but I think the names work with the Clegane tradition. Kinda Slavic and Nordic - hard and heavy masculine names.

(WARNING: Non-fic related spoilers) Any Walking Dead fans totally pissed about Bob? I mean, I saw that coming a mile away but still! When are they going to learn that Rick is always right? Of course it was Bob... Goddamned cannibals! I love how the priest is the vet from Teen Wolf - I am just going to pretend he's really a druid. That would really be useful in the zompocalypse. There really hasn't been a memorable modern-setting show with a mash-up of high fantasy with zombies before... Hmm... I feel a bit tingly with inspiration.
YGRITTE

She stared at her phone, caught between calling him and throwing it against the wall and watching it smash into pieces. Ygritte wanted to be mad at him, but she was even angrier with herself. What made her think she could be celibate for a year? Even for the guy she wanted more than anyone else – it was just too much. If she was honest with herself, she assumed Jon would've given in long before his eighteenth birthday.

The stress and regret were making her crazy - she barely slept since the night of the Winter Formal. She walked over to her dresser drawer and dug around in the back until she felt the plastic baggie. It only had a few flakes of shake and a couple of stems, not nearly enough to calm her nerves. Ygritte quickly mashed the phone number and hit the call button.

"Hey," she didn't wait for his answer, "meet me at our usual spot." Ygritte hung up the phone, grabbing her keys and a flannel shirt before heading downstairs to her car. The local park had a basketball court where she met up to play with her friends sometimes. She parked her car and got out, seeing he was already waiting for her.

"Hey Theon," she greeted him as she sat down on the bench beside him. "You got what I want?" He looked around before handing over the bag of weed and she slipped it into her pocket before passing over the cash. "Thanks," she muttered and started to get up to leave.

"Hey," he protested and grabbed her wrist. "How about a little dealer's appreciation?"

"Free loader," she grumbled, "come on." Theon followed to her car and she pulled her small one-hitter out of the glove box to pack it up. She stuffed a nugget into the bowl, and took a deep hit before passing it to Theon. "Let me ask you something."

"Shoot," he struck the lighter and finished off the bud with a deep inhale.

"Would you fuck me?" Either her question or the weed smoke made Theon sputter and choke before turning a wide-eyed stare at Ygritte.

"Right now?" He looked pretty damn eager and it was sorta an ego boost.

"I'm saying 'if' I said I wanted a fuck," Ygritte eyed him sideways. "Would you?"

"I got a dick, don't I?" Theon quirked his brows and smirked at her.

"So..." She pressed another small bud into the bowl and took a longer hit, holding it in her lungs. "Why would a guy not want to fuck?"

"Is he hot?" Theon's question did not seem relevant to hers.

"Yeah," she raised a brow in confusion and passed the piece back to him.
"Give him my number," he grinned, "boy's gay."

"No gay guy likes to eat pussy," she countered. Besides, Ygritte had already tried to comfort herself with that very assumption but it just didn't make any sense.

"Huh..." Theon took another hit and stared at the ceiling as if thinking deeply before blowing out a huge cloud. "That's a mystery," he wheezed. "If he comes out, kick him my way."

"Sure, I'll do that." Ygritte chuckled and she knew it was the weed starting to kick in.

"Girl, I'm being serious." He turned his body to face her and looked her straight in the eye. "I would fuck you sideways." Theon ran his eyes over her before coming back up to meet hers. "There's nothing wrong with you."

"I don't need your comfort," she scoffed a laugh and snatched the bowl back to take another hit.

"Could've fooled me," he shrugged. "I'm down - right now, might make you feel better." Theon was a good-looking guy, not as attractive as Jon was but more her type. Jon was just such a goody-two-shoes, with his unshakable honor and his vows to himself. Who even does that these days? But Ygritte didn't want anyone else and a pity fuck certainly wouldn't make her feel better.

"Thanks," she smirked and patted her pocket, "I'll just take the pot."

"Call me, Gritty." Theon grinned as he reached for the door handle. "I got what you need."

"Peace," she called after him as he got out of the car and watched him walk to his vehicle to drive away from the park. Ygritte waited but she didn't know what for, it was high time she got it over with. The call only rang once before he picked up.

"Ygritte," his voice sounded strained, "how are you?"

"I'm fine," she lied, "can we meet?"

"Sure," he responded hurriedly. "Where?" She told him where she was and packed up another bowl-pack to wait for him. It didn't take long for his car to pull up next to hers and he walked around to get into her passenger side.

"Do you smoke?" She offered the chillum to him, not expecting him to accept it.

"I've been known to partake." He took the one-hitter to her surprise and chiefed down the rest of the nugget.

"Theon Greyjoy thinks you're gay," she commented. "He asked me for your number."

"What?!" He choked on the hit and stared in horror at her with his mouth hanging open.

"I'm kidding," she laughed at his ridiculous shocked expression. "I didn't tell him who I was talking about - just hypothetical talk."

"I'm not gay." He replied quietly as he passed the piece back, obviously not finding humor in her little jest.

"Yeah, I didn't think so." Ygritte slumped down in her seat. "Might be better if you were, maybe I'm too boyish for you. Or maybe my face isn't pretty enough. Or maybe I'm too skinny and wiry."

"I think you're beautiful," he stared down at his feet. Ygritte just shook her head and pulled out the
"You can say that as many times as you like," she jerked the bag open and stuffed the bowl with as much green as it could hold. "It doesn't change the fact that you won't fuck me." Ygritte sparked the herbs and took a deep drag before pressing the piece into his hand. "There's gotta be a reason." Jon didn't want her like she wanted him - no matter what he said - he didn't stay up every night wishing that he'd call and beg her to take him back.

"I swear, Ygritte, I'm just..." He let his words trail off - of course, he hated to explain himself and just expected her to accept his suck-ass reasons. His hit killed the rest of the bowl pack and he coughed on the exhale. "There's only one method of birth control that works one hundred percent of the time: abstinence. It would destroy me to do to you what was done to my mother."

"It's not like I enjoy the idea," just the thought made her feel sick, "but if worst came to worst - I'm pro-choice. I'm not an idiot, I still want to go to college and I have nothing to offer a child." Ygritte turned towards him and gestured a hand at herself in frustration. "Why don't you trust me?"

"I don't trust manufacturers not to send you defective birth control," he protested. "I don't trust condoms not to break." Jon's handsome face was a mask of frustration. "I think it should be your choice... but I don't want either of us to have to go through that."

"They say pot lowers sperm count - smoke up," Ygritte shoved the chillum back at him. "Jon, I don't want anybody else but I can't keep torturing myself with you." She needed him, simple as that, and it hurt too much to know he didn't care as much about her. "I didn't know it would be this hard. You are great at going down but it just makes me want you even more. And you... To be honest, if you really wanted me as bad as I want you then you'd've had me by now."

"That's not true," he chuckled softly, "I have amazing willpower." Jon sparked up and drew in another lungful. "You think you're the first girl who ever offered to have sex with me? I'll have you know, I'm considered attractive."

"I noticed," she smirked at him but her expression fell when she saw his serious gray eyes staring at her. With those eyes he stole her and made her into something she never thought she'd be - captivated. Ygritte took back the one-hitter from him and put it away. "You're not like other boys - I can't even begin to imagine what you're thinking."

"I'm in the same boat," he laughed but it sounded sad. "Are you saying we have to break up if I won't have sex?" Jon kept up his hard stare and she had to look away.

"I know that makes me the villain in all this," she dropped her forehead into one of her hands. "I don't want threaten you into sex, I just want you to want me. Is that so fucking wrong?"

"I don't want to lose you," he took ahold of her free hand, "but I can't change my principles out of fear." Ygritte shoved her hair back and tightened her hold on his hand, turning to face him.

"I'm willing to take every precaution," she compromised. "I read the entire Wikipedia on birth control - we can use condoms, spermicide, hormones, and even pull out. Also, we can track my cycle and avoid days when I'm ovulating. We can use any and every kind of protection and be really careful." It wasn't easy to admit she was so enamored with him that she was practically obsessive. Ygritte almost burst into tears when he shook his head and looked away. "I don't see how this is a black-and-white issue. Can't you meet me half-way?"

"I don't know," he stared straight ahead. "Can you give me some time to think? Just until after the break." All this waiting was making her fucking nuts! She tried every day to cut him out of her heart
and distract herself so she wouldn't think about him - nothing worked. Why couldn't he just let her go? Why did he have to keep stringing her along?!

"It might be easier just to end it now," she whispered because her throat felt tight. "We can still be friends and try again when you turn eighteen."

"Please, Ygritte, give me some more time..." Jon squeezed his eyes shut and hung his head. "I've held onto my virginity for this long, but I'm seriously considering if it's time to let go."

"It would be torture to wait any more," she tugged on his hand to regain his attention, "but you're worth it. I can wait a little longer." He leaned across the center console and pulled her into his arms. "I'm sorry, Jon - I tried."

"Don't be sorry," he squeezed her tightly. "Just wait a bit longer for me to figure it out." Ygritte couldn't respond so she just let him hold her, wishing he would suddenly make up his mind and end her misery. Either way had to be better than being kept dangling.

GENDRY

It didn't make him uncomfortable exactly, he felt like a third wheel: like he was interrupting. Mom and Bronn were making eyes at each other over their breakfasts and Gendry missed Arya more than ever. If she were here, she'd be teasing them with her arrogant smirks and pretty grey eyes rolling.

"Should I move out?" He voiced aloud the thought that had been bothering him since Mom started seeing Bronn.

"What?!" Mom looked at him like he slapped her across the face. "No, of course not!"

"Mom, I'm cramping your space." He waved her hand between them to emphasize his point. "I'm old enough."

"You haven't even finished your junior year - no arguments!" She pushed away from the table angrily and moved to the stove to put on another kettle of tea. Now he'd done it: she always drank tea when she was upset. Then again, mom drank tea when she was happy or really any time there was a kettle. "I don't want to hear a word about you moving out until you have your graduation certificate in hand!"

"Alright, I get it!" Gendry threw his hands up in surrender and returned his focus on his breakfast. "Jeeze, no good deed goes unpunished."

"You're lucky," Bronn smirked. "My own mom threw me out when I was seventeen then forced me to move back so she could kick me out again on my eighteenth birthday. She was a real piece of work, my mom."

"I know I'm lucky." Gendry looked passed Bronn, raising his voice to make it obvious he wanted her to hear. "I have the smartest most beautiful mother in the whole world."

"I agree," Bronn turned back to grin at mom and she rolled her eyes in response, trying to fight the smile tugging on her lips.

"Oh, stop it both of you." Mom returned to the table to set the hot pot of tea in the center and refreshed her cup. "Are you going to see Arya today?"

"No," he heaved a heavy sigh, "she went back to Winterfell for the holiday break."
"I'm sorry, honey." Mom gave him a sympathetic look over the rim of her teacup.

"It's okay," he shrugged, "I have to get used to waiting for Arya."

"My baby is all grown up and fallen in love." She reached out to pat his cheek, her hand warm from her teacup. "I can't believe it."

"Mom..." Gendry ducked his head to hide the blush heating his cheeks.

"I was wrong," she looked guilty, "and blind not to see it on that first day. I'm sorry for telling you to stay away from her."

"I know you did what you thought was best," he reassured her. "I tried to listen to you, I really did." Gendry blew out a breath and smiled. "But Arya is just... part of my life now and I do love her."

"I know, she's a lucky girl." She stood up, bringing her teacup with her as she moved to the living room. "Come on, let's open some presents." Gendry and Bronn got up to follow her, sitting on the couch while she gathered the presents from under the Winterfest wreath. Mom handed them each a gift and sat down on the coffee table to tear into one of hers. She acted like an excited little kid, grinning as she threw the torn paper behind her and opening the box.

"Oh, Gendry," she gasped as she admired the jewelry he forged for her. "This is so beautiful!" Mom pulled the ring out and slipped it onto her finger. "You made this?"

"The earth made the metals and stones," he rubbed the back of his neck, "I just forged it." The process of forging a ring by hand was intricate, demanding patience and careful attention. But mom deserved some beautiful jewelry. She lived her whole life without the finer things in life because she chose to keep and raise him all by herself. If not for him, she would've been swamped with marriage proposals from rich men who could've given her diamonds. The stone was carved from jade lava, a pale and pretty color but rugged and tough: just like mom.

"You are being modest," she chided, "this is amazing!"

"Arry thinks I should try to sell my work online," he knew mom dreamed of him becoming something fancy like a doctor...

"She's a smart one, listen to her." She smiled down at her hand before her eyes suddenly snapped up to his. "As long as it doesn't interfere with your grades."

"Yes, ma'am," he nodded his head obediently.

"I'm so proud of you baby," she stood up and leaned over him to kiss his forehead. "I know you will be great at whatever you decide to do." Her eyes misted over before she sniffled and sat back down and looked to Bronn. "Go ahead and open yours... I bet it's a pretty ring too."

"I thought you might want something more practical." Gendry got a bit nervous as Bronn revealed the leather wallet.

"I'll be damned," he grinned and opened the wallet to inspect the inside. "How'd you know I like a bi-fold?"

"I pay attention," he shrugged. "Hope you don't mind it's real leather."

"Mind? I love it! You've got a real talent here." Bronn nodded approvingly at the wallet. "I wish I had this kind of skill."
"Did you make Arya a ring too?" Mom was still admiring the ring on her hand.

"I made her a sword," he answered with a sheepish grin and Bronn threw his head back and laughed uproariously.

"Oh great," mom rolled her eyes, "that's just what she needs." She smacked Bronn's knee as he tried to control his amusement. "Don't encourage him."

"Don't worry," he assured her, "Arry acts a little wild, but she's responsible." At least Gendry felt pretty confident she wouldn't kill anyone... she sure had a knack for attracting trouble. Her grounding was so close to being over and soon they would be able to spend some real time together. Whatever she was doing in Winterfell, he hoped she was keeping her head down.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not feeling it today - I wasted my time pointlessly and didn't give this chapter the attention it needed. Boo! Hiss! I suck! Yeah, that's not helping... Next I'll do a Dany POV, that should cheer me up.
The Dothraki Way

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Dothraki Way

DANY

The fog on the window clouded her view of the empty field as she traced a heart on the glass. Dewdrops collected and streaked down the glass to reveal slivers of the first light of dawn breaking. Dany wished herself a happy Winterfest and let her mind wander over her happiest childhood memories.

"Dany?" He called from the bed: Drogo was usually the first to wake but rising early on this morning was a lifelong habit of hers.

"I'm here," she whispered and moved towards the bed, "I can never sleep in on Winterfest morning." Dany untied and dropped her robe onto the ground before slipping into the bed to fit her body against his. "You are so warm," she hummed happily as he pulled her into his arms. "When I was young my cousins lived with me and my aunt would wake us up early to help make Winterfest breakfast." She sighed and snuggled closer. "It was a simpler time... Should I tell you the story of Winterfest? I'm an excellent story-teller."

"Tell me," his deep voice whispered.

"Long ago," she lowered into her Dungeon Master voice, "the god of death became jealous of the other gods. No one would worship the Stranger with the same deference shown to the other six. To remind the people of Westeros what a gift death is, the Stranger caused the longest winter ever known and took away our ability to die. People suffered through injury and illness that should have killed them. Legions of murderous mindless undead roamed the land."

"Finally the Stranger, disguised as an old healer, found a sickly child frozen in the snow but still alive. The child begged for mercy and, filled with pity and regret, the Stranger granted the gift of death on humanity once more. Winterfest occurs every year to remind us that the shortness of life cannot be appreciated without death. We give gifts to our loved ones to show our gratitude for the Stranger's mercy." Dany hoped told the story well but doubted Drogo understood the cultural influence behind the holiday. "Do the Dothraki have a similar holiday?"

"No, Dothraki fight death and love life." An edge of pride crept into his voice whenever he spoke of his people. "No holiday is needed." Dany knew more about the proud Dothraki history than she did of the current status as a people. To her understanding, they were presently a scattered nation of refugees. They still identify with their common heritage no matter their birth nationality.

"This day is special for me because I remember a happier time in my family." Dany turned over onto her stomach and shimmied up to prop up on one arm to look down at him. "I have been sad for a long time, but you make me happy." She raised her hand to trail her fingertips down the side of his face. "Do I make you happy?"

"Anha nesat layafat," he turned his head to kiss her palm, "haji shekhikh yeri eme." Drogo was saying something about knowing happiness from her smile but one word eluded her.
"Shek-hikh?" Dany carefully pronounced the word and racked her brain for its meaning: it was familiar but flitted just out of her grasp.

"Light," he patiently explained. "Like from the moon."

"Glowing?" Dany offered a more accurate translation and he nodded his agreement. "My smile? Yer chomoe anna," she thanked him. "It really is the most charming language, or perhaps your voice makes it beautiful. Anha ahhasat lekh asto Dothraki."
She asserted that she sharpened my tongue to speak Dothraki, no longer the soft-tongue he accused her of being.

"Astolat," he corrected.

"That's what I said," she raised her brows, daring him to contradict her but he maintained his usual silent stare. "Irri taught me a new word: athijezar," she assumed an innocent expression as his eyes darkened. "I still don't quite understand, perhaps a demonstration is in order?" Dany pushed up onto her knees and straddled his hips. "Is this the correct way?"

"Sek, k'athjilari," his hands found her hips, lifting her up so she could sink down onto his hardness. She ran her fingertips over his stomach muscles, tensing under her touch and inflaming her lust. Her heart pounded as she squeezed his hard muscled chest and rocked slowly again him. He gripped her hips, guiding them back and forth with increasing tempo. Dany's legs shook from the effort to match his pace and the force of her desire. A satisfying ache coiled up from between her legs and spread through her body.

"Gods, Drogo!" Dany threw her head back as his hard pulsing cock pushed deeper inside her and babbled more encouragement. Her hips rocked furiously against him, working up a sheen of sweat that chilled her overheated skin.

"Yer zheanae sekke," he growled his praise of her beauty and thrust his cock into her. "Yer norethaan mra zhor," he groaned, saying she was in his heart: great sex was definitely the best way to learn Dothraki. She surrendered control of her body to him, letting her arms fall to her sides arching back. Her head felt light as he lifted her up and then she released a wheezed cry when he pulled her hips all the way down. Dany gasped for breath, bracing against his chest with one hand, drowning in pleasure.

His hands abandoned her hips to roam her body, leaving Dany helpless to attain the forceful tempo he achieved. One palm slid along the inside of her thigh and his fingers attentively stroked the slick pulsing flesh between her legs. Her body trembled from his rhythmic torment and she gasped when he thrust deeper inside her. Drogo's arm curled around her hips to pull her flush to him. She rolled her hips as her rushing released fractured her rigid body, melting her onto his chest.

Drogo followed with a final deep thrust, pumping his release into her as she remained curled on his chest. She trembled from the aftershocks and pressed light kisses to his pounding chest as their breathing slowed. His hand found the coverlet to pull it over her and then smoothed his palm down over her hair.

"Anha dothrak chek asshekh," she panted and Drogo's deep chuckle vibrated in his chest. Dany rested to catch her breath before rising to slide out of the bed and into her slippers. "Sleep a bit longer, I will make breakfast." She found her robe where she dropped it and moved to her dresser drawer to pull out a nightdress.

"Stay," he requested softly and Dany wondered if she imagined the hint of vulnerability in his voice. She moved beside the bed once more, bending down to pull the covers over his chest and tucking him in. His thick lashes veiled his heavy-lidded eyes, clearly worn out by their morning activities.
"Anha garvolat," she kissed him before standing up to pull on the nightdress and the thick cotton robe over top. Her hunger was only part of the reason why she could not go back to sleep, or even stay in bed. A renewed energy flowed through her body and she wanted to put it to good use and hoped to make a good impression on his family. "I will wake you when it is ready." Dany slipped out of the room into the dark hall and crept to the kitchen, only turning on a low light over the dining area.

As quietly as she could, she searched the cupboards and fridge to find everything she needed. It was her goal to make a semi-traditional Winterfest breakfast. First, the fruit loaf had to be mixed up and put into the oven, which made the kitchen comfortably warm. Some of the spiced and dried fruit she found were unfamiliar but it all smelled great. The hash was a little more difficult to do without potatoes but she found some butternut squash to substitute. Just when the fresh fruit loaf was finished baking Irri and Rakharo came out of their separate rooms.

"It's a Winterfest miracle!" Irri grinned at Rakharo before they both started to set out the plates and put on some coffee. "Dany, you could move in - even if Drogo won't let you stay in his room. You can live with me."

"I wouldn't kick you out," Rakharo smirked until Irri elbowed him in his side. "I meant if I was Drogo," he corrected and turned back to set out some napkins.

"Men," Irri rolled her eyes and Dany laughed at their comical interaction. "What can I do to help?"

"It's all done," she beamed at her hard work cooling on the stove. "I will go wake Drogo."

"Don't get distracted," Irri called after her, "I'm starving!" On the way back to Drogo's room, Dany narrowly avoided colliding with Qotho. He stared down at her as if she was a little annoying fly he would like to swat. 'Kill them with kindness,' her grandmamma used to say.

"Good morning," she beamed at him, "I have prepared a small breakfast, and I hope you find it to your liking." Dany bowed her head and moved out of his way and Qotho grunted something unintelligible before brushing past. It might be childish but she stuck her tongue out at his back. 'Kill them with kindness,' her grandmamma used to say.

"This is for you," he looked up and held the necklace out to her. Dany approached to inspect the necklace, a unique piece made from intricately decorated beads.

"It's lovely," she breathed, "thank you." She quickly sat down and held her hair out of the way so he could fasten the jewelry around her neck. When he closed the clasp, Dany turned around to give him a thank-you kiss and despite Irri's warning, she got a little distracted.

"We should get out there," she pulled away reluctantly, "before Rakharo and Irri eat it all." Dany rifled through her drawer to find some comfortable lounge-wear and got changed while he dressed. She fought the urge to watch him, lest she get distracted again. Once they were clothed, they walked out to the dining room to find Qotho, Irri, and Rakharo already digging in. They sat down in the two open seats beside each other and dished themselves some food.

She worried earlier that it was too presumptuous to take over someone else's kitchen. But the Dothraki appeared to be thoroughly enjoying her breakfast. Drogo nodded approvingly as he ate in silence while Irri and Rakharo stole food off each other's plate. Their playful banter caused an unexpected and sudden surge of jealousy in Dany.
"You are lucky to be so close with your brother," she sighed wistfully, "mine is a complete ass." Viserys was a horrible bully and a spoiled brat: the worst combination to have in a brother. Dany often wondered if the lack of love for her brother affected her previous failed relationships.

"Oh, he's not my brother," Irri explained with a mischievous smirk. "He's my 'betrothed'." The casual statement was so preposterous: Dany just stared at her slack-jawed. Her brain could not process the words even as she repeated them in her head. What?

"WHAT?!" Dany meant to speak calmly but the word shouted out of her mouth and made every man at the table jump. All except for Irri, a wide grin broke over her face before laughter bubbled up from her throat.

"See?" Irri glared playfully around the table and the suddenly quiet Dothraki men. "That is an appropriate reaction." She turned back to smile apologetically but still a playful twinkle lit her dark eyes. "Sorry, I knew it would freak you out - I couldn't resist."

"But..." Dany was still trying to process the information. "You're still a teenager." She blinked a few times, as if it would make the puzzling conundrum come into focus. "Do you love each other?"

"Hardly," Irri rolled her eyes heavenward as her lips twisted in a wry smile. "My father owed his father some life debt or something." She sighed and smirked at Rakharo, who pushed his hash around on his plate. "So the 'arrangement' was made before either of us could argue."

"So...?" Dany bit her tongue, knowing she should not pry into Irri's life but her curiosity was getting the better of her.

"Am I going to do it?" Irri guessed Dany's thoughts and shrugged. "Maybe if I hit thirty and there's no one better around." Qotho cleared his throat loudly, wearing an expression of absolute disdain. Dany bristled under his threatening stare. "Aw," Irri appeared undisturbed, "we're making the boys uncomfortable." She leaned over to whisper loud enough for all to hear. "They all think the arrangement is a 'good match'."

"That's very..." Dany searched her mind for a polite word. "Quaint."

"Oh no," Irri smiled gleefully, crinkling up her nose and pursing her lips. "I've made you uncomfortable. Ignore me - I'm always railing against 'the Dothraki way'." She waved a hand across the table. "If our Drogo can find a nice Westerosi girl then there must be hope for me yet."

"I like the Dothraki way," Dany lifted her cup of juice, taking a sip to hide her naughty smile. "Everyone in the house knows you like the Dothraki way," Irri quipped. Dany choked on her juice, covering her mouth with a napkin just in time to catch it. "You're too easy to shock!" Irri laughed at Dany as she patted her on the back. "I can never tell if I've embarrassed Drogo or not, he's so stoic." Rakharo tugged on Irri's arm but she shrugged him off.

"Irri-"

"You're not my husband yet," she snapped at him, "so stop trying to control me." She pointed at his plate with her fork. "Eat your breakfast." She turned back towards Dany, who had finished composing herself. "Dany likes my sassiness, don't you?"

"I actually do," Dany chuckled. "Not enough sassy women in the world for my taste."

"See?" Irri narrowed her eyes at Rakharo. "We're having fun," she frowned at the men around the table, "something you lot wouldn't know anything about." She leaned one elbow on the table and
"I have to disagree... Ah!" Dany held up one finger to cut off Irri before she could start. "I know what you are going to say."

"I will make an effort to control myself." Irri bowed her head, placing a hand over her heart with mock shame.

"At least around the breakfast table," Dany winked conspiratorially. "Later we should exchange numbers, we could go shopping sometime." She liked the feisty young woman and felt Irri was the only person in Drogo's 'family' who fully accepted her. Rakharo was polite but he never struck up conversations with her as Irri did. In her weakest moments, she wondered if he thought Drogo should be with a Dothraki girl.

"I would like that," Irri agreed with a bright smile, flashing a full mouth of bright white teeth against her tanned skin. The rest of their breakfast continued much more calmly, though she and Irri still filled up most of the conversation. When they all had their fill, Irri badgered Rakharo into helping her clean the mess as a thank-you for the meal. Dany would have insisted on helping clean but the hour had grown late and she needed to get home so she thanked them profusely. They changed into their day clothes quickly and headed out.

"You are putting too many miles on his old truck," she worried about it breaking down on the long trip back into the city. They got into the rickety old truck and she slammed the door closed: or else it would not catch right. "I can drive my car out here."

"No," he put the key in and turned it over to rumble the engine to life. Drogo waited for it to heat up as he used his sleeve to wipe the inside of the window. The wipers swiped at the outside and cleared the haze of fog on the windshield. "I want to drive you."

"I would be lonely without you," she admitted. "It is quite a drive."

"I like this time with you," he sat back and pulled on his seatbelt, "just us."

"Me too," she smiled at him as he pulled the car around on the gravel driveway. "Irri is hilarious," she laughed at the memory. "I thought I was going to spit out my juice." Dany eyed him sideways to see his stony expression. "You don't agree?" His shoulders raised in an almost imperceptible shrug.

"Irri has a good heart," high praise coming from him. "Strong head." They turned onto the road, empty of cars in the early holiday morning.

"And that's why I like her," Dany insisted, "the stronger headed the better." Drogo did not respond, staring straight ahead: a tenseness in his jaw revealed his differing opinion. "You pretend to disagree but I myself have been known to be strong-headed." Dany put her seatbelt behind her and turned her body to face him. "I think you like it," she accused playfully but got no response. "Poor Drogo, I won't allow Irri to make fun of you anymore. And apparently I need to learn how to keep the volume down."

"Can't be done." The barest hint of a smile pulled at his lips as his dark somber glanced over her, warming her up despite the chilly morning air.

"Oh, so sure of yourself." Dany sat up straight and proper, pulling her seatbelt in front of her slightly arched chest. "I'm afraid you are right: I adore being fucked by you. Too bad," she smirked at him sideways, "I have to get home now." Drogo pulled off the side of the road into a private driveway, parking behind a crowding of trees for cover. "We will be late," she was already unbuckling her
seatbelt and sliding across the seat towards him.

"Hazi davrae," he reached out to pull her closer. "I want to keep you."

"I want to be kept," she sighed before he captured her mouth.

Chapter End Notes

I'm certifiable for spending so much time on getting the Dothraki even slightly correct. But I don't care! I get all depressed when my ships are separated and Dany/Drogo are the holders of my happiness. Go ahead, tell me I'm too emotionally invested in this fic. I can take it... No I can't - lie to me! Tell me this is healthy and normal!

Next chapter is called: Joff the Ass-hat (Working Title)
Shit is going down...
Joff the Ass-hat

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: rape threats.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Joff, the Ass-hat

SANSA

As per tradition, the kids went ice-skating while mom prepared breakfast and dad brought up the presents. It was a well-known secret that he hid them in the basement but the kids pretended not to know. This year they were reluctant to go skating without Bran but Robb produced a sled to carry him to the pond. Sheri and the Baratheon siblings came along but none of them knew how to skate. Sansa held Tommen's hands, slowly skating backwards to teach him.

Arya and Rickon skated circles around them, passing a hockey puck between each other. Myrcella giggled and blushed furiously as Robb taught her, falling into his arms intentionally. Joff shot the action with his 'brand-new high definition camera' that he would not shut up about. Sheri and Bran scooped up snowballs and tried to hit his siblings as they skated past. After a while, Sansa took a break to exchange her skates for snow boots and Joffrey approached her.

"Sansa," he offered a hand to help her stand, "will you take a walk with me?" Sansa looked up at him with suspicion but he smiled kindly and her worry waned. "I have to show you something that you will want to see."

"Fine," she pushed off the ground without his help and dusted the snow off her jacket before following him. He led her back towards the house and stopped behind a large tree halfway between the house and the pond. "What?" Sansa's patience for being dragged around wore thin.

"Take a look," he handed her his camera and she recognized the still frame as her room. She turned a confused look at him and Joff reached over to press the play button. "The camera has a motion sensor that can be set to auto-capture." He sounded so proud of his little toy but Sansa's attention was riveted on the video when the door swung open. She watched herself walk into the room and start undressing.

"How...?" Sansa swallowed the bile rising in her throat and snapped the camera shut before watching the whole video. "What have you done?!"

"Ah-ah," he snatched the camera out of her shaking hand, "careful now. You'll regret it if you even think about trying to do something to this camera."

"Why?" Sansa meant 'why would you do this' but he took her question to mean 'why not destroy the camera'.

"You're not the only one I have a video of," he smirked confidently. "I have dozens of Marge, getting fucked in all manner of embarrassing poses. You wouldn't want your friend's reputation ruined, would you?"
"How could you do that to her?" Sansa's voice trembled as she rephrased her question. "To me?! What did either of us ever do to you?"

"You insulted me," he snarled, suddenly hostile and wild-eyed. "Father hoped we would become close so I dumped Margery before you came to school. Then you never ever gave me a chance - choosing a dog over me!"

"I liked Sandor before I ever met you!" Sansa realized she was explaining herself to a lunatic; he must be insane to hold something like against her. It was as if Joff thought of her as a 'possession' he was entitled to. "But even if I had started dating you I would have seen your true self soon enough!"

"Now everyone is going to see your 'true self',' he mocked, "if you don't do exactly as I say." The gleeful look on his face was indescribably terrifying... He was having fun tormenting her!

"What do you want?" Her voice was so quiet that the howling winter wind carried it away but the widening grin on his face meant he heard. She turned away, looking past his shoulder at the house in the hopes that her parents would come save her.

"What I deserve - you," his expression was one of victory.

"I don't understand," she whispered. Did he really think she would date him after all this? He truly was crazy!

"I just hope the hound hasn't loosened you up too much." Joffrey frowned as he looked her up and down, as if inspecting a damaged product he still desired. The true meaning of what he wanted sunk in and if Sansa had eaten anything, she would have lost it all over him.

"You can't..." Horror overwhelmed her as his glittering green eyes snapped her hers with fury. His anger sparked a rage that bloomed and consumed her fear. "That's rape!"

"Call it what you want," he snickered. "I'm going to have you one way or the other - or else I'll send this footage to everyone in school." Joffrey held up the camera and jiggled it. "Then you might learn to respect your betters. You think your father's company is anywhere near as large as my father's?" A glint of sunlight reflecting was the only warning before he doubled over with a scream of pain. "FUCK!"

"Get away from my sister," Arya threatened, "or I'll go for your face next!" Where did Arya get a sword...? Sansa's mind felt sluggish as she tried to process all that was going on around her. No... Margaery!

"Arya, stop!" Sansa moved in between them and held out her arms to protect Joffrey.

"You little brat!" Joffrey bent down to pick up his dropped camera but Arya brought her boot down on top of it and smashed the expensive device. "NO," he shrieked and glared at them in turn. "You're both going to pay for this!" He turned on his heel, clutching his arm as he stormed back to the house.

"Are you alright?" Arya reached for Sansa, looking for damage.

"No, Arya, he..." Sansa tried to explain but the words caught in her throat. "Oh gods!" She tuned to run after him, calling against the harsh wind. "Joffrey wait, please." He started to run towards the house and she followed as fast as she could. "Talk to me!"

"Why are you begging him?!" Arya caught up quickly, still holding onto her little sword. "He should be begging you!"
"You don't understand!" Sansa wailed as she shrugged off her sister's hand trying to hold her back. "Joffrey please!"

"MOTHER!" Joffrey screamed and his mother came running out of the house, pulling on her coat. "That bitch cut me!"

"He deserved it!" Arya showed off she could scream just as loud.

"Please Joff," Sansa panted breathlessly as she bowed in front of him, "I'm begging you! Don't do anything to Margaery!" Mrs. Baratheon looked up from tending to her son's wound, a tight expression on her face.

"Let's get you inside," she tersely insisted, pulling her glaring injured son into the house. "Robert!" Mrs. Baratheon called for her husband but daddy came running instead.

"What happened?!" He met them at the entryway, his eyes instantly narrowing on Joff's bleeding arm. "Cat, get a towel!"

"That fuck," Arya pointed an accusing finger at Joffrey, "was trying to blackmail Sansa into fucking him!"

"LIAR!" Joffrey screamed some more, staring murder at Arya as mother secured a towel around his arm.

"Sansa," daddy looked to her, "what happened?" All eyes turned to her and Sansa started to feel woozy, not knowing what she should say.

"It was... a misunderstanding." Sansa turned to bow her head remorsefully at Joffrey. "I'm sorry, it's all my fault."

"What are you doing?!" Arya grabbed her arm and wrenched her around. "Tell dad the truth!" She pointed at Joffrey with her sword. "He needs to know what kind of people they are!"

"Daddy, I don't..." Sansa was trembling so hard she thought she might fall over. "What happened is-"

"What in the bloody hells is going on?" Mr. Baratheon stormed in, saving Sansa from having to explain. "Ned! Why is my son bleeding?"

"Apparently," daddy narrowed his eyes at her, "there was a misunderstanding."

"The only misunderstanding," Arya gritted through her teeth. "Was the point of my needle missing his eye!"

"Arya, where did you get that sword?!" Daddy held out his hand. "Give it to me at once!" Arya looked like she wanted to argue but handed it over without a word.

"Don't think you've won you spoiled brat," Arya hissed at Joffrey. "I am never, ever going to forget this day."

"That's enough," daddy cut his youngest daughter off sharply and pointed upstairs. "Go to your room." Arya opened her mouth to continue arguing but he cut her off. "Now!" Daddy was red-faced as he watched his younger daughter march past to stomp up the stairs to her room. "Sansa, are you sure it was a misunderstanding?"
"Yes, Joff didn't really mean any harm." Sansa moved closer to Joffrey, who was being tended by her mother and comforted by his. "I hope he can forgive me and let this go. Please, Joffrey..." He sneered at her begging and turned away.

"He's going to need stitches," Mrs. Baratheon interrupted, "let's get him to the hospital."

"It is forty minutes from here in this weather," mother pulled on her coat. "I will drive you." She glanced at Sansa with a worried expression before leading the way outside.

"This gods-forsaken place!" Mrs. Baratheon helped her son out of the house, followed by Mr. Baratheon. As soon as the door was closed, Sansa collapsed onto the ground, too exhausted to cry.

"Sansa!" Daddy crouched down beside her with a worried expression but it did not comfort her. Though she knew it was not her fault, Sansa felt completely responsible for everything that happened. "You need to explain everything to me."

"I... it all happened so fast... Joffrey was just... teasing me." Sansa tried to explain through shuddering breaths and she could see the conflict in his eyes. "Daddy, it's not Arya's fault. It's my fault, please don't punish her." She gripped the front of his sweater and felt herself becoming frantic, the video of her undressing flashed through her mind. For better or worse, Arya destroyed that footage so nobody would ever see it. "She misunderstood and that's why she attacked him. It was all my fault! Not Arya's!"

"Okay, lemon cake." He knelt and pulled her into his arms as she continued to babble and beg. "Why don't you go take a rest and I will check on you in a little while." Daddy rose to his feet, pulling her up with him.

"Yes, daddy." She watched him pull on his coat and walk outside, presumably to gather the other children. They were likely still blissfully playing and unaware of all the drama that had transpired... lucky them. Arya was the only one attentive and smart enough to keep an eye on Joffrey, risking getting into trouble to save her older sister. And Sansa thanked her for it by lying! This had to be the worst Winterfest of all time.

ARYA

She paced back and forth in her room, stumbling over discarded boots and dirty clothes, which she angrily kicked out of her way. Why didn't she hide the sword?! Arya kept it hidden from mom and dad but she brought it out with her to the woods. There was just a feeling she had since she woke up - that something bad would happen. That Joff always made her twitchy... Why would Sansa lie?! Dad walked into the room, interrupting her thoughts.

"Dad," she walked up to him as he shut the door, "you have to believe me! That ass-hat somehow taped Sansa and he was threatening her with that camera!" Arya spun around away from him, her fists clenched in anger. "I shouldn't've broken the evidence - godsdammit! You..." Turned to face him again but his disbelieving expression made her lose her train of thought. "Don't you believe me?!!"

"I don't know what to believe," dad wore an expression of supreme disappointment, refusing to look her directly in the eye. More like he looked 'around' her, as if trying to see each individual part to find out which one made her bad. The seven hells would freeze over before he took her word over Sansa's about what happened.

"Why else would I attack him?" Arya struggled to keep her voice at a normal level. "I've tried so hard... I don't even know what I did to lose your trust." He gave her a pointed look and her anger
bubbled up into a protective layer around her pain. "I was doing the right thing going after that power plant manager! And I was doing the right thing protecting Sansa! I don't know why she's lying but she is!"

"I am trying to understand," he sighed and shook his head sadly, "but I know both of you are lying to me. Where did you get that sword?" Why was he so fixated on the sword?! Sansa got rape-threatened! Arya regretted going too easy on Joffrey - just slicing his arm - she should've sliced his neck!!! Nobody threatens her family! No, she had to stay calm or else she was just going to make it harder on herself.

"Jon gave it to me for Winterfest," she lied and hoped her distress covered her tells. "Please, dad, don't get mad at him." Arya walked to stand right in front of him and turned a pleading look up at him. "I know I should have come to you but the things that shit-head was saying to Sansa... You would've sliced him open too. Talk to him, you'll see he's full of shit."

"I intend too," he turned to open the door but Arya grabbed his wrist.

"My sword?" She knew it was a long shot but she had to try - Gendry would be disappointed if she lost his gift.

"I will keep it," his words made her heart sink, "until I get to the bottom of this whole mess." That could never happen if Sansa kept lying!

"Dad!" Arya followed him but he stopped her from leaving her room.

"You are to stay in this room," he ordered sternly, "until I give you permission to leave!" Dad rubbed a hand over his temple in frustration. "The worst part of this is you don't think you did anything wrong! Violence is never the answer! No matter what Joffrey did, you should have come to me and I would have handled it."

"We're not that close anymore," she accused. "How would I know you'd believe me?" Dad just shook his head and closed her door between them. Arya stared at the door in disbelief for a long moment before her mind started calculating where he might hide her sword. No matter what - she wasn't going anywhere without it. As she turned around to start pacing some more, the door opened again and in walked the traitor.

"How could you?!" Arya charged Sansa and shoved her against the door.

"Shh!" Sansa covered Arya's mouth "I'm not supposed to be in here." Arya pushed her sister and turned away in disgust. "You should not have attacked Joffrey..."

"You," she whipped around and pointed an accusatory finger, "shouldn't have gone on a walk with him!"

"I actually thought he might want to apologize." Sansa huffed a laugh as she staggered to the bed to plop down and stare lifeless at the floor. "He had a video of me getting undressed," she shuddered, "I was completely naked."

"I know," Arya snapped, "I heard - that's why I attacked him."

"You missed the part," Sansa hissed, "when he said he had videos of Margaery!"

"She's not my sister!" Arya gritted her teeth to keep from screaming at her idiot older sister. "It's her own dumbass fault for dating that creep!"
"She doesn't deserve that," tears filled Sansa's eyes and her lower lip trembled, "nobody does! I didn't know what else to do... I'm sorry Arya."

"You need to tell dad the truth," Arya heaved a sigh as she sat down next to her softhearted sister. "Or we're going to take the fall for her."

"It's the right thing to do," Sansa insisted, "if it means saving an innocent girl's reputation. Videos like that can ruin her whole life before it begins, she would never be able to escape it."

"Sex tapes?" Arya felt sick with guilt about it but she didn't want to get in any more trouble for some random girl. "That shit fucker asshole - I shoulda killed him."

"If the person I loved did that to me..." Sansa shuddered. "I would kill myself." She turned to face Arya with a piteous expression. "We're both lucky. It's obvious Gendry adores you and I know Sandor would never hurt me. Margaery loves Joffrey, gods know why, but it would destroy her to be betrayed by him."

"Then you have to tell her," Arya shocked herself with all her insistence on telling the truth. Usually she was asking people to lie for her - felt weird. "But first we're going to get that fucker," She balled her fist so hard her nails cut into her palm. "If I could get to his computer I can erase his hard drive."

"What if he has backups?" Sansa could be smart when she tried.

"That's a chance we have to take," she shrugged. "If you want to protect that girl - it's the only way. If you tell her and she dumps him, he'll probably release the videos."

"Oh gods, this is such a mess." Sansa buried her face into her hands. "Sandor warned me about Joff but I didn't take him seriously enough. I'm so stupid!"

"No you're not," she patted Sansa on the shoulder. "We are going to put him down - together. I need you to be strong and do everything you can to convince mom and dad to not punish me. I need freedom if I'm going to B-and-E into the Baratheon mansion... again." Arya turned her sister to face her and looked her in the eye. "It took guts to stand up to that asshole. You're strong in your own way. We're going to fix this, don't worry." Sansa suddenly tugged her into a tight hug and sniffled against Arya's hair.

Gendry made her promise to stay out of trouble and she wished he was here to talk her out of doing anything crazy. The one thing Arya could count on - no matter how bad she messed up - he'd get over it.

Chapter End Notes

Joff really is an ass-hat. The Stark sisters are teaming up! Can they bring down a bully and save Marge?! Will Sansa run into an even 'bigger' problem?! Is Arya ever going to be ungrounded?!? Stay tuned.
They had been at it all day, pulling out volumes of student files and organizing them. She kept meticulous records but hardly any of it was useful because she could never find anything. Pod spent all day helping her organize the hard copies before teaching coach how to use a computerized filing system. He discovered coach was computer illiterate, which really meant he had to teach her everything. Good think he was in love with her or she'd be stuck with her antiquated filing forever.

"I am never going to get this!" Coach tossed aside the stack of student files she was entering into the computer. She leaned back in her chair and raked her fingers thought her short blonde hair, even distressed she looked pretty.

"Not with that attitude you won't," he teased, unable to resist throwing her own favorite expression back at her.

"Hey," she protested, "I might be terrible at this but I'm still your teacher."

"I think technically I am the teacher right now." Pod flashed a cheeky grin at her and her frown lifted despite her annoyance.

"Fine then," she gestured angrily at the computer, "teach me: unless I'm hopeless."

"No you aren't," he asserted, "this just isn't your strength." Pod leaned forward to move his arm in front of her to take over the mouse.

"Strength is my only strength." Coach rolled her chair back and braced her elbows against the desk to prop her chin against her fists.

"Again not true," he sat back in his seat. "Everyone on the volleyball team and cheer squad look up to you. You are a natural leader: that is a quality that can't be taught."

"Do me a favor and call my mother." Coach let one hand drop to the desk and tilted her temple against one fist to give him a wry smile. "She thinks I've failed at life if I don't marry before thirty."

"You're not thirty yet," he narrowed his brows in confusion as he moved back to let her take over again.

"That's what I keep telling her." Coach flourished her hand in a hopeless gesture before rolling back to control the computer. Pod turned his attention back to organizing the paper files only looking up when he heard a loud groan come from coach. "Rick, I messed it up again."

"Here, let me help." He braced an arm on the desk and went through the steps slowly. "If you accidentally close a record just go up here to the search bar and type in the student's name. It's easy, you just have to get used to it."

"Thanks for this," she bowed her head with a shamed expression. "I am forever in your debt."
"I would do anything for you." The words came out of his mouth before he even knew what he was saying. "Because," he quickly amended, "you are my favorite teacher and my mentor. You're the one who inspired me to pursue a career in sports medicine." Her expression was unreadable before she turned away to dab at the corner of her eye.

"I just got a bit of something in my eye," she sniffled.

"Let me see." He reached out to cup her face and turned it towards him only to see her bright eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

"It's quite alright..." A flush rose in her cheeks as Pod froze in that position, so close their faces were almost touching. A jingling sound from coach's pocket made them both jump apart. She pulled the phone out and laughed when she saw the caller. "I swear my mother knows when I am talking about her," she babbled in a high-pitched voice. "I'll just take this call real quick so she can nag me about not flying home for the holiday." Coach stepped around him to walk out of the office, stumbling with unusual clumsiness.

"I'm a coward," he groaned and lowered his forehead to the desk with a resounding bang. What's the worst that could happen if he just kissed her? Suspension or possibly expulsion or maybe a sexual harassment suit. Oh, and don't forget: the loss of a valued mentor... is that all? Life just isn't fair.

MISSANDEI

She planned their date down to the last detail but nothing she did broke through Torgo's withdrawn nature. Just when she thought he was gaining confidence, he would start stammering or just stare at her with a helpless expression. Missa did not want to admit it to herself but the evidence was piling up against her... No bones about it, he was terrified of her. On the drive home there was even less conversation until she pulled up into his driveway and he did not get out.

"Why did you choose me?" Torgo eyed her sideways with a wary expression as he adjusted his glasses in a gesture she came to recognize as agitation. Did she really make him so uncomfortable?

"To date, you mean?" Missa turned off the car and removed her seatbelt to face him, trying to hide any distress lest he believe she was disappointed in him. Dating Torgo was like baking a souffle: perilous yet eventually rewarding. "Do you want a list of reasons?"

"There's a whole list?" A pleasantly surprised smile pulled at his corners of his lips though a bit tremulous. Torgo was a great guy... too bad he could not see himself through her eyes.

"It's not excessive," she smiled, "but there are several things I like about you. You are kind, gentle, and thoughtful. I like your sense of humor and the way you always make me smile." Missa glanced down bashfully tinged with shame. "And perhaps this will sound narcissistic... I like you because you like me."

"I probably shouldn't say this," he laughed nervously. "But I'm fairly certain I'm one of a legion of guys who would kill to take you out." Torgo sat up rigid in his seat and firmly grasped his knees, digging in his fingers. "Most of them wouldn't be jumping around like cat on a hot tin roof... I'm making a fool of myself, aren't I?" He could not possibly know how charming his nervousness really was and that was only part of his appeal.

"I am afraid I have to disagree," she leaned forward and took one of his hands in between hers over the center console. "There might be other boys who find me pretty but I don't have to guess if you really like me because it is obvious." Missa smiled wider as his eyes shifted away with embarrassment. "I can be my true self around you and not worry I am talking over your head or
"intimidating you with my intelligence."

"Again..." Torgo smiled sheepishly and slowly shook his head. "I am intimidated."

"But you're not threatened by it," she insisted. "You like that I'm smart, don't you?"

"Of course," his eyes snapped up to meet hers. "I greatly admire your intellect and self-assurance."

"That makes you unique," she smiled wider at his sudden seriousness.

"I think," his brow furrowed with concern, "you might be giving me too much credit."

"I think you do not give yourself enough." Missa gave into her urge to kiss him, leaning across the console to slide one hand behind his neck and firmly pressed her lips to his. His breathing quickened as did hers when he moved his hand to her waist, holding her lightly and sending warmth through her body. The softness of his lips coaxed the heat rising inside her into a roaring fire burned under her skin. She shivered with barely restrained desire but kept herself from going too fast and giving the poor boy a heart attack.

Torgo was addicting, the more she kissed him only made her want him more and she could not imagine stopping. Alas, oxygen is a necessity of life and when they broke apart for air, she rested her forehead against his to catch her breath. When she pulled away, Torgo gulped and blew out a breath as if he ate something spicy. She fixed a mock-displeased glare at him before nodding at his house.

"When are you going to invite me in to meet your parents?"

"Ah," he glanced towards the house and adjusted his glasses. "I guess I'm not really hiding it... I live with foster parents."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Missa worried that he might never trust her to accept him, the likely source of his unrelenting anxiety.

"It's not exactly the happiest conversation." Torgo ran a hand over his hair before glancing sideways at her with a half-smile. "Hi," he waved with mock cheer. "I'm Torgo and my parents abandoned me when I was an infant. Trust me, there's no easy way to bring that up and most people prefer not to know."

"I am sorry," she murmured, unsure what else to say. This awkwardness was exactly what he wanted to avoid and she forced the issue. Why was she so impatient when it came to him?

"It's fine," he gave her a tight smile of reassurance, "I've lived with my foster parents since I was ten. They are like my real parents, or they are more like grandparents." Torgo tilted his head towards the house. "Come meet them if you like, but you'll have to speak up because pop is going deaf." Missa nodded her agreement before she followed him up to the house and waited nervously as he let them in.

"Torgo," a woman's voice called, "is that you pet?" The smell of freshly baked cookies wafted from the kitchen.

"It's me, mama!" Torgo helped Missa take off her jacket and hung it on a peg. "I brought someone for you to meet." He removed his own jacket to hang it up before leading her into the small but cozy home.

"Oh goodness," a short plump woman who looked to be in her sixties greeted them. "I wasn't expecting company, forgive the mess." She waved a hand over her flour-dusted apron as she approached, adjusting her glasses. "What a pretty girl! Are you our Torgo's special girl?"
"Yes I am, my name is Missa." She extended her hand and received a soft handshake. "It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Well, come in." His mother led them into the dining room, which was set up for cookie decorating. "I was just pulling out a fresh batch of cookies. Do you like to decorate?" Missa was about to respond in the affirmative but the woman turned away to cut her hands around her mouth. "Ronald! Come meet Torgo's girlfriend!"

"WHAT?!" A man's voice called from the den.

"TORGO," she shouted, "BROUGHT HIS GIRLFRIEND!!"

"Why didn't you say so?" A hunched man wearing thick glasses and using a cane staggered into the room. He approached her, lowering his glasses to scrutinize her face. "Let me get a good look at you, dearie. You hold onto this one, Torgo. She carries herself with dignity - not seen often in young women these days."

"Yes, sir." Torgo obviously had a lot of respect for both of his parents and visibly relaxed around them, smiling more and not glancing away. He leaned close and kept his voice low. "You don't have to stay and decorate cookies. I'm warning you, she might look small but I bet she's baked at least five hundred cookies today."

"No, I don't 'have' to," Missa murmured. "However I would love to decorate some cookies as long as I get to eat some." Torgo grinned and took her hand, leading the way to the table so they could sit next to each other. "Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?" Torgo blinked in surprise.

"For letting me in," she responded sincerely. "Inside your home and into your life, thank you for welcoming me. I know I make you anxious but you have the same effect on me. Whenever you reveal more of yourself I feel less nervous because I know you are trusting me just a little more. Even if I could go anywhere in the world, this would be the place I want to be." Torgo looked a bit dazed by her speech but a pleased smile curled his lips.

"These cookies are already cooled," Torgo's mother set down a tray between them. "You two can have as many as you like but don't spoil your appetites because I made papa's favorite.

"Rump roast?" Torgo's father came in a hurriedly as the old fellow likely could.

"You hear only what you want to hear." Torgo's mother waved a dismissive hand at her husband before disappearing back into the kitchen.

"WHAT?!" He tottered after his wife and Missa could not hold in her laughter any longer.

"I'm sorry," she covered her mouth to muffle her chuckling. "They are so adorable."

"I'm lucky." Torgo was breathtakingly handsome when he smiled without any hit of anxiousness and it stole her breath away. "That they made me their family."

"I'm sure they feel the same about you," she tore her eyes away from his beautiful face to focus on the cookies. "Now, show me how this is done."

"You've never frosted cookies before?" Torgo stared at her in shock slightly tinged with horror.

"My mother is a brilliant woman but has no patience for baking," Missa missed her dad's cooking
when he was out to sea.

"The thing you have to know about frosting is..." Torgo pushed his finger against the center of his glasses, glinting in the low light over his narrowed eyes. "You can't mess it up because it's almost pure sugar and people don't care what it looks like as long as it tastes good."

"Then I shall apply it liberally to the surface of the cookies," she picked up a cookie to start slathering on frosting.

"Excellent technique," he praised, "but you missed a spot."

"Where?" Missa inspected the cookie but it was sufficiently loaded with frosting.

"Here," he swiped a dollop of sugary cream over her nose.

"You did not just do that," she slowly turned her head towards him, her mouth hanging open in shock.

"Sorry," he bowed his head, "I mistook you for a cookie-" Missa shoved the frosting-piled cookie into his mouth to cut off his words. She laughed at his disgusted expression as he tried to swallow the mouthful.

"Ugh," he smacked his lips. "I take it back, there certainly is such a thing as too much frosting."

"Then take your duties seriously," she scolded, "and teach me how to frost properly." Torgo turned serious, explaining far too much about surface area and the exact thickness of coverage. Missa never knew she could have so much fun doing something as simple as frosting cookies. It wasn't the treats, but the company that made the time together so sweet.

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SHIREEN

It was awful, just... horrible - the whole house was filled with a thick murky pool of disagreement and mistrust. The Baratheons left, all except for her of course, to go stay in a hotel and nearly everyone stayed in their room since Winterfest day. It was heart-wrenching to watch the presents sitting under the wreath, unopened until Mrs. Stark put them away. In silent standing with Arya, even Rickon refused to open presents while she was confined to her room. Never before had Sheri wanted siblings so badly.

Mr. Stark would not budge from his position to punish Arya for her violent attack on Joffrey. Yet no one seemed to know the whole truth about what happened. Of course, Aunt Cersei wailed that her son's assault was unprovoked but Sheri knew him too well. Neither sister would give up their side of the story, both claiming it was a 'misunderstanding'. Bran took it hard that he could not spend the holiday with his sister so Sheri kept him company. They were glued to each other's sides since it happened - reluctantly parting to sleep.

"Watching Arya apologize to Joffrey was like," Sheri searched her mind for the perfect analogy. "A wild tiger being walked with a leash around its neck." She lay sprawled on his bed while he parked beside her, facing the same direction. They both stared at a strange dark stain on the ceiling, periodically giving guesses as to the cause. "It could be black mold, highly toxic stuff."

"Nah," he shook his headful of shaggy hair, "it's kinda purple don't you think? Is it paint?" They both tilted their heads to the right to take in another perspective. "To be honest it broke my heart," he switched topics seamlessly. "If I wasn't stuck in this chair I would've kicked that asshole in his grinning teeth." They often held multiple conversations at once without ever misunderstanding each other.
"And poor Sansa has been listless... all because of Joffrey." Sheri looked away from the stain, propping up on one elbow to face him. "I'm so sorry, Bran." His head leaned back on the top of his chair and lollled towards her with a concerned expression on his face.

"How are you apologizing for him?" Bran always said more with his expression than his words. His face was telling her he would never blame Sheri by association with anyone. But piping hot guilt rushed through her despite his meaningful looks.

"Because he won't!" Rage bubbled up alongside her sense of responsibility. "My whole family has been horrible and I hate them!"

"I don't lump you in with them," he assured her, rocking his head from side-to-side. "And Myrcella and Tommen are alright."

"What if Arya hates me now?" She picked at the quilted coverlet on his bed as she voiced her greatest concern. "I can't even talk to her since she is confined to her room but I would not blame her if she never talked to me again."

"She doesn't hate you," he raised his head, "I know that much." His eyes searched her face before he nodded once decisively and hooked a thumb at himself. "Watch a master show you how it's done," he winked before wheeling to the door. "Mom!" Bran only had to call out once before Mrs. Stark burst through his bedroom door with a concerned expression.

"What is it, honey?" She sounded a little breathless and Sheri wondered if she actually dropped everything and ran. "Do you need something?" Bran complained often about his mother's overprotectiveness. Sheri found the attention enviable - it was better than being ignored.

"I miss Arya and I never get to see her." Bran found the perfect balance between whining and being pitiful. "I understand why she has to be punished but... I don't see why I have to be punished too."

"I'll talk to your father," she offered vaguely with a conflicted grimace.

"Dad is overreacting," he protested. "That Joff kid is despicable and I'm sure he said something horrible to Sansa to make Arya go off on him like that."

"Arya needs to learn to control herself," his mother insisted in a stronger voice. "We are lucky the Baratheons haven't sued."

"I wish..." Bran hung his head pitifully. "The girls would move home and dad canceled this merger."

"Your father knows what is best for our family." Mrs. Stark did not appear fully convinced of her own words and her face pinched before she gave in. "However, since your sister is leaving soon it is only right she be allowed to visit you for a short while."

"Thanks mom," he beamed up at his mother until she left and then closed the door behind her. Bran wheeled around with a cocky victorious grin.

"I am impressed," Sheri gave him a light applause as he resumed his place beside the bed. "That last part was a nice touch, asking her to talk your father out of the merger."

"Hey," he shrugged and gave her a crooked grin, "I had to try. I could've convinced her but my heart wasn't in it."

"Why?" Sheri silently begged the gods he would say it was because of her.
"You," Bran's serious eyes locked with hers. "I want to move to Kings Landing now."

"Really?" She was unused to her prayers being answered - and so quickly - it made spots bubble in front of her eyes. "Even though we just met a few days ago?"

"You can't deny," his smoldering eyes held hers, "there is something real between us."

"I've never felt like this about anyone before..." Sheri scooted to the edge to slip her legs between his, leaning forward and praying he would take the hint.

"I'm going to kiss you now." He answered her second prayer in as many minutes, overwhelming her with exhilarating anticipation.

"Yes," she only had to breathe the word before his mouth pressed against hers - it was magic, just like the movies promised. Her eyes fluttered shut to see stars shooting across her eyelids and it made her dizzy but in a good way. The kiss started sweet and soft but quickly turned urgent and almost tormenting.

Bran's hand lifted to cup her cheek, pulling her closer to press his lips against hers more insistently. Sparks rippled over her skin and the sensations rendered her mind useless to form a coherent thought. Sheri splayed her hand against his chest for balance before curling it around his neck. For that single moment, time stopped and all the tension lingering in the house melted away.

"I would tell you two to get a room," Arya stood in the doorway, leaning against the doorframe and wearing a crooked smirk. Sheri scrambled out of the bed to stand, breathless and panting, with an assuredly guilty expression. "But it looks like I'm the one intruding," she gestured down the hallway and raised a brow. "Should I leave?"

"No!" Sheri quickly moved forward to grab onto Arya's hand. "We both really want to see you." She searched her friend's face for any disapproval but only saw her usual mocking smirk.

"Looks like you are managing just fine," she chuckled and looked past Sheri's shoulder to wink at Bran.

"Please, come sit with us." Sheri dragged Arya back to the bed and crawled into the middle to sit cross-legged. "I'm surprised you are not mad at me for how my family treated you."

"That's stupid, Sheri." Arya scrambled into the bed to curl up and lay her head in Sheri's lap. "You are literally my favorite person right now."

"Really?!" Her eyes darted to Bran, who gave her an 'I told you so' look.

"Who else is going to help me see Gendry since I'm likely grounded until the day after eternity?" Arya made a good point... Poor Gendry was going to be so disappointed.

"It is an honor," Sheri insisted, "to aid your forbidden love."

"Love?" Bran raised a brow and looked between them. "Gendry?"

"Chill," Arya scolded, "that's not your style."

"You're right," Bran clunked himself on the head, "I'm happy for you Arya."

"Her boyfriend is a really nice guy," Sheri vouched, "he dotes on her like she's the only girl in the world."
"Yeah-yeah," Arya waved a dismissive hand, "he's awesome-sauce. Who knows how long I have before the warden comes back? Let's cut to the chase - begin your interrogation."

"Why did you slice Joffrey's arm with your sword?" Bran posed the question but Sheri was equally curious about the answer.

"That reminds me," Arya suddenly sat up and flicked her eyes between them. "Let me know if you catch a whiff of my sword." Her serious expression fell into a miserable pout. "Gendry forged it," she sighed wistfully, "as a Winterfest gift to me."

"Wait a minute, you're dating a blacksmith?" Bran nodded approvingly. "Okay, now I'm impressed."

"Anyway," Arya set her head back down onto Sheri's lap. "That blonde shit took some video of Sansa undressing and tried to blackmail her into fucking him."

"Oh gods," Sheri gasped, more disgusted than surprised - Joff really was a repulsive creep.

"You did right," Bran insisted tightly, "even if dad can't see it."

"Apparently Prince Jock-itch has other videos of one of Sansa's friends," she let out an annoyed huff. "Our dear sister is keeping silent to protect that girl."

"Sansa is so noble," Sheri murmured, honestly impressed by Sansa's selflessness.

"She's a fucking idiot!" Arya bolted upright, growling in frustration. She roughly ran her hands through her short hair to make it stick out in all directions. "But... yeah, it's the right thing to do so I went along," she grumbled sullenly. "The plan is to break into the Baratheon manor and wipe Joffrey's hard drive."

"You already apologized," Bran pointed out, "why are you still in trouble?"

"Because I withdrew my original statement," she snorted a humorless laugh. "Dad knows we are lying and it's got his undies in a bunch. Of course, he assumes Sansa is a complete victim and I'm the evil child."

"I'm sorry, Arya." Sheri offered a comforting pat to her friend's shoulder.

"Whatever," she sniffed, pretending it did not bother her until a hopeful expression crossed her face. "Actually..." Arya looked first at Sheri and then glanced at Bran. "You two can help."

"Anything," he immediately promised.

"We're with you," Sheri took Arya's hand to give it a squeeze, "all the way."

"Okay," Arya got that determined and semi-crazy look in her eyes, "here's how it's gonna go down. Sheri - you'll have to help me get away as soon as we touch down. I will need to beat the Baratheons home. Bran - I am not just going to wipe the hard drive but also make a copy. Then I can send that copy to you - find any and all evidence of illegal activity against Joffrey Baratheon. We are going to make it so he can never lift a finger against any of us."

"Consider it done," Bran nodded seriously at his sister before he grimaced. "What about the videos he has of Sansa's friend?" Arya looked up at the ceiling, seemingly pondering his question.

"Keep them," she decided. "Put them on an encrypted external drive and mail that back to me. Sansa might need it to convince the girl to leave that asshole. Then she will tell dad the truth and I will be
vindicated."

"How can I help you get to the Baratheon's house?" Sheri wished she was as talented at planning as Arya but her mind drew a blank.

"I haven't figured that part out yet," Arya rubbed a hand over her chin in concentration before glancing up at Sheri. "Can I borrow your phone? Mine was confiscated and I need Gendry's help too."

"Here," she handed over the phone, "keep it as long as you need. You're the only one who ever calls besides my parents."

"You have to give me your number," Bran reminded her with a flirtatious grin.

"Oh... okay," she blushed and looked away.

"I can see when I'm not needed," Arya stuffed the phone in her pocket as she bounded off the bed and headed for the door. "You two don't do anything I wouldn't do," she winked and shot a finger-gun at them, backing out of the door to close it behind her. Sheri shyly peeked at Bran to see him grinning at her.

"So..." She cleared her throat of its sudden tightness. "Should we go back to trying to discover the origin of the purple toxic mold on your ceiling?"

"I could kiss you again," he suggested.

"That sounds better," she smiled wide and felt her cheeks flushing. Her hair fell into her face when she bowed her head shyly but Sheri tucked the loose locked behind her ear. The gesture was unfamiliar but it felt unimaginably good to feel so freed of her insecurities. If only she never had to leave...

"Don't worry about the future," he guessed her thoughts - or maybe he actually could read her mind as it sometimes seemed. "Be with me now."

"Now is all we have," she agreed, knowing he understood what it felt like to dance with death. Sheri glanced at the door nervously. "What if your mother walks in? I doubt she will be as amused as Arya."

"Come here," he patted his lap and Sheri crawled to sit across his legs without hesitation and hugged her arms around his neck. Bran wheeled them around to back up against the door and locked his wheels. "Problem solved," he grinned and she bent her face to kiss his smiling lips, tasting his happiness. Soon they would be parted and there was no question 'if' she would wait for him - she only wondered 'how long'.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter could've been split up but I thought it worked best all together so it's just one long one. Sheri and Bran are the sweetness of my life but alas must be parted too soon - at least I will have Sansan and Gendrya reunions to ease the pain!
As he sat in his car waiting for her, he wondered if he could even explain it in words to tell her how much he needed her by his side. With her, there was a sense of 'rightness' in the world: each day had a purpose. Without her, one day bled into the next and time passed by slowly without meaning or substance. There was emptiness, or maybe more like incompleteness in every aspect of his life. He couldn't sleep right and nothing tasted good. Music sounded like bloody bullshit and it all made getting up in the morning a right pain in the ass.

Today, just knowing he was going to see her made him energized in the morning and the world made sense again. A quiet uncertain voice in his head whispered there was no way Arya could possibly need him as much as he needed her. Gendry ignored that voice because he knew Arry better than anyone did and she never bullshitted when it came to serious stuff. She might act tough and like she didn't care about anything but deep down he knew her love for him was fierce and true.

He never knew how much the actual distance would bother him, knowing even if he had to see her she was days away. If one of them got a fatal 24-hour disease, they wouldn't get to spend their last day together. Gendry knew he would never find love like that again with anyone else if he lost Arya. No one could ever be held up to her standard and he wouldn't be able to help comparing. There was nothing about her he didn't like or would change even one bit and she felt the same about him. What are the chances of that? How many people get that kind of opportunity?

So even though the distance was hard, it was bearable because he knew she'd be coming back to him no matter what. And he thought about that whole 24-hours-to-live scenario one morning when he couldn't get out of bed. If she were dying, he would hijack a plane just to get to her side to say goodbye: because that's what she'd do for him. The sound of tires approaching pulled Gendry out of his thoughts.

He sunk down into his seat, trying to make himself invisible as he watched Mr. Stark's car pull up in front of Sheri's house. A small figure, wearing glasses and a woolen hat hopped out of the vehicle and stepped lightly to the front door. He would recognize that nimble gait anywhere and he held his breath until the car pulled away. Once the coast was clear, the small figure whipped around and darted across the street to Gendry's car. Arya jumped in, pulling off her hat and glasses to reveal her panicked expression.

"Step on it," she stared straight ahead anxiously, "he might come back if he figures it out." Gendry couldn't wait any longer, grabbing onto her arm and dragging her into his tight embrace. "What...? We don't have time for this," she grumbled but still wrapped her trapped arms around his waist.

"Then stop me," he challenged. "I'm never letting you go again: you're mine." Gendry pressed a press his lips to the top of her head, her hair made fluffy and messy by the woolen cap. She felt good, smelled good, and holding her settled the unease he felt in her absence. "I missed you," he kissed over her ear and then her cheek. "I missed you so much." He tilted his face down to kiss her lips but she growled in protest.
"We have a mission to complete," she wriggled a bit but Gendry just held her tighter. "And I have to get back so dad doesn't catch Sheri." Too bad: he near lost his mind with missing her and he wasn't letting go yet. "Fine," she huffed, "I missed you so much that I almost died." Arya's exasperated tone did not match the beauty of her words. "I can't be without you because only you can keep me out of trouble. Without you I never feel comfortable, like my skin is on too tight." She tilted her head back to give him an annoyed look. "Happy?"

"Happier than I've been in ten days," he reluctantly released her. "Alright, let's do it," he put the car into drive and pulled away from the house. Gendry glanced sideways at her pretty coat and cute hat, knowing they weren't he clothes. All her texts told him was when to pick her up and to wear dark colors because they were beating the Baratheons home. "How exactly did you pull this off?"

"The old switcheroo," she snickered as she loosened the jacket. "Sheri and I wore similar clothes but different jackets and hats. Sansa helped distract dad while Sheri and me switched outfits then pretended to sleep. Once dad pulled up in front of the house, Sansa 'woke' me up while 'Arya' stayed asleep. I don't know how much longer we can get away with it but it's not like I can get into more trouble."

"You are brilliant," he shook his head in amazement. Gendry would never say it out loud but he thought her brains would be wasted doing something like being a private detective. She would make a brilliant military strategist or an excellent lawyer: Arya was better at arguing than anyone. But she knew herself and always knew exactly what she wanted so he figured she put a lot of thought into her future. As long as he was in her life, he'd be proud of whatever she did.

"I know," she shrugged the jacket off and threw it in the backseat, "but it was a group effort." There wasn't anything revealing about her outfit but that didn't stop him from eyeing her sideways. Arya smirked when she caught him, her eyes blazing with familiar hunger. "Be warned, once we have a minute to ourselves, I am going to terrible, awful, dirty things to you."

"I look forward to it," he wheezed, forcing his eyes forward so he didn't veer off the road. "But stop talking about it: I can't drive with a hard-on."

"When this all gets sorted out, I am confident dad will unground me." She sure sounded confident as she rummaged through her bag. "Then we are going to live at the forge - not leaving until we finish that box." That threatening edge to her voice wasn't helping: it just made him even harder but they had a 'mission' to complete. Sacrifices now it would mean rewards... whenever the everlasting grounding finally ended.

"I'm up for the challenge," he felt nearly giddy with happiness that she was back, even if she was extra-super grounded. The drive to get to the Baratheon's house didn't take long since it was near Sheri's neighborhood. They found the back way they used before and parked to hoof it through the woods. "I can't believe we are doing this again," he laughed and looked over to see her pulling on a mask. "What's with the get-up?" He waved at the ski mask.

"Rich people usually have security cameras," she adjusted the mask over her face, tucking up her short hair. "I can't give them anything else against me. Hand over your hoodie," Arya held out a waiting hand for him to unzip and hand over his hooded sweatshirt. She pulled on the over-sized black jacket and zipped it all the way up.

"You look like a tiny burglar," he giggled and she scowled at him. "But in a hot way."

"That's my main concern," she rolled her eyes, "looking hot."

"You always look hot," he straight-up leered at her and even with the mask on, he could see Arya's
lusty stare. Arya could be rolled in mud and he'd still want her... actually that sounded really hot.

"Stop - cease - and desist your torturing," she ordered, holding out a reproaching finger. "Don't even turn those eyes on me and save your smiles." They reached the fence and Arya turned to face him. "Now listen to me," she grabbed the front of his shirt, turning her serious grey eyes up to meet his. "If there is even a whiff of trouble then you need to take off." Gendry was about to argue but she did not give him a second to speak. "I'm a minor but you could be arrested and charged - promise me."

"Promise," he assured her.

"Wish me luck," she let him go and blew out a breath.

"You don't need it," he held onto her shoulders to press a quick kiss to her lips before releasing her. "Go get the evidence to take that asshole down."

"This is why I love you," she smiled happily up at him: kinda at odds with the ski mask. "Now, boost me up." He returned her smile before kneeling down to link his hands for a foothold. She stepped into his hands and he easily lifted her up to reach the top of the fence. Arya was even faster at hopping the fence when she wasn't wearing a dress.

ARYA

She hopped down from the fence, crouching to absorb the impact before standing and turning around to face him again. His worried expression made her more nervous but not for herself. The worst thing that could happen to her was nothing compared to the ramifications he could face.

"Go," she ordered, "wait in the car for me - I'll be back before you know it." He nodded once, giving her one last worried look before turning around and heading for the car. After watching him for a moment, Arya crept around the side of the fence past the golf course and pool. She hurried to the French doors and tested the handle. As luck would have it, the door was unlocked and she quickly slipped inside.

"Dumbasses," she snickered and closed the door behind her but whipped around when she heard movement. "Oh, fuck," she hissed. Arya hastily ducked behind the kitchen island before a tough looking man walked into the kitchen to pull a soda out of the fridge. Her heart pounded in her chest - so loud she worried the man might be able to hear. She peeked around the side of the island to watch him pour the soft drink over a glass of ice and replace the bottle in the fridge. After he left she breathed out a silent exhale to slow her racing heart.

The guard sat down on the couch in front of the big screen TV in the nearby living room and turned a sports game on. Luckily, the surround sound provided some cover noise because Arya had to walk right behind the man to get to the stairs. She slinked past as quietly as she could and tiptoed up the staircase to slip inside Joffrey's room, locking the door behind her. The laptop was sitting on a desk stuffed in the corner of the room and she wasted no time turning it on and setting up her external hard drive.

"Come on," she impatiently coaxed the computer to life, "come on, come on." She moved to the door to listen for sounds of the television as the computer started up. Unsurprisingly, nothing in the laptop was password-protected. That arrogant fuck never dreamed of anyone retaliating against him. "Got you, shit-stain." Arya made a copy onto her external drive before installing a program that would wipe everything clean. "Bye-bye hard-drive. Aw, now he lost all his favorite porn sites - poor baby."

"And that's all she wrote," she grinned in celebration of her victory. The instant it was done she
slipped the external drive into her satchel and got the hell out of there. The worst house sitter ever did not even look up as she snuck past him on her way out. She sprinted all the way to the gate to find Gendry disobediently waiting for her. "Gods," she yanked the gate open, "I'm such a badass sometimes it even amazes me."

"No disagreement here," he grabbed her hand and they hurried towards his car. "Let's get you home: if we're lucky, Sheri hasn't been caught." They sprinted to the car and jumped inside to speed away - Gendry was smart enough to keep the engine running.

"I've never been so thankful to be the ugly sister," she pulled off the mask and pushed back her frazzled hair. "Nobody would ever want to film me naked."

"I won't even respond to that," Gendry sulked.

"I know," she scoffed, "I know - in your eyes I'm the prettiest girl in the land. I think we've established that you aren't like other guys."

"Good," he nodded once, "as long as you know." The drive back to dad's apartment went by too short as they talked about their winter break apart. He told her all about spending Winterfest with his mom and Bronn while she filled him in on details about her fight with Joffrey. It felt like only seconds passed by the time he pulled up in front of the apartment building. "I love you," Gendry put the car into park and turned to face her.

"And I love you," she scooted closer to wrap her arms around his waist to a goodbye hug. Gendry folded her into his arms and held her tightly against his chest. The right thing to do would be to hurry upstairs to relieve Sheri but his embrace felt so right. Every once in a while, she had this crazy idea to convince Gendry to disappear with her - he'd do it if she asked. They could go to Bravos, live off the grid, and just be together without having to wait for her parents to give 'permission'. Damn but that would be one hell of an adventure. "I'm gonna make this right - you'll see."

"Doesn't matter," his fingers stroked through her hair. "No matter how long you're grounded: I'll always wait." Arya tilted her head back to receive one of his soft kisses before she let him go, gathered her stuff, and got out. He knew her well enough to know she'd never look back but Gendry always watched her until she was inside. On her way up she texted Sansa to let her know she was coming. Sheri and Sansa waited outside the apartment, rushing towards her when she softly whistled.

"He never caught on?" Arya handed over the coat, glasses, and hat to exchange with Sheri. They hurriedly pulled on their own clothes

"I am an excellent actor," Sheri beamed as she pulled on the coat.

"She impersonated your zombie walk so well," Sansa backed up as she held Arya's bag. "Even I thought it was you for a second." The last thing Arya did was passing over Sheri's phone - just in time before dad opened the door.

"Sheri?" Dad turned a puzzled look down at the girl.

"Mr. Stark," Sheri beamed innocently at dad before patting the top of her head, "I am so stupid. I accidentally took Arya's bag so I came to return it." She whirled around, tossing a wave over her shoulder. "My dad is waiting downstairs, bye!"

"Why are you wearing your coat?" Dad's eyes narrowed on Arya suspiciously.

"I told her," Arya jerked her head in Sheri's direction, "I would meet her downstairs but she's a selfless little thing." She covered a forced yawn with her hand and brushed past dad to go inside.
"I'm going back to bed, still jet-lagged."

"Me too..." Sansa followed into the apartment. "You should get some rest too, daddy."

"I should," dad closed the door behind them. "Work will be tense tomorrow." Arya might have imagined the accusatory tone of his voice. He was totally clueless that his daughters just pulled a fast one. "Order some food if you get hungry." The girls hovered in front of their door to watch him disappear into his bedroom.

"So?!" Sansa ushered her inside, closing the door behind them while Arya plopped down on her bed and set her bag down.

"Who do you think I am?" Arya smirked at her older sister before pulling the hard drive out of her satchel and holding it up. "I got it," she grinned as Sansa accepted the drive almost reverently. "Do you have the cash to overnight it?"

"Of course," Sansa turned around to stash the drive in her backpack. "I'll drop it off tomorrow."

"It's gotta be now," Arya insisted, "the sooner the better."

"Right, then I'll borrow daddy's car." Sansa pulled on her coat but stopped halfway through buttoning to turn a serious look at Arya. "Thank you, I never appreciated you before... I thought you were annoying for always getting into trouble." She moved to sit down by Arya's side. "Now I realize just how brave you are."

"I would've never done all this," she argued, "if you hadn't been honest with me. Even if we have to hide stuff from mom and dad - let's always tell each other the truth."

"There is something I need to tell you, it is making me crazy..." Sansa did look mightily distressed - wan and eyebrows drawn together. "But it's a long story and I'm not up to it now. Later, okay."

"I'm all ears when you need me." Arya flopped back on her bed and kicked her shoes off. "It's not like I'm going anywhere."

"We are going to fix that," Sansa promised before getting up off the bed and walking to the door. "Order whatever food you want," she smiled before walking out and closing the door behind her. And Arya was left alone with her thoughts - dark as they could be. What if the drive malfunctioned? What if she never got the evidence to save Marge and earn her freedom? Gendry would wait for her, like he always promised, but it was only for him she stayed out of trouble this long. All this captivity was starting to get to her.

Today wasn't scary at all - breaking into the Baratheon's mansion and copying Joffrey's hard dive - it was a rush.

Chapter End Notes

Yesterday I had a dentist appointment and I think: "It's just a new patient consultation, the scheduler was exaggerating when she said it could take 'up to' an hour and a half." I was there for THREE AND A HALF *HOURS* (plural). No wi-fi of course so... it was the slowest three *and a half* hours of my life. That ate up all my chapter time right there but that wasn't the worst part - my right butt-cheek fell asleep and it still felt all
tingly while I was trying to watch The Sopranos and eat my dinner. Who knew that was such a good show... :P I'm waiting for all my favorite shows new seasons so I have to go back to old shows I never got around to watching. It just makes me want to watch the new seasons of 'Nurse Jackie' and 'Rizzoli and Isles'. No, actually it makes me want to re-read "Gods and Monsters" by Dr_Supernova_Dragon_Cat - now that's some rockin' fanfic right there. Sandor as a sexy gangster made me tingly in all the right ways - not like my dentist's chair. Gerrrr...
Sansa had been ducking him for a few days since she got back and that set his nerves on edge wondering why. He pulled up in front of the apartment building where she waited for him, her white coat glowing in his headlights. But her head was down so she did not notice him until he parked in front of her. She looked up with distracted surprise before walking to the car to open the door and slid into the passenger seat. Sandor already knew something was wrong or he would've expected her to be her usual cheerful self and happy to see him.

"I'm not very hungry." Sansa looked anywhere but at him as she closed the door and smoothed the skirt of her jacket. "Would you mind if we skipped the date?" Those words sent off warning signals in his brain - she would normally want to go on a date even if the sky was falling. She glanced at him with a guarded expression and it made him start to feel even more anxious.

"But you're all dressed up." Sandor waved a hand at her pretty outfit and carefully styled hair. Her long red tresses were loosely gathered and piled on her head so that several wavy strands framed her pretty face. But her cheeks had a little less color than usual and her features pulled tight.

"I thought dressing up would lift my mood but..." Sansa looked away again but not before revealing everything with her sad expression.

"You okay?" He was hesitant to ask but unbearable heaviness settled in the pit of his stomach, urging him on.

"No..." She slowly shook her head while wringing her hands in her lap and then glanced back at the apartment building. "Let's go somewhere we can talk." Great, she wanted to 'talk' and he didn't have to be a genius to know that meant trouble. Sandor drove them straight to the bridge lookout spot and she stayed silent, staring out the window. He parked the car, turning it off and setting the keys on the dash. Both of them slid their seatbelts off but she kept quiet and still wouldn't look at him. Her averted eyes brought up some old anger he struggled to keep down.

"What's up?" Sandor broke the silence first, unable to bear it anymore.

"Sandor, something horrible happened over the break." Sansa turned to face him but her eyes wavered instead of meeting his. "The Baratheon family came with ours back to Winterfell-

"Joff went?" The tightness in his gut rushed up his throat and nearly spilled over but he swallowed the acrid bile when she answered with a slow nod. "Why didn't you fucking tell me-?" Her eyes instantly filled with tears before hanging her head. "Fuck me," he made a real effort to soften his growling, lowering his voice to a rasping whisper. "What happened?"

"He threatened me..." Her voice wavered as she struggled to get the words out, taking in shuddering breaths every few words. "He planted a camera in my room... He..." Then she suddenly burst into tears and covered her face.

"Quit blubbering and tell me!" Fear made him lose his patience but somehow it worked. Sansa
stopped crying and stared straight ahead with a blank expression. She didn’t bother to wipe the wetness shining on her cheeks.

"He put a camera in my room to shoot footage of me... undressing." Her voice was no louder than a whisper but he hung on to every word - as painful as they were to hear. "He threatened that if I did not... have sex with him, then he would send the video to everyone at school."

"He's dead - I'll kill him for this." Sandor gripped the steering wheel to keep himself from punching the dash and scaring her.

"Listen to me!" Sansa grabbed onto his arm with panic etched on her face. "Don't even say things like that! Arya overheard him threatening me and destroyed his camera after slicing open his arm with a sword. She already saved me." Those last words cut him deeper than her news - that Sansa needed saving and he wasn't there for her.

"I love that kid," he blew out a sigh of relief, "thank the fucking gods for her." It put him to shame that a little shrimp of a girl defended what was his to protect. Greg showing up and Sandor moving out of his dad's house distracted him. He let his guard down - letting that snake raise his blonde head to strike.

"That's not all," her hands fell from his arm as she wilted back in her seat. "Joffrey has videos of Margaery too and threatened to release them if I did not do what he wanted. I could not tell my father the truth because I was afraid of what Joff would do."

"You want to protect that girl," he scoffed in disbelief, "after she interfered with us?" Dumb as a fucking box of rocks and headful of fanciful notions about 'right and wrong' - it's dog-eat-dog in the real world!

"It's the right thing to do," she insisted in a stronger voice. "The type of videos he has of her are not just undressing and it could ruin her whole life. The world is a cruel and unforgiving place to women who appear in such videos, no matter the circumstances. At the time I might have been angry with her for interfering but I know she only meant to protect me."

"That's rich," he sneered, "considering who she fucks." Sandor took ahold of her shoulders and stared hard into her eyes. "She's an idiot, don't risk yourself for her - let her make her own choices and solve her own problems."

"I am going to do what's right." Her voice rose in pitch as her eyes narrowed with determination. "Marge deserves to be protected and monsters like Joffrey deserve to be stopped. That's why-"

"Let me take care of it," he cut her off.

"No!" Sansa pushed his hands off her shoulders to glare at him - still looked all kinds of beautiful when angry. "Why can't you ever listen to me; even this one time?! Don't go around threatening people, that's not the right way to handle this." She wagged her finger like a schoolmarm as she lectured him and he sank down in his seat, crossing his arms. "Right now, he's the one committing a crime but if you hurt him, he becomes a victim. Arya and I are taking care of it so Joff can't hurt anyone again. Don't do anything to him, promise me."

"I have some good news." Sandor changed the topic, unwilling to make a promise he knew he couldn't keep, and hoping his news would improve her mood. "Greg is gone."

"Gone?" Sansa did not give him the reaction he hoped for. Instead, she looked even more afraid, sinking into her seat and staring at nothing. "Where did he go?"
"I don't know - not here and that's all I care about." He could not keep the harsh edge of frustration out of his voice so he took a deep breath to try even harder. "He's doing some out of town work for Robert Baratheon."

"Do you know where?" She sounded so small and frightened and it made him feel completely useless - which made him pissed.

"I just said I didn't!" Sandor lost his temper again and the pitiful look on her face was enough to make him want to jump off the Kings Landing Bridge. "Listen - dad said he wouldn't be back for at least a year." Instead of looking relieved Sansa's eyes darted back and forth, as her forehead furrowed. "You don't look too happy." Her eyes snapped up, sharp and almost angry at him. For what?!

"I don't trust your father or Mr. Baratheon." Sansa crossed her arms sullenly and stared straight ahead. "I'm so sick and tired of all of this. Why can't our relationship just be normal?" Apparently, that was his fault - good to know! Did he not warn her at the get-go it would be like this?!

"This is still better than normal for me," he scoffed a laugh and returned his hands to grip the steering wheel. "Are you done with us then?"

"What?!" Her eyes snapped towards him to stare at him in horror as her mouth hung open. "Does it give you some sick pleasure to say things like that?! Stop trying to break up with me! You... You-hateful jerk!!" Sansa wrenched open the door and flung herself outside to slam the door behind her.

"Fuck me!" Sandor forced his hands to unclench from the wheel and inhaled a deep breath then exhaled until he calmed down. He stepped out of the car to walk around to her side and raised a hand to turn her around by her shoulder. Thick streaks of tears ran the length of her reddened cheeks. "I'm sorry little bird, don't cry."

"I missed you so much," she squeaked, "I wanted you because I was so scared." She shoved his hand off her shoulder and took a step back to glare at him but almost appeared to see straight through him. "What happened to me was horrifying and you could never understand!" Sansa waved a hand at his height and huffed a humorless laugh. "You're bigger and stronger than everyone and nobody can touch you," she pounded a fist against her chest. "But I'm weak and I'm your weakness as well..."

"That's not true," he whispered but she didn't hear.

"If I try to accuse Joffrey without evidence no one will believe me." Sansa smiled through her tears but it was the saddest thing he'd ever seen. "Everyone would rather believe that I'm hysterical or jealous or petty than he's just evil. There are never any real consequences," she shrieked, clenching her fists with anger. "Bad men like Joff, your bother, and Mr. Baelish prey on women all the time. But everyone refuses to see it and that's why they do it, because they get away with it. Not because men are bigger and stronger... but because nobody wants to believe the truth."

"I believe you," he took a step towards her but she stumbled back and held up a hand to stop him.

"Even my own father," her voice was tight with pain, "thought Arya was lying about what Joffrey threatened. His own daughter! Daddy knew I was lying but he would still rather believe my lie that it was a 'misunderstanding'." Sansa wrapped her arms around herself and squeezed her upper arms. "I need to prove that I can protect myself. Arya's help doesn't feel like a burden but yours does." Sansa gave him a pleading look as her half-dried eyes filled with tears again. "But I still need you so please don't leave me."
"My poor sweet little bird." He slowly approached her to fold her into his embrace, holding her against his chest. "I'm not gonna leave you."

"Promise?" She whimpered the word he hated most in the world but it wasn't a difficult promise to make.

"I promise," he exhaled slowly as she wrapped her arms around his waist to return his embrace.

"Am I a burden to you?" She sniffled in a tiny scared voice. "Is that why you keep driving me away?"

"Never," he assured her, "I keep thinking you wouldn't have any problems if it wasn't for me."

"If it wasn't for you I might have dated Joffrey," she shuddered. "I might have been taken advantage of my Mr. Baelish. Who knows, even if I never met you, I could have accidentally bumped into your brother somewhere and sealed my fate. You are nothing like them because you see me as a person and not some object to be owned." Sansa tilted her head back to gaze up at him through teary eyes. "But you do own me, Sandor, I belong to you willingly. I love you more than I can say."

"I'm not so good with words but I could show you how much I love you." Sandor braced himself for the expected rejection but she only pulled away to take his hand and led him to the backseat.

SANSA

Every day since it happened, she went through the five stages of grief but anger remained the most prevalent. Sansa knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Sandor was a good man and her father was one too, still a hatred for mankind surfaced. She never used to be so cynical and always had a bright outlook on humanity as a whole. Joffrey's cruelty made her see the world in a new way. Things suddenly became clear to her when she saw how readily daddy accepted her pathetic lying.

If that video of her came out, it would be passed around school and posted on the internet for the whole world to see. Countless men and boys would enjoy her most painful experience without a moment of guilt of shame. To them she would never be a 'person' with hopes and dreams... she was just a pretty sex toy. It was in Joffrey's eyes when he threatened her; he believed she was his property to do with as he pleased. In his mind, Sandor stole his 'toy' and her preference was inconsequential.

These realizations shattered her fantasy of men being brave and noble, all but destroying her faith in her father. He was the smartest man she knew but he brushed off Arya's explanation as if it were impossible. Daddy begged Sansa to tell the truth but he never once considered that his other daughter was being completely honest. That day she learned that counting on men, either daddy or Sandor, to save her was not only weak but also foolish. At the end of the day, women only have themselves to count on.

But even in her darkest moments, when she wished death to all males, Sansa would think about Sandor's advice. 'Next time help yourself,' he told her on the day he saved her from Mr. Baelish, 'and don't wait around to be rescued.' Back then, she thought his words came from the humble part of him that did not want to be recognized as a hero. After her experience, she understood he meant the advice and gave it because he cared. He wanted her to learn how to keep herself safe and stand up to a world that would seek to make a victim out of her.

No one else in her life sought to make her a stronger person except for Sandor. Her parents taught her how to be pretty and kind but never explained to her the challenges she would face as a woman. They told her the most ridiculous lies about dressing with respect for herself if she wanted others to respect her... It did not matter how she dressed or how nice she acted, being 'pretty and kind' made
her a target for predators! The same exact thing happened to Margaery and Sansa could have easily been in her place on those videos.

"Little bird..." Sandor reached out to take her hand, interrupting her thoughts and bringing her back to the backseat of the Skylark. "I don't pretend to know what you're going through, but I know what it's like to be hurt for no reason. You are never going to understand why Joff did that to you and you'll always wonder what you could've done to prevent it. But you will come out stronger in the end."

"You're wrong... you are good with words," she turned to face him with a smile. "Thank you, that actually does make me feel better, but we did not come back here to talk." Sansa wound her arms around his shoulders and pulled herself up to straddle his lap. "Make me feel loved."

His hands moved up to seize her waist to pull her closer, the heat from his hard body seeped through the fabric of her dress. She gripped his shoulders tightly before she crushed their lips together in a tormenting kiss. Her skin burned to touch his, hindered by layers of clothing as their warm panting breaths mingled. Sansa impatiently ripped her jacket off and set her hands to removing his as he cupped a hand behind her head.

She ached to remove their clothes but he hindered her progress with his intoxicating kiss. His tongue traced along her upper lip and she granted access. His mouth opened with hers and her tongue slid against his as unrelenting longing overtook her senses. The familiar taste spurred her urgency as she moved her mouth against his. Sandor groaned when her hands slipped between their bodies to unfasten his pants and freed his hardness.

Sansa whimpered against his mouth as his hands roamed her body, his palm rasping over the gossamer fabric of her dress. With one hand, he gently kneaded her breast, while the other slid up her thigh to curl his fingers around the thin hem of her panties. The contact of his fingers against her skin tore a moan from her throat and he responded with an impatient growl. Sansa gasped when she felt the thin fabric rip away. The surprise did not restrain her demanding need; if anything, it incited more urgency.

She broke the kiss and pushed her face into the crook of his neck as she positioned the tip of his hardness at her slick entrance. Sansa sank down onto his lap and he panted against her hair as his warm hands gripped her bare hips to pull her flush against him. As he filled her completely, she moaned and tightened her arm around his shoulders. Through this time it did not hurt at all, the sensation was still overwhelming and she trembled uncontrollably. Sansa arched against his chest, wishing they were unclothed with her last bit of consciousness.

"My Sansa," he whispered, digging his fingertips into her hips and pulling her down onto his hardness again. She arched against him and tilted her hips to take him deeper, causing him to groan and return with a thrust of his own. A rumbling sound came from Sandor's chest as he rocked inside her as she panted and clung to him, grasping onto the collar of his shirt.

His fingers held her tighter and tugged on her hips to repeat the motion, building up an erratic pace. Sansa collapsed against his body and buried her face against his neck, trying to match his rhythm as it increased in tempo. His head lolled onto the back of the seat as he thrust faster into her and she swayed against him fervently. Her lungs could hardly pull in air as he drove into but her hands clung to his shirt, needing more.

"Please, Sandor," she demanded. His arms wrapped around her, one hand curling around her shoulder and the other arm spanned the width of her hips.

A single thought resounded in her hazy mind as unrestrained need captivated her full attention. No
one could take away their love, no matter how hard they tried. Not even Sandor could push her away if she did not let him... and she never would. He was stuck with her for the rest of his cranky life whether he griped and groaned about it the whole time. She loved him more than air and earth and needed him to breathe and stay grounded.

She crushed her chest against his and the lack of skin contact heightened the sensitivity between her legs. He pulled and she pushed, moving their bodies together in erratic rhythm that set off fireworks behind her eyelids. The warmth from his chest and arms enveloped her trembling body as another gush of passion swelled within her. She whimpered and shook from the force of the rising tide of sensation robbed her other senses.

"Sing for me," his deep voice broke through her haze, causing her to whimper and writhe as the intense sensation built. "My love." The spiraling sensation suddenly snapped and she shuddered. She released one high pitched cry, unashamed as ecstasy overwhelmed her body and engulfed her in pleasure.

"Sansa," he growled as his fingers plunged his into her hair as his body raised off the seat and his hardness pulsed inside her. In the aftershocks of her release, she whimpered and held onto him with her remaining strength. He slumped down into the seat and leaned forward to rest his temple on her shoulder as they caught their breath. Sandor stroked one palm over her hair as she kissed down his neck, tasting the slight salty sweat on his skin. "You're everything to me," he whispered, "I can't be without you."

"That is up to you," she answered honestly. "Even if I tried I could not stop loving you." Sansa pushed on his shoulders to lean him back against the seat and locked her eyes with his. "Never question my devotion to you again or next time I won't be so forgiving." He actually smirked at her attempt to be tough but then his expression fell into one of horror.

"Shit," he breathed, "we forgot." The look on his face made her immediately worried but she could not imagine why he appeared so terrified.

"Forgot what-" Then it snapped into her head like a bright flashing neon sign... "Oh my gods!" Sansa quickly removed herself from his lap and felt slickness between her thighs. "Do you have some tissues or..." He stripped off his shirt and handed it to her and she mumbled an apology as she cleaned herself. Inside her mind, she berated herself for her thoughtlessness and questioned her own sanity. "How could we forget to use protection?!"

"It's my fault," he groaned. "Fuck I'm an idiot!" He leaned forward to brace his elbows on his knees and pressed his temple into his palms.

"We're both idiots," she grumbled, "if that makes you feel better." Sansa balled the shirt up and threw on the floor of the car as she slumped down on the seat and put her face in her hands.

"Not really," he blew out a breath as he raised his head and tugged on her arms to turn her to face him. "There's meds for this, right - some pill or something?" A renewed wind of hope breezed through her troubled mind.

"I think I can get it at the pharmacy," Sansa answered, feeling grateful there was still something she could do. She gripped his forearm tightly and fixed a hard stare at his grimacing features. "But this can't ever happen again, we have to be responsible!"

"No fucking way I'm forgetting again," he scoffed, "my whole life just flashed before my eyes." Sandor released her to pick up their jackets from the seat and pulled his on before handing over hers from the floor. She pulled it on gratefully because without his warm body the air was too cold.
"Sorry the mood got killed," he avoided her eyes.

"It was amazing." She gave him a reassuring smile. "That's why we got carried away and forgot..." It was sort of perfect in its imperfection that their first time was flawless while their second time was rushed. That was the way of their relationship; the highs were unbelievably high while the lows only made them stronger. "I don't think the night was ruined." Sansa scooted closer to him and lifted his arm around her shoulder to tuck herself by his side. "But you do owe me."

"For what?" He looked down at her with a raised brow.

"You destroyed my panties." She gave him a reproachful look and his expression lightened at her playfulness. Sansa regretted her earlier outbursts but only Sandor ever let her express how she truly felt without judgment. "They were very pretty and I did not even get a chance to show you."

"My loss," he grinned, "next time we will slow down and remember the fucking condom."

"Agreed," she approved of his plan. "But you still owe me a pair of panties."

"I'll get you all the little lacy underthings you want," he bargained, "since I'm the one who gets to enjoy them."

"Is that an offer to take me shopping?" Sansa beamed up at him and fluttered her eyelashes in that way he liked.

"Only for underthings," he stipulated, "and definitely nothing for me."

"Killjoy," she chided as she settled against his chest. "I wish I could stay with you all night but I have to get home soon." Sandor checked his watch and tightened his hold on her.

"We can stay a few minutes longer," he rested a cheek on the top of her head and they watched the lights streaming across the bridge. At some point, she fell asleep and only woke when Sandor pulled the Skylark in front of her apartment building. "I'll call you tomorrow," she leaned over the front seat to give him a quick kiss goodbye. "To let you know that I've been to the pharmacy and everything is okay."

"I'm sorry." He started apologizing again but she cut him off with a quick kiss and then pulled back to smile at him.

"No more saying 'sorry' between us," she insisted, "we just have to learn from our mistakes and try harder." Sansa leaned forward to press another lingering kiss to his lips. "Dream of me, my love."

"Always," he answered softly before she reluctantly turned away to get out of the car. Sansa watched the Skylark drive away before heading into the building. When she got into the apartment, the first thing she did was head straight for the bathroom and turned the shower on. She stripped her clothing leaving them lying around without her usual care and attention. At the moment, she didn't feel much like taking care of her clothes or anything except getting clean so she could crawl into bed. After her shower, she crept into her room because Arya was already sleeping.

They spoke at great length after Bran called to say he received the copy of Joffrey's hard drive. He told them that it was filled with videos and it would take days to go through it all. She pulled on some loungewear before adding a coat on top. Sansa slipped on some shoes and grabbed her phone before quietly letting herself out of the apartment. This confrontation had been put off for too long and it was about time she took control of her life. She scrolled through her contacts until she found the right one and pushed the call button with a slight tremble in her hand.
"This is a surprise," he answered and even the sound of his voice made her want to vomit. "You rethink my offer?" The arrogant fool still thought he had the upper hand and rage twisted in her stomach over his superior condescension.

"I hear you had a little computer trouble," she taunted, surprised at how strong her voice sounded. That trembling little bird that was afraid to leave her nest learned how to fly the hard way. In a way, she owed it to Joffrey for opening her eyes but she hated him more for killing her innocence.

"What did you do, bitch?" Joffrey only enraged her further by calling her hateful names. He was the evil one, he was the one in the wrong, and he had no right to be angry with her for not rolling over and being his willing victim. Sansa could not even begin to comprehend what his motivations were. But she refused to waste a single second trying to understand or pitying him.

"That's not a very nice word," she chastised. "You might want to be more careful about how you talk to me. As we speak, a copy of your hard drive is in a very safe place. But if I give the word, the contents will be revealed to both of our and Margaery's parents."

"You're a fucking idiot if you think I don't have copies," his threat sounded empty to her ears.

"If you have copies somewhere," she emphasized her dubiousness. "I suggest you destroy them or else I will tell our fathers how you threatened me. You will only be hanging yourself if you try to release those videos. I know every disgusting thing you've been up to on your computer. Your parents will know it too if you ever try to do anything to my family or Margaery. Also, right now, the only thing holding Sandor back from choking the life out of you is me; remember that."

"I'll remember this," rage oozed out of his every word, "don't you worry."

"I'm never worried when it comes to you," she countered hotly. "You don't scare me." Sansa mashed the button to end the call and leaned back against the wall to catch her breath. It was impossible to tell if her threats would keep Joffrey in line. At least until Bran could comb through the videos looking for anything they could use. The videos of Margaery were useless except to convince her to break up with her psychopath boyfriend. They needed more, something that Mr. Baratheon could not sweep up with money. One more call before she could collapse in her bed; the phone rang a few times.

"Hello," she answered groggily.

"Missa, it's Sansa," she rushed to explain, "I'm sorry for calling so late but it is life-or-death." This part of her plan was not well thought-out. She and Margaery were not close and had plenty of problems between them. Missa, on the other hand, was a calm rational person who would listen to Sansa without questioning her motives.

"You have my full attention." Missa's voice perked up and her attentiveness settled Sansa's fluttering stomach.

"It is about Margaery and Joffrey," she hesitated. "I don't want to talk about it over the phone. Can we meet?"

"Of course," Missa agreed immediately, sounding worried. It supported Sansa's assumption that Margaery's closest friends would not approve of Joffrey. "Meet me for lunch in front of the weirwood tree on the first day back to school."

"Thank you," she murmured tiredly, "bye." Then Sansa trudged into the apartment, collapsed onto her bed, and fell into a dreamless sleep. At least the nightmares stopped.
Poor Sansa has so much on her plate! I hope she remembers to stop by the pharmacy... getting knocked up would certainly compound her problems. For the next eighteen years! Sex is like driving - don't do it when you're upset to distraction or bad shit's bound to happen. They get a pass because they're still new to this whole sex thing but Sansan could take a lesson from Gendry. Hell, I bet Ygritte could practically teach a class on preventing pregnancy at this point. It happens to the best of us, kids: you live and you learn.

I really took my time with this chapter because a lot of important stuff happens but nothing should get in the way of my posting tomorrow. School is back in session! Marge is up first!
MARGAERY

The beginning of the new quarter felt like a fresh start - complete with an incredibly cute boy in her art class. The boy was not beautiful like Joffrey but his face had a simple kindhearted aspect to it that she found appealing. She felt awful about her fascination but there was no denying he possessed something that Joff did not come close to owning. Marge certainly appreciated all the muscles but that was not what attracted her, the blue-eyed boy was... nice. He almost seemed gay because the only other 'nice' boy she knew was her brother.

First, he held the door open for her while she struggled with a flyaway messing up her style. Then his seat happened to be assigned next to hers and he caught her purse when she dropped it off the desk. After that, he lent a pencil when her only one broke - it was enough to make a girl all fluttery! Even if he was gay, he was still dreamy to look at, no matter how guilty it made her - it was not as if Joff could read her thoughts. Besides, Marge did not intend to do anything else but enjoy the view.

"What is your name?" Margaery peeked sideways to see his adorable confused stare and then he pointed a finger at himself. "Yes," she laughed softly, "you. I am Margaery Tyrell - may I have the pleasure of knowing your name?" It had been a long time since she flirted with anyone but Joff - she hoped she was not completely mucking it up.

"I'm just Gendry," he mumbled as an attractive rosiness flushed in his cheeks. Oh my, a boy who blushes in very handsome indeed - who knew? Joff never blushed - he was far too refined for such an overt display of emotion.

"What do you think?" Margaery slid her sketch over to him and watched his eyes widen in surprise to see his own face on the page. "You have an excellent profile." Her favorite thing to draw was male faces but Joff never willingly sat still to be her subject. It was her dream to go into men's fashion - an extremely difficult field for a woman to break into.

"It's really good," he whispered and pushed the page back. "Think the hair's a bit neat though."

"What can I say?" Margaery glanced at him and smirked. "I like to make things tidy." Blue-eyed Gendry was practically screaming for a makeover - he would be devastating in a suit. And somebody needed to take a brush to his thick head of hair, just so she could get it messy again with her fingers. It's not cheating if it's just fantasizing! "Can I peek?" She pointed at his paper and he passed it to her - his rough sketch was of intricate armor from all angles. "Is this design for a video game?"

"I actually plan to make this," he got this little proud smile that made him look adorable in a sexy way. Joffrey always looked proud but he was always so aloof about it, a guy who showed a little emotion was starting to appeal to her.

"Out of what medium?" Margaery imagined he wanted to sculpt the design from clay or something but he chuckled quietly.

"Metal: steel specifically," he explained, "I mean this to be a full-size suit of armor." Margaery stared
at him in shock, turning his words over in her head to try and make sense of them.
"Are you pulling my leg?" She narrowed her eyes in suspicion as he grinned and rubbed a hand through his messy hair.
"I have my own forge," he admitted sheepishly. "I make weapons, armor, jewelry: you name it."
"Get out of town," she smacked his arm, "I have to see that!" Mrs. Waynwood cleared her throat in warning for them to keep it down and Mage lowered her voice. "Can I watch sometime?" Gendry looked a bit reluctant so she clasped her hands together. "I really need some inspiration for a collection I am designing. Please let me just come to see you work one time," she held up one finger and gave him a pleading look.
"I don't see why not," he shrugged - not exactly an enthusiastic response but at least an affirmative! The bell rang - cutting short their conversation just when it got started and he stood up to gather his things. "See ya," he flashed another friendly smile before heading out. Margaery watched him leave before heading to her next class, her heart pitter-pattering faster. It had been a long time since she could look at any other boy aside from Joff and Gendry was the exact opposite of her boyfriend. He was nice, a little goofy, and did not act obsessed with 'being cool'.

The last time Joff dumped her, she consoled herself by swearing 'never again' but that promise was too hard to keep. When he came around to make up, he acted like a prince and always brought some expensive gift for her. His charming smile and pretty words reminded her how it used to be when they first started dating. Where did that sweetness go? Or... did she mistake possessiveness for longing and sex for affection? Some time ago, she got it into her head that anyone she dated would treat her like Joff so it might as well be him.

Every time they started over was like a dream, perfect and lovely - Joff would take her on lavish dates and dote on her for a few weeks. After a while, he would start blowing off plans they made to hang with his friends while acting jealous and possessive. This time was the biggest contrast - everything was near perfect until he got back from Winterfell. Margaery had not even spoken with him in days and he would not talk about whatever was bothering him. She worried about him but at the same time, frustration over his immaturity overpowered her worry.

For some time, Marge wondered if maybe she needed to look past her usual standards and expand her options. She was missing out on the best type of guys by judging them first by family connections and then appearance. The boy looked lower-middle class at best and could not dress himself to save his life. But she wasn't looking to get married! It might be interesting to see how the other half lives... Whom did she think she was fooling? Her heart belonged to Joff and no amount of cute artists was ever going to change that.

GENDRY

Every new quarter he always ran late as he adjusted to his new schedule and Gendry sprinted to meet up with Arya and everyone in the group. This was the only time they got to see each other without Arya putting herself at risk for getting into more trouble. Sure, they just sat next to each other and sometimes held hands under the table but it was enough. Just when he made it to the door outside of the empty room, a feminine voice called his name.

"Gendry!" Margaery Tyrell, his new classmate was the source of the voice and he turned around to face her as she approached. "I hate to impose but I need a favor."

"What's up?" Gendry tugged on the straps of his backpack to adjust the heavy load. It surprised him how easily he could talk to her: in the past, he would have broken out into hives and run away like a
coward. He supposed that being with Arya made him less nervous around girls because... Well, it was hard to explain: like they weren't girls anymore but just 'people'.

"I might not make it to class tomorrow," she frowned. "Can you call me if Mrs. Waynwood assigns any reading?" Margaery held a slip of paper out of the notebook in her hand and passed it to him. "Here's my number."

"Sure thing," he stuffed the paper into his pocket, turning away until she his arm she caught his arm.

"Thank you so much, you're such a sweetheart." She beamed an appreciative smile at him, which he returned with a friendly one of his own. Margaery seemed a nice enough person and clearly talented from what he saw in class. Her interest in seeing him forge was surprising. After learning she was into fashion designer he hoped to get some input from a fresh perspective.

"No problem," he nodded before whirling around to the door, "catch you later." Gendry tossed a wave over his shoulder and stepped away quickly before she could stop him again.

"Bye-bye," she called as he opened the door to find two dark grey eyes glaring murderously. Arya stood in his way and he had to walk around her just to step into the room.

"Hey, Arry," he gulped hard as goosebumps prickled all over his skin. "What's up?" She stepped into his path and pushed him back against the door, closing it behind him. His eyes darted over her head to the game room, hearing the rest of the group chatting.

"If you ever cheat on me I will kill you both and then myself." Her voice was as cold as her icy glare and twice as threatening. He wondered if their children were going to be able to do that same Stark death-stare but decided that didn't bother him.

"Good to know." Gendry tried to play it off with a little laugh but she did not let up her strong hold on his chest.

"Slowly," she continued her threat, her expression still dark and homicidal. "All three of us will die over a period of several days."

"Okay, okay: I get you." Gendry rolled his eyes and lifted a hand to ruffle her hair. "Little Arry is so scary, I'm trembling in my sneakers." Her expression didn't relax one bit and he lowered his hand to cup under her stubborn chin. "I don't see anyone else," he insisted. "Other girls are basically dudes to me." Arry's hand gripped the font on his shirt and pulled him down until the faces almost touched. Those hard grey eyes did not blink even once, holding his in a hard stare.

"Even if you cheat on me with a man - I will end you." She looked so bloody serious it made him want to laugh but he bit the inside of his lip to hold it back.

"Don't worry, I only want you." Gendry pressed a quick kiss against her frowning lips and when he pulled back, she still didn't look convinced. "Hey, I'm serious," he narrowed his brows, concerned over her sudden doubt. "You know what you mean to me." Her dark expression lightened just enough so that he could see the insecurity underneath.

"She is pretty and nice." She jerked her chin towards the door, talking about Margaery Tyrell. "And soon to be single... you looked good together." Arya didn't have to say it: she thought he matched better with Margaery than with her.

"I don't really like nice girls," he shook his head, "they never say what they really think. And you're way prettier." Arya wrinkled up her nose in disbelief and he tapped the tip with one finger. "My petite pixy princess."
"Ugh," she groaned and rolled her eyes at him, "you're pathetic."

"But you love me anyway," his smile fell when she just nodded glumly in response. What was with her? "It's not like you to worry about some other girl."

"You're right, let's get in there before they send a troll after us." She flashed a confident smirk at him before whirling around to head into the room. Gendry could not tell if her confidence was genuine: sometimes Arya was just too damn talented at lying for her own good.

**SHIREEN**

"As you can see on your character sheet." Dany leaned forward, pulling her long blonde hair over her shoulder to point at the page. "It is just as we discussed over the phone." As they waited for Arya and Gendry, Dany explained some final details about Sheri's character. "Do you have any questions?"

"Just tell me if I mess something up." Sheri tried for a confident smile but knew she was making a nervous grimace.

"You'll do fine," Dany assured her. "We'll have an easy one today to get you used to playing." Sheri flashed a grateful smile before retaking her seat next to Rick.

"Did you have a good holiday?" He gave her a wide smile and it surprised her how little of an effect it had.

"I did," she returned his friendly smile. "I fell in love with someone."

"Good for you," he cheered.

"But he lives half a continent away," she finished glumly.

"If I know anything about difficult love, and I think I do." Rick smirked through his self-deprecation. "No matter how hard it is: love is its own reward."

"That's comforting to hear." She forced a contented smile, trying to hide her sadness over being separated from Bran.

"No it's not," he gave her a knowing look, "you're miserable without him."

"Is it that obvious?" Sheri braced and elbow against the desk and tilted her temple against her fist.

"Love is always miserable," he groaned, "but sometimes it's..."

"Wonderful," she sighed.

"Yeah," he chuckled, "something like that."

"And your love?" Sheri lifted her head and let her hand fall to the table. "Still unrequited?"

"It has its moments." Rick sat in his seat, crossing his arms and staring down at the table. "Sometimes I see this glimmer in her eye, like she's seeing straight into my head and knows my innermost thoughts."

"I know exactly what you mean," she commiserated. "Somewhere between miserable and wonderful - love is a bit more than terrifying all around."
"You said it," he laughed again, a lighter more genuine laugh. "I'm really glad you decided to join the group."

"Me too," she rolled her eyes, laughing at herself. "I need a distraction or I'll be calling Bran twenty-four-seven."

"If you ever need a sympathetic ear," he offered, pointing at the side of his head. "I've got two of them right here."

"Same here," she returned the offer. "We fools for love need to support each other." Finally, Arya and Gendry walked into the room.

"Alright, let's get started." Dany called the room to order before turning to Sheri. "You are walking through the woods when suddenly a twig snaps behind you..." Nhee glanced around through the trees but saw nothing but still forest - too still... A smell on the air like wet fur sent her sprinting in the opposite direction only to come face to face with a giant wolf. It growled at her and moved in as she stumbled backwards. The sheer unfairness of the situation made tears prickle in her eyes, which were busy staring at death itself.

Her vengeance was foiled by a common woodland beast - though there was nothing common about its sharp fangs bared at her! Nhee attempted to evoke a spell but she stuttered from fear and nothing happened. There was no one around to save her but she could not stop the piercing scream that ripped from her throat as the wolf lunged at her. A strong hand suddenly yanked her backwards and threw her down onto the ground.

"Stand back!" The interfering Human in glittering gold armor pointed his warhammer at the beast.

"Gendry wait, let me try something." A girl-child in dark clothing ran out in front of the Human to stand between him and the wolf. The child fished a piece of dried meat out of her pouch and held it out to the beast. "Here girl, I have something tasty for you." Nhee thought the girl was insane to approach the animal but eat suddenly showed intense interest in the morsel. Its ears flattened against its head as the girl continued to entice the animal closer. Everyone stood completely still, hands on their weapons and ready to jump into action.

"Go on," she coaxed, "it's really yummy." The wolf approached the girl to accept the meat before licking the girl's hand. "Who's a good girl? That's a good girl." The child patted the top of the wolf head as if it were a beloved pet. "I'm keeping her," the girl announced as she stood up, dusting the dirt off her leather breaches.

"Are you alright?" A High Elf approached her to reach out and take Nhee's hand, helping her to her stand.

"Take your hands off me!" Nhee ripped her hand away as soon as she was on her feet - she needed no one's help! "I could have handled it!"

"Didn't look that way to us." The Human called 'Gendry' in glittering armor gave her a disapproving frown. "Some bloody gratitude wouldn't hurt."

"Stuff your gratitude where the sun doesn't shine!" Nhee made a rude gesture at Gendry and then glowered around the entire party. "My sister..." Her voice cracked as she recognized The Protector - this was the very company she sought to take vengeance on! "It's all your fault! Ray of Enfeeblement!" She shrieked the invocation but the High Elf quickly shielded against her attack and sent it back to her. "NO!!!" The force of the spell slammed her into a nearby tree and she slumped onto the ground. "You all will pay for what you've done to Khaleesi!"
"She is your sister?" As the girl-child approached, Nhee could tell it was truly a grown Halfling.

"WAS!!!!" Nhee could not hold back the tears that ran down her face as the shame of her failure turned her heart cold. "You all got her killed!"

"She is not dead, child!" The Protector knelt by her side but she only glared at him.

"You're a liar!" Nhee had lost all faith in Boccob. "I heard..." Shuttering sobs racked her body as she glared accusingly at the party. She was lead to believe there were more members - the Ranger, Dwarf, and Cleric were nowhere to be seen. "The Devourer has taken her for his host... She is as good as dead, or worse!"

"Listen to me," the Halfling put her hand on Nhee's shoulder, "we are going to save her."

"You've caused enough trouble." Nhee shrugged off the hand and glared down at the ground, wishing she were not in enfeebled so she could just get up and walk away. "Your companions and The Protector only pretend to be good!"

"I agree with you - all this Boccob bullshit has me pissed too." The Halfling leaned into her vision and gave Nhee a meaningful look. "What's your name, youngling?"

"Sirinhee," she muttered, "but everyone calls me 'Nhee', it means 'sweet'." Gendry let out an arrogant snort and Nhee bared her teeth at him.

"Well met, Nhee." The Halfling took a hold on her forearm in a gesture of friendship. "I am Arry Wolfborn - thief, pickpocket, and all-around-badass - at your service." She released Nhee's arm to bow with a flourish. "Your sister Khaleesi is a hero - she sacrificed herself to save your people. We were with her in the end and I can tell you - it gave me chills to watch her do something so selfless. Your god chose her to be The Protector of your clan - that is nothing to be upset about."

"She can never be The Protector," Nhee protested, "if she is held by that demon!"

"Grey Worm, show her." Arry nodded at the High Elf who pulled a small bead out of a pouch around his belt.

"A soul-eater?" Nhee gasped as she recognized the item immediately. "But how will you get her to swallow it?"

"I'll shove it down her throat personally if I have to." Arry flashed a cocky grin before turning to face the group who each appraised Nhee with varying expressions. "I think it is only right we allow her to come with us to fight the demon who took her sister. Any objections?"

"She is very young..." The High Elf, Grey Worm raised the only objection and Nhee scowled at him.

"No matter my age," she protested, "I have the same right to vengeance as anyone!"

"Then it's up to Drogo," Gendry nodded at the half-Orc standing in the shadows behind the rest of the party.

"Khaleesi would say 'no'." Drogo spoke correctly - her sister would never allow her to go on such a dangerous adventure. "She is not here." The half-Orc wore and unreadable expression on his face but Nhee thought she saw hint of sadness. "You join us," he nodded once and then turned around to walk off into the woods alone... The bell rung.
"Did I do okay?" Sheri whispered to Rick as the rest of the group gathered their belongings.

"You did fine," he encouraged, "the next game should be more exciting but if you mess up I'll help you."

"Thanks," she stood up and threw her bag over her shoulder. "Bye, Rick!" Sheri waved before scampering around the table to catch up with Arya. Something was the matter with her face - it was a little more drawn and serious than usual.

"What's wrong?" Sheri followed Arya out of the room, glancing back to see Gendry staring after them with a sad expression. "Don't you want to wait for your boyfriend?"

"He knows the way out," she shrugged like she didn't care but Sheri knew better than to believe that.

"Do you want to talk about it?" She put her arm around Arya, who tilted her head on Sheri's shoulder.

"Nope," she sighed, "I don't even want to be thinking it."

"I would have given anything," she changed the subject. "To see the look on Joffrey's face when Sansa called to threaten him." Arya chuckled but did not respond so Sheri kept quiet and just walked with her friend. Sometimes that is all a person can do.

Chapter End Notes

A heartfelt thanks to Veridissima - even when I write a dud you hold me up and cheer for me to get me through the rough times. I simply could not get past the last chapter - 'Oopsy Daisy!' "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in." It took four days and I can honestly say I did my best - c'est la vie!

I only have some vague notes about how I want the battle between the DnD group and The Devourer but I know I want to dedicate a whole chapter. Right now, I'm debating who the POV should be... It has been a while since a Snow chapter or maybe a multi-POV! That might be really fun.
MISSANDEI

In her gut, Missa knew there was something seriously wrong but she kept a cool head because panicking would solve nothing. Her mind was a storm of possible transgressions Joffrey could have committed... each one worse than the last. They waited for Sansa underneath the tree in quiet nervousness, both of them rising to their feet as she approached. Her blue eyes flickered to Dany with surprise and a hint of displeasure.

"I asked Dany to come along, I hope you don't mind." Missa gave Sansa an apologetic look. She needed her friend with her so they could face the problem together and support each other.

"I was never the one who had a problem..." Sansa turned her nose up to ignore Dany but then her haughty expression fell into a sad smile. "But I suppose now that the rolls are reversed I can better understand. Although... in this case I am actually helping," her eyes narrowed at Dany again. "Instead of interfering needlessly." Missa could feel the static rising between the two girls and felt like a kite tossed around between two strong winds.

"We will have to agree to disagree." Dany refused to take the high road, assuming an equally hostile expression. Missa opened her mouth to chastise their immaturity but Sansa beat her to the punch.

"I won't be pushed around anymore!" She crossed her arms and glared at Dany. "Not by Joffrey, you, or anyone else. Maybe sometime Sandor is mean and rude and all sorts of awful things but he's not violent unless provoked. You have no right to think badly of him for what his brother did. Especially because you tolerated Joffrey, even though he is cut from the same cloth."

"Dany," Missa cut off her friend before she could continue the argument, keeping her voice low. "Stop being a child, this is for Marge's sake! Our worst fears are about to come true; don't kill the messenger." She fixed a pleading look at Sansa. "Please tell us what happened."

"Joffrey and his family came with us to Winterfell over the holiday break." All emotion disappeared from Sansa's face and she stared at the gnarled roots of the tree. "While we were there he set up a camera in my room to shoot footage of me undressing. He told me that if I tried to do something to the camera that he would release some videos he has of Margaery."

"What?!" Dany's hand flew to clutch her chest as her face appeared as shocked as Missa felt. "What kind of..." Her fair skin turned white as a sheet before turning a sickly shade of pale green. "Oh gods, I think I need to sit down." She stumbled back against the tree and braced a hand against it to sit down on the ground.

"Are you alright?" She sat down next to her panicked friend and Sansa joined them without complaint. Dany's mouth opened a closed as if she wanted to say something but the words would not come out. Missa tore her eyes away from her stunned friend and nodded at Sansa. "Please continue."

"He tried to blackmail me into having sex with him." Sansa's upper lip curled in disgust, which Missa shared. "It was his way of getting revenge on me for not dating him."
"He's insane," Dany wheezed, clearly not taking the news well. "That sick, twisted, perverted... How...?" She gripped the front of Missa's jacket. "How did we not know it was this bad?" Missa shushed her friend and gave Sansa a look to encourage her to go on.

"My sister Arya attacked him and smashed his camera." A hint of a smile pulled at the corner of Sansa's mouth. "She did not hear his threats about Margaery and acted out of rage. After I told her everything, she agreed the right thing to do was protect Marge. We told our parents and the Baratheons that it was a misunderstanding. Then my sister broke into their house and made a copy of Joffrey's hard drive before deleting it."

"Oh thank the gods." Dany choked on a sob and covered her face with one hand and Missa rubbed her back in an attempt to comfort her. She should have realized this situation would be too difficult for her friend to handle... How could she have known it would be this unimaginably horrible? With the exception of Marge's bizarre attachment to Joffrey, she was always the strong one of the group.

"Why make a copy?" Missa felt just as concerned and overwhelmed as Dany but it was up to her to stay strong and clear minded. That was her role in the group... the levelheaded one.

"We are turning the tables on him." Sansa smiled confidently and for the first time Missa felt some hope. "Now we have evidence of his illegal activities and proof to convince Marge to leave him."

"I am both deeply disturbed and highly impressed." Missa bowed her head in acknowledgment of Sansa's hard work. If this same situation happened to her, she did not know if she would handle it with such dignity and strength.

"It was mostly Arya's idea," Sansa answered modestly, "but neither of us wanted to let him get away with it." Missa only met Sansa's sister in passing but fully intended to thank the girl in person when she got the chance.

"How can we help?" Missa was ready to take on whatever needed to be done.

"It might be easier to hear coming from her best friends." Sansa clearly did not envy them the task but it was only right they be the ones to tell Margaery the truth. "Can you convince her or should I get the videos for you to show her?"

"Where are they now?" Missa had serious doubts about whether or not Marge would take their word. She fully trusted that Sansa was telling the truth but Margaery had always been blind when it came to Joffrey.

"My younger brother has them in Winterfell." Sansa ducked her head sheepishly when Missa raised a questioning brow. "He is a whiz with computers and compiled all of the evidence and made sure no one else is in those videos. I know it seems a bit odd to leave that task in the hands of a young boy but Bran is trustworthy and dedicated." She clearly felt proud of her siblings; it shone through her expression when she spoke of them. "All of my brothers are very protective of their sisters."

"After we tell Margaery," Missa grimaced at the mere thought, "what are you going to do?"

"I will tell my father the truth to get my sister out of trouble." Sansa looked like she had more to say but she hesitated for a moment before continuing. "Sandor already knows what happened and it is very difficult for him to stand back and let me handle this." Dany tensed noticeably at the mention of Sandor by Missa squeezed her hand to keep her quiet. "That's why I knew I had to do this for Marge..."

"Everyone deserves to be respected by the person they love, including Margaery." Sansa sighed
heavily and shook her head at the ground. "If it was not for Sandor's support I would never be brave enough to tell the truth... I would hide from it and lie through my teeth, pretending it never happened." Her gaze lifted to briefly meet with Missa's before locking with Dany's eyes. "Love should make a person stronger, not tear them down."

"We should not dawdle: Marge needs to know right now." Dany rose to her feet, tugging Missa's hands to help her stand. A look of raw determination fixed on her face as she nodded at Sansa. "She will believe us."

"Thank you," Missa expressed her gratitude to Sansa as Dany dragged her away from the tree. "You could have been more appreciative," she admonished.

"I will kiss her feet once Marge is safely out of that creep's grasp," Dany countered.

"At least let me tell my next period teacher that I won't be attending," Missa wrenched her wrist out of Dany's tight grasp and continued before her friend could argue. "Call Marge and tell her to meet us at our table, I will meet you both there." She grasped Dany's shoulders and stared hard into her purple eyes. "Don't start without me."

"Hurry," she demanded before turning around and stalking off, already dialing Marge's number. Missa blew out a long breath before hurrying to her next class and making an excuse with her teacher. When that was done, she ran as best she could in heeled boots to meet the girls... She got there just a moment too late, Dany had already started explaining the situation to Margaery, and she was not taking it well.

"I don't believe a word you are saying!" Margaery, red-faced and panting, stomped her heel of her shoe against the ground.

"Marge," Missa ran to her friend's side, "let me explain-"

"You too?! This is ridiculous!" Margaery glared at Missa as if she was a traitor. "Don't you think I would know if I was being filmed? Do you think I'm an idiot?!" Missa started to argue that no one questioned her intelligence but Dany responded emotionally.

"You are certainly acting like an idiot!" She waved her hand between herself and Missa. "Why would we lie?!" This is why Sansa called her instead of Dany or Marge directly... She was such a fool for bringing Dany along! When she got into one of her furies, nothing could calm her down.

"You've never liked Joff and... you are jealous!" Margaery's furious eyes darted back and forth between them. "I know that you blocked his number on my phone so I would miss his texts and calls." Missa's stomach sank under Marge's glittering glare. She regretted the childish prank more than she could say. Back then, they thought Joffrey was just an asshole, not pure evil! "How dare you try to control my life?!" She suddenly started to stomp away but Dany caught her arm to stop her.

"Marge, please!" She pleaded it in a shaky voice, all annoyance lost behind her desperation. "If you walk away now I don't know where our friendship is going!"

"It's over!" Margaery ripped her arm out of Dany's hands and stumbled backwards. "Joff loves me!" She pounded a hand against her chest over her heart as thick teardrops rolled down her cheeks. "He would never do the things you're saying! He might be a little aloof and arrogant but that doesn't make him a monster!" After one last hateful glare, she whirled around and scurried towards the front parking lot where she parked her car.
"Marge!" Dany started to go after Margaery but Missa stopped her. It was no use; Marge was never going to believe such a terrible thing about the person she loved.

"Let her go... we will have to prove the truth to her." Missa turned Dany to face her. "I don't blame her one bit; it is such a horrible thing." Dany started to argue but Missa shook her gently. "Who would want to believe it? I know you think she is being unreasonable but we cannot hate her for being in love with the wrong person. That happens every day and usually to the nicest people. Monsters like Joffrey pick kind and trusting people so they can control and manipulate them. If it was Drogo, would you believe it?"

"That's entirely different," Dany sniffled as she tried to hold back the tears shining in her violet eyes. "Drogo would never do something so... vile." She spit the last word with hatred and disgust that Missa shared. Neither of her friends could be blamed for their reactions... It was completely Joffrey Baratheon's fault!

"Marge feels the exact same way about Joffrey," Missa explained patiently. "She 'knows' he would not do such things." She sighed wearily and loosened her grip on her friend's shoulders. "But he did and we need to show her the proof before she will accept the truth."

"I just can't believe she doesn't trust us." Her head hung forward as she let loose her tears and Missa pulled her friend into her embrace. "We've been through so much together and she is willing to throw it all away! For that sick disgusting asshole!"

"Right now we don't have to the right to be hurt." Missa rubbed a soothing hand up and down Dany's trembling back. "Our friend needs our understanding... When she finally accepts reality it is going to crush her."

"Missa..." Her voice strained was from crying, Dany's arms locked around Missa's waist. "What are we going to do?"

"I trust Sansa and intend to follow her lead." Missa recognized strength in Sansa, which her friends had been blind to, from the very the beginning. This situation only cemented in her mind that she could trust the girl. There was nothing obligating Sansa to help Margaery but she did it without a moment's hesitation. That strength of character was sadly rarer than the detestable villainy committed by Joffrey.

"You are the smart one," Dany laughed through her tears and pulled out of Missa's embrace. "I think I need to go cry on my boyfriend's shoulder."

"An excellent idea," Missa replied wearily. She had yet to cry in front of Torgo but this was as good as any time to start.

"How is that going, by the way?" Dany's interest perked up as she plopped down at the table, clearly lacking the energy to go anywhere just yet. They had seen little of each other since boyfriends were added into the equation. Perhaps that distance was part of the reason Margaery did not trust them.

"Slowly," Missa smiled wryly as she sat next to Dany, "but very well I think." Torgo was still shy and reserved but they had made great strides since she met his parents. The next hurdle would be bringing him to meet her parents... once dad was back from his deployment.

"I am happy for you, Missa." Dany's face was still flushed from crying but her encouraging smile was genuine. "You deserve it."

"It is like Sansa said; we all deserve to be respected by the person we love." Missa leaned back on
"That became clear to me after seeing you both go through relationships with disrespectful boys. You two thought she needed your guidance but it turns out Sansa is not quite so oblivious as you assumed."

"You think I am wrong when it comes to her, don't you?" Dany crossed her arms and stared down at her booted feet. "I forgot you joined the hound's fan club." Several times Missa tried to tell her friends how Sandor acted heroically at the wedding she attended with Torgo. They chose to hear the story as 'the hound behaved violently' and refused to consider the circumstances. Some people looked down on her father the same way, disapproving of his military career. Those people did not care to know the man himself or his views on war, only judged his participation unfairly.

"I am not telling you what to do but if I want my opinion I will give it." Missa waited for Dany to nod her head slowly before continuing. "Sansa has far surpassed anyone's expectations of her and barely bats an eyelash. We all thought she was naive when she started to date the most notorious student in school. Instead of ruining her reputation, she improved his. When is the last time you heard of him fighting in school?"

"Are you saying she 'fixed' the hound?" Dany scoffed to a disbelieving laugh and uncrossed her arms to brace against the seat and lean forward.

"I am saying," she felt amused rather than baited by Dany's quips. "She saw something in him and perhaps even brought it out for others to see." Missa touched her friend's arm to gain her attention. "From where I sit, what happened two years ago must have been difficult for him."

"I won't listen to that kind of talk," Dany narrowed her brows at Missa and pulled her arm away. "My family members are the victims."

"And Gregor Clegane alone was the perpetrator." Missa pointed out, refusing to back down just to spare her friends feelings. "You know that." It was the exact same situation with Margaery, they both needed to hear the hard truths, and that is what made Missa a good friend.

"Robert Baratheon paid for his legal defense," Dany got sidetracked, "and his son is just as disgusting! Poor Marge... We should have done something sooner!"

"It would have only driven her away faster," Missa disagreed, "even we did not know Joffrey was this bad." Missa's mind still reeled from Joffrey's cruelty, especially despicable considering how much Margaery loved him. "However we are not talking about Baratheons, don't change the subject." She turned the conversation back on track, refusing to allow this useless spite to continue. "How does hating Sandor help you? Does it really make you feel better?"

"No..." Dany appeared physically pained by her admission but at least it was a step in the right direction. Missa recognized the recent growth in her friend, especially when it came to dealing with her family.

"I am not telling you what to do," she tread lightly, keeping her voice soft and low. "If I were in your shoes I would see Sansa as an opportunity." Missa bit back a smile at Dany's quizzical expression. "Ask her about him," she explained. "Give her a chance to show you what she sees in him. It could be he's not the person you think he is."

"I will think about it," Dany answered after a long pause. "Truthfully, I have been blind to many things... but no longer." She tuned towards Missa and pulled her into a tight hug. "Goodbye, my friend," she kissed Missa on the cheek before standing up. "Call me the instant Sansa has the proof ready."
"I will," Missa agreed, "the very instant." Dany gave her another tight nod before walking to the side parking lot where her boyfriend's beat-up truck sat. Left alone, Missa wondered what she should do with herself but could not think of anything so she decided to finish the school day. No matter what happens, life still goes on and it would be a waste of a perfect attendance record to find somewhere to sit and cry alone. Next year, Dany and Marge would go off to college and leave her behind... then who will care for them?

Chapter End Notes

Full Missa chapter! And no sweet nerdy Torgo in sight - what is wrong with me? I don't have anything planned for them until Maiden's day but maybe I can sneak something in sooner than that.

I believe one of the lovely comments on my last chapter mentioned a phone call between Sheri and Bran? Ask and ye shall receive! Sheri gets the next POV!

I really want to get to some Sam/Gilly stuff I've had planned FOREVER but it's all wrapped up in some Jon/Ygritte stuff and stupid Joffrey got in the way! I wish I could type like... 1000000000000000000x faster.
SHIREEN

All day at school and the entire ride home she daydreamed about being back in the snowy wonderland of Winterfell. That place seemed almost a dream and the nippy southern air still felt too warm. Just after she closed her bedroom door, her phone jingled its cheery ringtone and Sheri hurried to dump her bag out on her desk. She was not expecting a call but she wished it was from Bran - a quick glance at the screen confirmed her hopes. Her stomach tightened and her heart stuttered, even though he half a continent away!

"I was just thinking about you." Sheri answered the call with a smile so big it felt like it might split her face. She twirled on her tippy toes to her bed as he chuckled charmingly in her ear.

"I know," he replied smugly, "that's why I called." Bran puffed out a sigh as Sheri settled into her bed, kicking her shoes off. "Really, I should be calling Arya and Sansa but I'm procrastinating."

"Why?" She was kept mostly out of the loop on the revenge against Joffrey. Arya explained that she did not want her to be an accessory but Sheri worried it was because of her last name. Her loyalties unquestionably resided with the Stark siblings but it felt awkward to profess such a thing. Bran also shared few details, mostly assuring her that she was better off in the dark.

"I can't talk about it," the tone of his voice sounded troubled. "Trust me: you don't want to know." That was his new catchphrase... Sheri felt even more concerned after hearing his solemn tone but shrugged off the weight of her worry to focus on her happiness. Even though they spoke every day after school and sometimes all night, conversation was never enough. She wanted to see his face and for him to see hers - no small thing on her part. Her life was spent avoiding being seen by others, blending into the background, and hoping nobody noticed.

"Fine," she conceded, "what do you want to talk about?"

"You," his voice lowered, erasing all tenseness and making her heart beat faster. Somehow it was easier to talk to Bran in person... or maybe his voice was captivating to distraction.

"The new quarter started and I have some new classes." Sheri made a bored humming sound, pretending she was not flustered by his deeper tone. "But nothing remotely interesting."

"What are you doing now?" He seemed to find everything Sheri said fascinating but she always worried she bored him.

"Lying in bed," she answered honestly but it still made her feel a little naughty. Sheri felt her face getting hot as she turned onto her side and hugged a pillow to her chest. "I wish you were here." Her life might be unexciting but the thoughts heating her face were almost shocking.

"What would we do if I was there?" Bran's question was innocent enough but she could just imagine the roguish grin on his handsome face.

"I would kiss you," she whispered and her face burned even hotter as she buried it against the pillow.
"And I would kiss you back," he flirted shamelessly and it made her stomach coil and her skin feel hot all over. "Then what?" She imagined his arms holding her and his warm soft lips kissing her - it felt really wonderful when he kissed her neck.

"I don't know," she mumbled her answer quietly as shyness overtook her pining. Sheri knew she was being coy but it was too embarrassing to admit her true thoughts. They never risked the chance to lay next to each other and she wished she was hugging him instead of her pillow.

"I keep thinking about that last kiss," he declared, "right before you left." She was confused that he would remember that kiss above all the others, not that there were many. They spent a lot of time alone when she stayed at his house but Mrs. Stark became suspicious towards the end of the visit.

"It was just a quick peck goodbye," she reminded him.

"It was unfinished," he corrected, causing her breathing and heart to race as her face burned unbearably hot. "Someday we're going to make a proper kiss out of it."

"What constitutes a proper kiss?" Sheri asked the cheeky question in a weak attempt to disguise how absolutely charmed she was by him.

"First, I have to be holding you close to me: anything else is just a polite greeting." His devilish manner sent a shiver down her spine. "Next, I have to wait until your cheeks turn pink."

"That seems awfully specific," she wheezed, lifting a hand to fan her overheated face.

"It's how I know you really want to kiss me," he chuckled. Bran was so suave and confident even though he was almost a year younger - it made her anxious to jump ahead a few years. All this waiting and yearning was overtaxing her poor heart!

"I thought you were reading my mind," she teased.

"That's right," he answered seriously, "I can see your thoughts plain as day."

"Do you know what I'm thinking now?" Her stomach fluttered as she found her boldness.

"Something wicked," he answered in a knowing voice.

"You are psychic," she accused playfully.

"Dammit," he muttered in annoyance and Sheri wondered what she did wrong. "Arya keeps beeping in..." Sheri knew they had important things to discuss. At least more important than long-distance flirting. "This conversation is not over, call me later."

"I will," she promised, "I'll miss you until then."

"I don't miss you," he insisted, "I'm just looking forward to seeing you again." Sheri bit her smiling lip as she ended the call, turning onto her back to press the phone over her heart. All the land and sea that covered the world could separate them but it did nothing dull her growing affection... Dare she admit that Bran was her first love? That was something she feared never to experience and the distance made it bittersweet.

**ARYA**

Her patience was wearing thin, almost nonexistent when the fifth call did not go through. On the sixth time she called him Bran finally picked up the phone.
"Bran, what the fuck is taking so long?!" Arya clicked the phone over to speaker and set it down on the bed between her and Sansa.

"Hi to you too," he replied in a snarky tone. "If you want, I could spend the next two hours explaining how the videos were encrypted and that it took forever to get into." Bran was being a smartass. "Would you like that?"

"No, just give us the low-down," she griped irritably - Arya just wanted something to distract her from... "On second thought, give us the short version."

"So when you copied the hard drive it only saved all the files, not the programs." Bran launched into his explanation while Arya swung her foot impatiently. "What confused me was the some of the video files were huge and others tiny and unplayable. I discovered that an additional program was needed to unencrypt those tiny files. You see, they were ones he never saw: unopened files that were created in the few days before he left for Winterfell. I found something... You have to understand I was prepared to see some pretty horrible stuff but this..."

"Just fucking tell us!" Arya started to get really annoyed with his inability to spit it out - it had nothing to do with...

"There was a video of Mrs. Baratheon," he hesitated and Arya huffed an exasperated breath, "and her brother."

"Doing what?" She rolled her eyes at Sansa, who looked equally confused by his cryptic account of what he found.

"Having sex on Joffrey's bed," he mumbled uncomfortably. Arya's eyes snapped up to meet Sansa's startled expression.

"Are you serious?" Sansa choked out the question while Arya reeled from the revelation. It certainly was a juicy tidbit of information but how could they use it against Joffrey?

"Dead serious: as in," Bran released a nervous laugh. "I'm kinda worried knowing this information is going to get me killed. What's more is they said something..."

"WHAT?!" Arya exploded from curiosity and Sansa quickly covered her mouth and glanced worriedly at the door.

"Mrs. Baratheon called Joffrey 'our' son," he whispered, "talking to her brother." Arya shoved Sansa's hand away from her gaping mouth. They all sat in stunned silence for a moment as the wheels started turning in her head.

"Holy fucking hells," she grinned - knowing this was way better than anything she hoped to find out. This was going to be their golden ticket to putting Joffrey down once and for all!

"Oh... dear gods." This time Sansa covered her own mouth but not succeeding in hiding her horrified expression.

"Yeah," Bran scoffed a laugh, "so 'sorry' that it took me a few days to drum up the courage to tell you." Arya felt guilty about putting this kind of responsibility on her younger brother but there was no one else she trusted to do the job.

"Do you think Joffrey knows?" Sansa uncovered her mouth to ask the question but her expression was still tense and shocked.
"The file was never opened," uncertainty clouded Bran's voice. "His camera seems to be automatically hooked up to start recording whenever his door opens and stops when it closes. Most are of him just making phone calls, jerking off, shit like that."

"What kind of calls?" Arya latched on to whatever evidence they could use against Joffrey, hoping to save the big one in case of full-on crisis.

"Mostly stuff I already told you about: he pays someone to do his homework." Bran ran though the laundry list of Joffrey's misdeeds. "I also have clear evidence that he buys drugs, gambling and other petty crimes. He has that whole room wired up good; bet he never thought it would bite him in the ass like this. I have been watching this kid for almost two weeks straight. I think there's enough here to keep him quiet for a good long while."

"Thanks Bran," Arya meant her gratitude sincerely, they could not have pulled this off without his help. Neither she nor Sansa had the time to go through hundreds of hours of video and wouldn't have done it with the same attention to detail. "Make a new copy of everything incriminating and send it back to us when you can. Keep the original and hide it somewhere no one will find it."

"You got it, sis." Bran agreed easily and Arya lifted the phone to hang up. "Oh, one more thing! You should be getting a package soon: I found your sword."

"You're the best," a wide grin broke over Arya's face - everything was coming together!

"I know," he was so modest. "See ya!" Bran hung up and Arya plugged her phone in on her bedside table. When she turned back she noticed her sister's face was even more pale than usual.

"We're almost through this," she attempted to comfort Sansa.

"I just want this nightmare to be over." Sansa shook her head and rubbed a hand over her forehead. "I feel like I have been run over by a truck... and then it backed up again to park on me."

"You called Joff," Arya insisted confidently, "he knows we're on his ass - he won't try anything."

"You don't know..." Sansa wrapped her arms around herself and squeezed her arms. "He is completely insane. I doubt my threats will stop him from retaliating."

"He probably doesn't have a clue he's a product of incest," Arya didn't bother to hide her disgust before she snorted a laugh. "We have him by the balls and he doesn't even know it."

"I hope you are right," her sister answered quietly. "Even if it is for her own good, I don't look forward to breaking a Marge's heart."

"We're saving her," she argued, "that's what we are doing. Besides, Margaery Tyrell is a dumbass," Arya scoffed and gesture a hand in a sign of disbelief. "How could she not believe her friends?" And how could she even think about dreaming about looking at her Gendry - he was hers! She wanted to wipe that pretty smile off her stupid face!

"Love makes you do crazy things," Sansa sighed miserably - Arya wasn't about to touch that drama with a ten-foot pole. Her sister was the genius who thought dating the hound was a good idea. She should've found herself a nice obedient boy... too bad she nabbed the last one.

"Don't I know it," Arya admittedly was going through some boyfriend drama herself. "Well, at least she won't be able to live in denial once she gets a look at that footage."

"You are right," some color returned to Sansa's cheeks. "Joffrey would end up hurting her much
worse. Thank you," she reached out to hold Arya's hand, "you are a true hero and I am so proud to be your sister."

"Psh, come on..." Arya waved her free hand at her sister's sudden sappiness. "Don't be like that - pretending we don't hate each other."

"I love you," Sansa locked eyes with Arya, her expression serious.

"I love you too," she mumbled, glancing away embarrassed.

"I can tell there is something wrong." Sansa could be too perceptive sometimes but talking about... what was 'wrong' was the last thing Arya wanted to do. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Nothing to talk about," she forced a confident grin. "What was it you wanted to tell me before?" Sansa grimaced - clearly not wanting to hash out her bullshit either. Good, both of them can put it off for eternity for all Arya cared.

"First let's talk to daddy," Sansa stood up and headed to the door.

"I thought we were gonna wait," Arya quickly grabbed her wrist to stop her, "until Marge broke up with that dipshit."

"We have done what we can," Sansa sighed and shook her head, "there is no point in waiting any longer." She slipped her hand down to link with Arya's once more and squeezed it. "I think he will believe us now."

"You mean he'll believe you," she scoffed, still a bit sore about dad's dismissal.

"Either way, I'm not leaving his office until you are ungrounded." A determined look fixed on Sansa's face before she led the way. They walked out of their bedroom and through the hallway into their father's office. Arya followed behind, worrying that after all of their hard work they would still not be believed.

"Daddy," Sansa barged in without knocking, "we need to talk to you."

"Come in," he waved them inside, "have a seat." Sansa and Arya sat down opposite their father, who folded his hands on his desk. "What would you girls like to discuss?"

"We want to tell you the truth," Sansa sat up straight and stared hard at dad, "about what happened in Winterfell." He closed his eyes as his hard expression fell into a mask of relief.

"Girls," he smiled for the first time in days. "I cannot express how glad I am that you decided to tell me the truth."

"Arya told the truth from the beginning," Sansa frowned at him. "I was the one who lied." Dad blinked a few times and Arya was nearly as surprised as him - her sister was getting strong.

"What are you saying?" He knew exactly what Sansa was saying but he still didn't want to believe it - sometimes adults were such children. Arya simply sat back in her chair to enjoy the show.

"Joffrey took a video of me undressing and then tried to blackmail me into having sex with him." Sansa looked super pissed and it was a struggle for Arya to not grin during her vindication - gods it felt good! "Arya overheard and that's why she attacked him and destroyed his camera." Dad sputtered, clearly not taking the truth very well despite how much he demanded it.
"Are you sure it was not a prank?" Dad's attempt to make excuses for Joffrey made Arya roll her eyes. "Did you actually see a video...?" His inability to accept the truth, even from Sansa, made her feel a little better and worse at the same time.

"It wasn't a prank, daddy!" Sansa leaned forward in her seat and thumped a fist against his desk. "He wanted to rape me and Arya saved me!" She glared at their father. "You punished the wrong person." He stared at his eldest daughter open-mouthed before turning his shocked face towards Arya.

"I know I shouldn't have attacked him," she hurried to excuse her violent reaction - his main reason for grounding her. "But when I heard him saying those things to Sansa I lost it. She's my sister for the love of the gods! Robb would've done the same thing and you would have patted him on the back for it!"

"Calm down," Sansa patted her arm and Arya slumped back in her seat, having said her piece. "It's all going to be alright now." She turned back to face dad. "Isn't it? Arya does not deserve to be grounded anymore," she insisted.

"Why would you lie?" His eyes darted back and forth between them, clearly still trying to make sense of the bizarre situation. There was no making sense of it! Joffrey was a fucking animal - end of story.

"He had videos of one of my friends, the girl he's dating." Sansa leaned back in her chair wearily, as if finally admitting the truth exhausted her. "If I told on him then he would release those videos."

"The Tyrell girl?" Dad looked like a lost little kid and Arya almost felt bad... until she remembered how harsh he was to her. It served him right - he can't just live in his little fantasy world where he assumed his children were safe. The world is a fucking scary place and her parents did their best to ignore it, like that was gonna make anything better. In the 'real world' kids get hit by cars, women like Gendry's mom get abandoned, and assholes like Joffrey get away with being evil. Bad stuff happens to good people and ignoring it doesn't fix anything!

"Yes, Margaery Tyrell," she answered. Her chin raised higher and she stared down her straight nose at him. "Do you believe us, or do you need to see proof?"

"I have faith in you," he looked first at Sansa and then at her, "both of you. I just... did not want to believe my friend's son could be capable of such a thing. What is this 'proof'?"

"I broke into the Baratheon's mansion," Arya jutted her chin up stubbornly to match her sister's pose. "I copied his hard drive before I wiped it. Go ahead - tell me I did the wrong thing." She crossed her arms and looked away. "You didn't give me a choice."

"I'm sorry girls: I let both of you down." Dad's remorse surprised her and it tore down her resentment. "Arya, I officially remove your grounding."

"Really?!" Arya's eyes opened wide in shock before turning to smile wide at Sansa. "We did it!" Her sister returned the smile. "Joffrey can suck our dicks!"

"Language!" Dad admonished and Arya calmed down.

"Sorry," she apologized quickly but could not hold it in any longer - Arya grabbed Sansa into a tight hug. "We did it!"

"Arya," dad interrupted their celebration, "let me speak with your sister alone."
"Fine with me, I'm going out!" Arya jumped out of her seat to tear out of the office. "BORN FREE!!!" She ran straight to her phone, grabbed it off the charger, and pulled on a jacket before sprinting out of the apartment. FREEDOM!!! It felt damn good! The phone only rang once before he picked up "We did it! My dad believes us! I'm free as the wind, baby!"

"I knew you'd pull it off," he laughed. "What're you doing now?"

"Waiting for you dumbass!" Arya impatiently punched the elevator button before giving up on it and heading for the stairs.

"I'll come now," Gendry agreed right away - ever obedient, something she could count on. "You know: there's no school Monday."

"It's a three-day weekend," she froze in her tracks, nearly passing out from happiness. "My gods... Do you know what this means?"

"What?" His voice was tinged with wariness and it made her grin as she continued down the stairs.

"We can finish the box," she suggested - might have been more of a mix between a threat and a command.

"You're trying to kill me, aren't you?" Gendry always had something to complain about - the boy had to have at least one flaw.

"Just get here," she grumbled as she turned down the last flight of stairs.

"Can I at least throw on some pants first?" Behind Gendry's voice she could hear him passing the television. She imagined him walking through the apartment in a towel. Hmm... it was good to be free!

"If you must," Arya rolled her eyes at his insistence on always wearing pants - if she had her way he'd be naked twenty-four-seven.

"Love ya," it was in his voice that he was smiling and it made her smile too.

"Love ya," she made a kissy sound into the phone before hanging up. Arya sighed in relief - this was exactly the kind of distraction she needed... No need to worry about stuff she can't change.

Chapter End Notes

Just under the wire! I got caught up in the third season of 'The Sopranos' and it makes me want to write a gangster fic so bad. But it's been done so well already that I doubt I can live up to what I've already enjoyed. Maybe I should go the other way and write a really good GoT modern cop drama... Oh... Gendry in a uniform... *mouth waters*. Sandor as a tough-as-nails detective with a crush on Sansa - wait for it - Police Chief Stark's daughter and whiz forensic analyst. I don't know, that sounds pretty hot! Ohhhh... I should- No! I need to sleep! Bedtime!
SANSA

When Arya left the room she took all the happy energy with her, leaving herself and daddy to sit in silence. Sansa sat stiff in her seat, filled with an unfamiliar discomfort in her father's company. He appeared to struggle to form his thoughts into words, his head shaking while his mouth opened only to snap closed. Finally, she sighed and impatiently waved a hand for him to go ahead.

"This is... a disaster." Daddy dropped his forehead into his hand before raking it through his thick graying hair.

"For me, it has been a nightmare." Her eyes fixed on the painting behind his head but she forced herself to look him in the eye. Let him see exactly how much the whole experience changed her and made her stronger! "Except it really happened."

"Of course," he gave her a pitying look that revived a surge of newly familiar wounded rage within her. Why should he pity her? She and Arya acted stronger than he ever taught them to be. "I am so sorry, lemoncake. Sometimes-"

"Don't feed me any more of your..." The disrespect fell from her lips before she realized that her internal thoughts were being spoken aloud. "I'm sorry," she looked away as shame burned her cheeks. "I am just so angry... I say things I don't mean." A sudden spark of understanding made her realize this anger must be how Sandor felt all the time. Instead of getting mad at her insolence, daddy averted his eyes and assumed a guilty expression.

"I have let you down." His guilt did not erase the anger caused by his pity but neither did it seem right for her father to blame himself. "You are my child and I am supposed to protect you." In a strange irony, Joffrey had two fathers and neither of them deserved to be called such an honored title. Her father was fallible, that was the lesson she learned, but he was still the best man she knew. Sansa would always love her father with all of her heart. It hurt to see him as a human and not as a hero yet that seemed a normal part of growing up.

"When I saw myself on that video..." Her words trailed off when he flinched as though her humiliation physically pained him. "I felt so vulnerable and alone." The memory was almost hazy after spending so much time trying to block it out but one thing straight out clear in her mind. "Arya came out swinging her sword and for that instant I wished I were her instead of me."

"I am so proud of you for putting your friend first." It did not feel the same to receive daddy's approval, that rush of well-being did not bloom within her as it once did.

"I lied because I was scared..." It shamed her to admit how much the experience affected and changed her. "Part of me wished you would see through my lies and take care of everything." Time passed so slowly it felt like years though only a couple of weeks had gone by. Her biggest worry back then was what to get Sandor for Winterfest. This abrupt change in her had to bother him, no matter how much he claimed he would not leave her. As if he expected her to leave him. "It is best I learn to care for myself since I will be a grown woman before long."
"You will always be my little girl." He gave her a weak smile and she could see in his eyes that he recognized their relationship would never be the same.

"What will you do?" She returned his smile with a tight one of her own, attempting to express her understanding without saying it aloud. It would hurt him too badly if she admitted how her faith in him was shattered. In truth, as she was putting the pieces of herself back together, Sansa found that she was stronger than she thought she could be. Even if her parents shielded her from reality, they still instilled in her unwavering sense of right and wrong. When push came to shove, she did the right thing even when everyone called her an idiot.

"That's the question." He leaned back in his seat as he decided, tilting his head back to look up at the ceiling as if praying to the gods for answers. "In all honesty, I don't know what I should do." It was unusual for her father to show any weakness or doubt... Maybe their relationship could grow into something more substantial from this disaster. His eyes returned to meet hers, his expression drawn and serious. "If you wanted to press charges I would support you without question."

"If we did that," Sansa shook her head, "we would risk getting Arya into trouble."

"My other option is to talk to Robert." He looked like he would rather tear out his own eyes than talk to his friend about the evildoings of his son. "If anyone can get that boy under control it would be him." It was on the tip of her tongue to warn her father that Robert Baratheon could not be trusted. She feared he would think her prejudiced against the family because of what happened. It also burdened her heart to hold onto the horrifying truth about Joffrey's parentage. But she could not tell daddy because innocent people could be hurt.

As a last resort, they had one defense Joffrey would not be able to escape and that would have to be enough. There had been enough truths spoken for one day. Her goal of getting Arya released from her grounding was completed and all that was left to do was move on with her life.

GENDRY

In a flurry of clothes and camping gear, Gendry rushed to pack up so he could head out to pick up Arya. He froze mid-step and pumped an arm in victory: in a way he was ungrounded too. Mom tried to gain his attention but he ran past her in search of his sweatshirt.

"I gotta go!" He grabbed ahold of the doorframe to his bedroom as his eyes darted all over: looking for the last thing he needed before he could leave. Where in the bloody hells was his hoodie?!

"Where?" She held the sweatshirt he was looking for from the back of the couch and handed it to him as he hurried past.

"Arya isn't grounded as of right now." He actually giggled a little bit but he was so damn happy he didn't have it in him to feel any embarrassment. "We're going camping: probably won't be back until Monday night."

"Love you baby," she called after him as he headed to the door to slip on his shoes. "Don't forget anything!"

"Oh, right!" Arya would skin him alive if he forgot again so he ran back to his bedroom to gather the trusty box of condoms. "Bye mom!" Gendry raced downstairs, jumped into the Lincoln, and drove way too fast to Arya's apartment. She was waiting for him outside while bouncing up-and-down with impatience.

"Took you long enough!" Arya launched herself into the car and pulled the door closed before
turning to face him. They grinned at each other like a couple of idiots before he put the Lincoln into drive and headed to their place. The forge used to be 'his' place: his fortress of solitude. But he never felt the need to be alone anymore like he used to before he met Arya. Gendry pulled the Lincoln into his usual parking space and they both got out, walking around the car to link hands. She dragged him through the woods and headed straight for the tent

"We could just hide away in the tent..." He stopped following her and tugged her back, earning him a questioning look.

"What else is there to do?" Her confused expression turned to disbelieving delight when he waved a hand at the forge.

"You could forge something." There was still plenty of daylight and they would be spending the next three days together. Her eyes widened excitedly and she pushed past him to march towards the forge.

"I can have you anytime - let's make some weapons!" Arya skipped to the center of the clearing and Gendry jogged to catch up to her.

"Slow down, Arry." He tugged on the sleeve of her sweatshirt. "Safety first: take off this baggy fire hazard and put this on." Gendry walked to the storage box next to his forge to retrieve an undershirt and handed it to her.

"I hate these things." She held up the undershirt with her nose wrinkled up in distaste. "Why do you always wear one?"

"It's practical," he shrugged. "Say I spill something on myself there's a backup. More importantly, makes it so the apron won't stick to my skin." She stripped her sweatshirt, making him regret his detour from the tent for a moment. Plenty of time for that later... Gendry chuckled at how the undershirt looked like a dress on Arya.

"You could just forge with no apron." She quirked her brows at him. "Now that'd be hot.

"That's how you get burned." He poked her in the forehead. "Now pay attention."

"Yes, master," she clasped her hands behind her back and stood up straight, a mischievous expression on her face. She knew how it made him all prickly when she called him that. "What?" Arya blinked her eyes innocently. "I didn't do anything - I'm just listening to your instructions... master." Gendry threw the apron at her and she caught it with a grin before tying it on. He moved closer to wrap the ties around her tiny waist and then stepped around her. Once a loose bow was secured behind her back, he set to work teaching her how to heat the forge.

The day passed as he helped her to fashion a small knife out of a spare piece of metal he picked up at the junkyard. Arya liked heating up the metal the most but her arms got tired pretty quick as she started to hammer the metal into shape. Though sweat dampened her hair and the strain showed in her face he had to order her to take a break while he finished. She gave in without much of a fight, relinquishing his apron to put her sweatshirt back on. While he finished the knife, Arya pulled out her phone to take pictures.

"You're distracting me," he complained as she circled around him snapping pictures. His arm fell to strike the metal, letting the hammer do the work as he effortlessly directed it.

"It's for your online shop - a little eye candy goes a long way." Arya knelt on the ground to get a different angle. "There's not nearly enough hot dudes doing interesting things on the internet." She
let out a frustrated groan as she stood up and stuffed her phone in her pocket. "This is driving me nuts - let's do it already."

"Aren't you supposed to be on your period?" The question just sort of popped into his head like remembering he was supposed to take the trash out or some other menial chore. But the way she looked at him, that flash of fear in her eyes, it made his heart stop. He set down his hammer and removed the apron to face her.

"How would you know?" Her terrified expression came and went so fast that he almost questioned if he'd actually seen it. There was something just not quite right about her voice though, in her own words, she was an excellent liar. But no... he remembered the last time was about a month ago so it was due. Gendry wasn't exactly keeping track but at that moment, he wished he had.

"That's not an answer," he whispered, unable to speak any louder. Instead of replying, she whirled around and stopped off into the woods towards the parking lot. "Where are you going? Arya!" His heart raced as panic overtook his mind, preventing his feet from chasing after her. The darkening woods spun around as she disappeared into the thick trees. Some bravery he had no idea he possessed moved his foot one step and then another until he was sprinting. When he cut into her path, Gendry held out both of his hands in surrender.

"It didn't come." Her lips were drawn into a tight line and her eyes stared blankly ahead without emotion. Seeing her standing so tall, like she didn't need anybody, he knew it was a front and somehow that melted his fear. Except he was kinda afraid he might pass out: but something happened in those moments they stared at each other. Or rather, he watched her looking straight through him but at least she didn't run away. But at any rate, some new strength came over him when he saw the suffering she tried to hide.

"You mean your period?" Gendry prayed he'd heard her wrong: surely, she said anything but what he thought she said.

"It just didn't come this month," she shrugged, "should already be done by now but not even a spot." Arya shook her head in disbelief or maybe denial. "It didn't come." He refused to let his mind jump to the conclusions she obviously feared. Gendry didn't blame her for wanting to run because it's natural for a person to escape when they're scared. Her terror was well hidden but apparent to him and he realized that this was his chance to be strong for her.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Gendry knew he was a coward and supposed he was born cautious but even the most gutless part of him did not once consider running away. To what? From what? Without her, he was just some guy who hangs out more with his mother than his friends. Love means never giving up. Arya was the end and beginning to everything: his best friend and reason for being. No matter what happened: nothing would ever take her away from him. They would get though it together, no matter how much she tried to carry her burdens alone.

"What's there to tell?!" Her face twisted into an expression he could not name if his life depended on it but 'abject horror' came close enough. "I'm not... There's no way," her voice broke over the tears she fought, "I'm fourteen - I'm a kid! I'm not having a fucking kid!" Sometimes, no matter how good someone is a lying they can't lie to themselves or their bodies. Suddenly her bright red face lost all of its color and then turned slightly green. She slapped her hand over her mouth and ran to the nearest tree to throw up.

"You alright?" Gendry took a step towards her as she turned around, her head hanging forward.

"Relatively," she shrugged and wiped her mouth on the sleeve of her sweater. He grabbed her hand and started to lead her through the woods to the parking lot. "Where're we going?"
"Pharmacy," he needed to know what they were dealing with as soon as possible. Maybe he'd have to quit school and join up with the military for the benefits... The faster they knew the truth, the sooner they could fix it together.

"I can't... I can't..." She yanked her hand away and started backing up, trembling from head to toe. Time stood still as the first tear rolled down her cheek, breaking the dam she held in. "Hold on - I'm gonna throw up again." Arya turned and slumped against the nearest tree to retch all the contents of her stomach. "Why did you have to bring this up? It's not like anything would change if you know or not." She fell backwards onto the ground to pull her knees up and he crouched down behind her. "There's nothing to know! It's just... it just didn't come.

"Maybe you're sick," he carefully wrapped his arms around her to pull her back against his chest, "shouldn't we know?" His chest ached as he questioned every choice that led to risking the impregnation of the girl he loved. He forgot, it wasn't ignoring reality, he actually couldn't remember that she was so young. About most things, she was smarter than he could ever dream of being but this situation clearly blindsided her. "I'm sorry, Arry."

"Apologies are asinine," she grumbled. "There's nothing wrong." Arya twisted her head around to look back over her shoulder at him. Though in a broken state, she still looked beautiful but her beauty took on a fragile quality that broke his heart. Apparently, she was displeased with what she saw on his face because a familiar fury overtook the sadness in her eyes. "Fuck your pitying looks! There's nothing wrong - it just didn't come! Fuck you!" There was his fiery girl: he'd wondered where she went these past few days. He'd assumed she was just worried about the Joffrey shit.

"It isn't like you to run away just because you're scared." Gendry knew there was too much pressure on her and even he was guilty of blindness to her troubles. "When you're afraid, that's when I'll be there to help you." He was born loving Arya, only he didn't know what his life was missing until he met her. "I'm always gonna be here for you and love only you no matter what happens. Can't you lean on me a little? Do you always have to be tough by yourself? You're allowed to be human."

"I just wanted a few days of happiness," her voice was tight and tinged with vulnerable desperation. "I've escaped one prison and am already facing another sentence. Our lives might already be ruined - what's the point of ruining our weekend?"

"Who says our lives are ruined?" Gendry squeezed her tighter and she burrowed against his chest. "The only thing that could ruin my life is losing you." He knew she felt the wetness on his cheek against the top of her head but he forced a laugh anyway. "This is nothing compared to being without you."

"You fucking idiot," she mumbled against his hoodie. "Why are you with me? Why me?"

"Didn't I just say?" He tangled a hand in her hair and struggled to keep his tone light. "You never listen to me."

"Stupid," she whispered, "stupid - dumbass - perfect..." Her voice rose in pitch and he knew she was crying. "Why are you so perfect?" Arya sniffed as familiar anger seeped into her voice. "I hate you for that - it makes me look bad." After a while of them just sitting there as the night grew colder, she wiggled out of his hold and pulled on his hand to help him up. "Let's go get this over with." Once on his feet, he tugged her close to look her in the eye.

"You're always my lady," he tilted his forehead against hers. "Always."

"As it should be," in the dark her eyes were shining as bright and full of life as always. It would be okay as long as they never let go of each other because love can conquer all. Whatever was coming
they would face it together: hand-in-hand they walked towards the unknown future.

Chapter End Notes

The old bait and switch - you thought I was giving Sansa the preggers scare! Honestly, I don't know if Sandor could handle it. At least not nearly as well as Gendry: he really is perfect. (sigh) I always worry that my angsty chapters will drive everyone away but I feel pretty good about this one. Maybe not the editing - that could be way better. I totally didn't waste a bunch of time outlining a new cop drama today... That's just didn't happen... much. *pulls collar* Oh but it's starting out really cute - Ygritte and Gendry are rookies together and besties from the academy! They get on Chief Stark's radar and *not* in a good way. <3 BUT! I am not posting anything else right now, I'll just keep the idea tucked away and work on it in bits and pieces. This fic is still priority #1!

Next up: Sansan are going on a date - not sure who will get the POV or maybe I'll split it. I really miss my Sandor, I feel like it's been a while.
The air turned cold after the sun went down so the little bird tucked herself against his side as they waited in line for movie tickets. Damn it was strange to admit that he was fucking happy to be on a date. It seemed lately that all they did was try to overcome all of the roadblocks set up by various forces. If he believed in the gods, he'd think they personally enjoyed fucking with him. They gave him Sansa and then kept him fighting not to lose her. Sandor knew well enough that good things never last so he might as well enjoy the peace while he could.

"It feels good, admit it." Sansa looked up at him with a more relaxed smile than he'd seen on her face since she came back from Winterfell.

"Standing in line?" He knew what she meant but couldn't help teasing her, especially when she rewarded him with one of her pretty pouts. A cool breeze blew through her hair, filling his nose with her flowery scent - life was good.

"No, silly," she pouted. "We are on a normal date, nobody is trying to tear us down." Sansa's arms tightened around his waist as she beamed gloriously in that way that made his heart stutter. "Don't you feel free?"

"Sure, whatever you say little bird," he rolled his eyes and pretended like he didn't know what she was talking about. Her expression fell from sulking to displeasure and he groaned in resignation. "As long as you're happy then so am I." Sandor felt the smile tugging on his lips and he gave into it - fuck how ugly it made him look.

"I am very happy, lover." Her bright smile returned and he knew she didn't see anything ugly when he smiled - love really does cause blindness. Sansa stretched up on her tippy toes to put her mouth close to his ear. "Later..." She blushed as her eyes darted around them. "Someone might overhear," the way her face flushed redder made him dying to know what was on her mind.

"Whisper it real soft - nobody will hear." Sandor bowed his head and wrapped a hand around her waist hoping it would encourage her.

"It's embarrassing," she whispered, her warm breath tickling his ear.

"Line's moving..." Somebody behind them interrupted their flirting and Sandor looked back to sneer at the heckler. "Holy shit!" The asshole didn't bother to keep his voice down as the line moved forward. "Did you just see that guy's face?" All other sounds faded out as his ears honed in on the two men directly behind them.

"That's fucking nasty," his companion replied - Sandor's hands clenched in anger and Sansa tensed.

"How does he get a fine girl like that?" It was like all of the negative voices in his head suddenly grew bodies and spoke loud enough so that Sansa can hear. Furious humiliation filled him, churning in his gut as his pulse rushed in his ears.
"So... um... What movie would you like to see?" She tried to ignore the idiots behind but her happy expression was clearly forced. "There's a romantic comedy-"

"Are you fucking retarded?" Usually when people stared or talked about him in public they did it quietly so as not to draw his attention. These fuckers were looking for a fight. "Look at him," the first asshole pointed at the little bird, "she's not with him for his face." He and his friend laughed uproariously. "That's why I don't date sweet-looking girls."

"Cause you can't get 'em," asshole number two taunted his friend. Sansa pulled Sandor forward as the line moved again but they couldn't get away from the dumbasses. They didn't even sound drunk so they must've been straight crazy.

"No, because they all love big dick." The two fucks yucked it up while Sandor counted deep breaths in his head - one, two, three... "Sweet face - loose cunt. Everybody knows that." Fuck - these morons were begging for it! And he'd love to give it to them and knock their teeth out so they learned to keep their mouths shut!

"Maybe we can get some coco with marshmallows after this-" Sansa tried again to lighten the atmosphere but Sandor was already shaking with rage.

"That's some shit," the first joker had the gall to sound disappointed. "I'd still fuck her. If she was loose, I'd just turn her around and tell her to suck my-" That was it - he snapped. Before he even knew he moved his hand, it gripped the front of the moron's shirt as his free fist sailed into the guy's face. The friend tried to jump in but Sandor threw the first asshole into the second and they both crashed to the ground together. He advanced forward to yoke up one of the fucks as the crowd dispersed, some of them yelling but one sound broke through his rage.

"Sandor, don't! Please stop it!" The little bird stood there, hands covering her mouth but he wished she covered her eyes... They were staring at him in horror - as if she didn't recognize him and so far removed from her usual adoring gaze. Tears flowed down her face as he unclenched his hand to release the fucker with the smart mouth. Both of the shit-talkers ran away like the fucking cowards they were. Finally, he thought to himself, he finally fucked it up and he was almost relieved until she started to walk away.

All of a sudden, raw fear struck his heart as he watched her red ponytail bouncing further away from him. He just chased off the only good thing in his life and for what? This was what he always expected to happen - one day she'd see him for what he really was and leave his side. Sandor didn't know how much he feared losing her until it actually happened. That sickening dread propelled his feet to chase after her.

"Sansa, wait!" When he reached out to grab her arm, he noticed blood on his hand. He tried to touch her with that fucker's blood on his hand and the thought nearly made him sick.

"I would like to go home," she stopped, whirling around to face him and stamped her heel against the ground. "Right this instant!" Sansa's blue eyes stared at him hard and Sandor had to look away. "Will you take me or should I call someone?"

"Fine," he brushed past her to lead the way back to the Skylark. They didn't talk - she was too upset to lecture and he was still too pissed to beg. So they sat in the car on the ride to her apartment in silence. A few times, he opened his mouth but no words came out because there was no way to explain his actions. If he'd been thinking clearly he would never have attacked someone just for saying some fucked up shit about his face. But they said that filth about her and all he saw was red, unleashing the hound to take control of his fists.
"You always say how I can't ignore what other people say," she broke the silence. "I hope you know how hypocritical you seem right now."

"They were talking about you," he knew it was a weak excuse but he couldn't say his mind reacted slower than his fist. That would mean admitting that he barely had control over his actions and might cause her to fear him. She was lucky he didn't beat the shithits senseless - talking about his girl like she was a car they'd like to test-drive! When he threw the first punch, it wasn't that asshole's face he was seeing - it was Greg's grinning face.

"How you reacted is unacceptable!" Always with the fucking lectures from her! Sandor struggled to hold in some sarcastic remarks, knowing his anger would be misdirected. "You could've been arrested, someone could've been hurt, and the situation could've escalated!" All the strength left her voice as she hugged herself and stared out the window to watch the city pass by. "You didn't defend my honor, you scared me." Her words were worse than any fist to the jaw.

"Is this it then - we done?" He knew it shouldn't be said, every piece of him was screaming at himself not to say it and even he didn't know why he was always pushing her away. Sandor should've been begging for her forgiveness but it would only make it harder if she gave up on him.

"You are the one who keeps bringing it up." She didn't get mad or sad or anything just looked disappointed. "Do you want to be over?"

"I told you, I'll always want you with me." Sandor meant everything he said to her - he never once lied about what he wanted. "Still doesn't mean we should be together." He was right from the get-go - she deserved some good-hearted prince, not a surly dog with a short fuse.

"Are you really so okay with us breaking up?" Her voice rose in pitch as she held back her emotions. "You're not upset at all?" Sandor didn't answer - couldn't answer - as he pulled into her apartment's parking lot to park the Skylark.

"I'm holding it," he gritted through his teeth. "If I don't hold it in I might drive back to the theater to find those two assholes and kill them." Sansa huffed a laugh and sharply turned her head to glare at him.

"People say horrible things all the time," she frowned as she looked him up and down. "Even you say horrible things quite often. As much as I'd like to punch all of them, and sometimes you, I do not." Sandor actually smiled a bit at the thought of her hauling off and punching him - it would be so unlike her to do anything violent. "I understand that it's hard for you, but it's hard for me too. You can't fight if we are together."

"You don't understand - I'm already trying my hardest." Sandor gave up trying to pretend he was this good guy who could change himself for love... Might be it wasn't pretend - he changed a lot since he met the little bird. "I stopped today, that never happened before. Usually I don't stop until they can't get up but I stopped today because you told me to stop."

"Next time, how about we just leave?" Her words sent his head spinning though he should've expected it by now. "The next time you get that angry, just tell me 'it's an emergency'. We can go straight to our emergency spot so that you won't be angry anymore. Is that okay?" His mouth hung open as he stared at her, wondering if he cracked his head and was imagining her generosity. He just beat the shit out of some guy and she... wanted to comfort him. Sandor really fucked over some prince charming somewhere by stealing the little bird for himself.

"You trust me not to abuse that power?" He looked away but then eyed her sideways and dared to give her a little half-smile.
"I trust you completely," she cautiously returned the smile. "You have to swear to me right now that you won't fight again."

"I don't deserve you Sansa, but I need you." Sandor slid his hand across the seat to cover hers and could finally breath again when she didn't pull away. "I'm sorry - I'll work harder." 

"I need you more," she turned her hand over to link their fingers. "I don't need dates or formal dances, I want those things but I need you. Please, don't turn into someone I don't know. That person is not you, I know it." Sansa gave his hand a little squeeze. "I'll call you when I'm not so... disappointed." Then suddenly she smiled at him again, it was a little sad but more like the adoring smile that sustained him. "It's unconditional, you know?"

"What?" Sandor was still hung up on the vague timetable she gave - he'd be waiting for her call and staying miserable until it came.

"My love for you," she lifted his hand to her lips to brush a kiss over his bruised knuckles.

"I'm sorry," he said again - not knowing what else to say.

"No sorry's... tell me you love me." Sansa should've have to ask, he should be shouting it from the rooftops. But that wasn't him, he wasn't the type to say he loved her with just his mouth - his actions should speak for him. Instead, he acted like a fucking asshole! Godsdammit!

"You know I do," he rasped softly and still she waited expectantly. "I love you."

"Then we can get through this and anything that comes our way." Sansa had been through too much lately and she needed his support but he fucked that up like he fucked everything up. "Right?" He could only nod his agreement and she seemed to accept it. "Goodnight, my love." She reached up to press a brief kiss to his cheek before turning around to leave.

"Night, little bird." Sandor watched her get out of the car before walking straight into the apartment building without looking back. "Don't leave me," he prayed to the gods he had no faith in and the girl who was the only thing he did believe in. "Please gods, Sansa, don't leave me." His voice cracked as he finished saying what he would've told her but he was too much of a coward. "Don't let me go - don't let me push you away. Hold onto me, please don't leave me."

**MARGAERY**

Joff was in an astoundingly good form on their date - it must have cost fortune! First, he had a car service pick her up and drive her to the restaurant, where he reserved the entire top floor so they could dine alone. The bracelet he bought for her had no less than twenty flawless emeralds. They danced to her favorite songs and he was utterly charming from the first moment to the last. Dany and Missa really must think her foolish if they expected her to believe the things they said.

All in all, this had to be the best night of her entire life. Though she never told Joff what her friends - former friends - said about him, he seemed to know she needed cheering up. After the date, he took her back to his home where they spend the rest of the evening in bed. Their bliss was only interrupted by phone call which Marge impatiently waited for him to finish.

"Hey, how did it go?" As with the rest of the night, he was in a shockingly good mood, even laughing. "Really? That's hilarious, I'm sorry I had to miss it. Oh no, you'll get your payment in full tomorrow. By then I should have another job for you." Joff hung up the phone and laid-back to talk his hands under his head in a relaxed pose.

"Who was that?" She turned on her side to prop up on one elbow and trailed her fingers over his
smooth chest.

"Don't ask me about my business," he smiled and raised a hand to sweep her loose hair over her shoulder. "I don't want you to have to worry, honey. We should get married after we graduate."

Marge was stunned - not just by his casual attitude but by the topic itself. He never said the 'm-word'!

"You want to marry me?" Marge finally managed to form words once her brain started working again.

"Why else would I say it?" His indulgent smile turned cold as his hand dropped away from her hair. "You don't want to."

"Certainly I do," she rushed to assure him. "I just didn't expect you to propose tonight! But of course I am happy beyond words."

"I've been thinking about it for a while," his pleased expression returned, "and there's no one else better suited for me. Naturally, we should attend the same university - Crownlands."

"But they don't have a fashion study course." Her stomach sank, taking her happiness and turning it into disappointment. There was always a catch with Joff, whenever he gave something - something else had to be taken away.

"I'm sure you can find something else more appropriate." He gave her that look which could only mean he would not accept any disagreement.

"I will look into it." She burned to argue and stand up for herself but did not want to ruin a perfect night just as it was ending. Once they were formally engaged she would show him how hard she worked on her fashion designs and make him understand.

"Good girl," he patted her cheek - it was a gesture of affection but somehow made her feel worse.

"I'm thirsty," she slipped out of bed to pull on a robe. "Do you want anything while I am downstairs?"

"Just hurry back," he waved a hand as if dismissing her. She ignored the swirl of doubt robbing her joy as she left the room to head downstairs. The kitchen was dark so Marge left the light off but the sound of glass clinking made her gasp and whirl around.

"There she is," Mrs. Baratheon raised her freshly filled wineglass in toast to Marge.

"Mrs. Baratheon," she blew out a breath and her startled fear evaporated.

"Please, don't be so formal, call me Cersei." The woman smiled radiantly and waved her free hand to beckon Marge. "Come, have a drink with me."

"I shouldn't-"

"Don't be ridiculous," Cersei snapped, "if you are grown enough to fuck my son in my house then you can have a drink with me." Marge settled onto a chair opposite her future mother-in-law - who was currently drunk as a skunk. "Good girl," she echoed her son's words and a shiver of discomfort ran up her spine. "You really are so very pretty."

"Thank you," Marge struggled to keep her poise in the awkward situation.

"I'm sure he told you all about his plan to marry you," Cersei smirked and took a long gulp from her
"Yes, I will work hard to live up to-"

"Oh, shut up you little fool." Her face turned ferocious as she leaned forward over the table, her glittering green eyes piercing into hers. "Run," she hissed. "Run as fast and far as you can and don't ever look back. My son doesn't love you - he barely tolerates your simpering devotion. You must have some silly little dream..." She laughed bitterly. "I had a dream once and this wasn't it. Unless your dream is to become me... run." Cersei waved in dismissal. "Go away, I want to be alone."

"Goodnight," Marge whispered as she got up from her seat to hurry away. Her feet stumbled as she climbed the steps up to Joff's bedroom. When she returned to the room he was already asleep and she moved quietly so as not to wake him. Just as she was untying her robe to slip back into bed and ignore the drunken ranting of a mad woman she changed her mind. She moved like a ghost to search the room and eventually opened his built-in cupboard doors to reveal a recording setup. It confirmed everything Dany tried to tell her.

Joffrey snorted in his sleep and she quickly closed the doors... She wasn't even surprised and that's what shocked her the most. Marge stepped away from the cupboard, trying to remember how to breathe and moved to Joff's bedside. His sleeping face was sadly his best quality - he looked so peaceful and innocent. There were half a dozen sketchpads filled with his sleeping face... It would be best to burn them this time, as she always threatened to do when he broke it off.

"No one," she whispered, "will ever love you like I did." Even now, knowing his true self, she could not just turn off her love. Her heart ached and threatened to burst out of her chest. Fuck him - this had been coming for a long time, she just needed a reason. She dressed silently, gathered the few belonging in his room, and walked out without him ever shedding a tear. 'Run', his own mother cruelly told her but she refused to flee like a guilty or terrified person. Margery Tyrell walked away from her first love as she did all things - head held high.

Chapter End Notes

Joffrey strikes again! But at least this one ended on a high note.

Next up: Arya and Sansa engage in some sisterly bonding.
Sisters are Awesome

ARYA

She looked up from the laptop as Sansa walked into the bedroom, looking completely despondent. Could nothing go right this day for anyone? To say it had been a bad day was the understatement of the century. Saying it was the worst day that happened ever to anyone was closer to reality. It was all going so great and then it all fell apart, like a tower of cards meeting a strong gust of misery and fear. She assumed he'd never notice - looking back that was severely underestimating his devotion.

Gods she hated it! Couldn't he be a little more aloof? Arya bet her life the hound didn't know Sansa's menstrual cycle. But... gods he was so perfect - just unbelievable with all the supporting, loving, and promising. Fuck him! Nobody asked to be treated like a princess... He just did it to make her look bad! And boy was he succeeding - they did not part on the best of terms. That was just what she needed, to feel even more terrible and guilty than before. Life sucks and then you die - probably of some kind of period-stealing disease.

"Hey," Sansa uttered the quiet greeting as she turned around to close the door behind her and then removed her jacket.

"Yo," Arya closed the lid on her terrifying internet research. She was sure she had some kind of cancer, maybe an autoimmune disease... or both. "Why are you here?" She set the laptop aside and moved to the edge of her bed so her legs dangled over the side. Instead of replying, Sansa sighed and shook her head as she hung her jacket up and then pulled some sleepwear out of her dresser drawer. "I could ask you the same thing," she pulled her hair loose and undressed to hang her dress carefully. "I expected you back Monday night." Sansa shook out the flannel pajamas before pulling them on. "I don't want dad to get suspicious now that I have my freedom." Arya thought the lie fell flat but her sister seemed to buy it. "A little sacrifice tonight will save me some pain in the future."

"Gendry is a good influence on you." Sansa gathered her hair into a loose bun before coming to sit by Arya's side, her expression still miserable. She obviously wanted to talk and Arya thought it might help take her mind off her own problems. "What happened?" Arya watched Sansa's eyes fill with tears and her chin quivered. "Hey now, tell me who I have to take care of. You want them dead? Consider it done - I'm getting my sword back. You say the word and I'll slice 'em from nostril to knees! I already warned that brute boyfriend of yours to stay in line or else he'd have me to deal with." Her sister laughed softly as she wiped her eyes, inhaling deeply.

"Some men at the movie theater were saying awful things and Sandor... lost his temper." From the look on Sansa's face Arya could tell it must have been bad for her to get that upset. She was just sorry she had to miss it - a fistfight sounded better than her night! "I'd hate to be the other guys," Arya joked to lighten the mood. "Were there casualties?"

"It's serious, Arya!" Sansa's angered expression scrunched up as she fought back her tears. "He was
so... ruthless. I have seen him angry but I've never seen him like that before, it looked like he wanted to kill them."

"I believe that." Arya did not share her sister's aversion to violence and assumed if Sandor kicked some ass then it was probably well deserved. "Why are you so surprised? He has a reputation for a reason, even if most rumors are bullshit."

"I thought he changed." Sansa hunched over like the weight of the world was on her shoulders and Arya knew exactly how that felt. The problems just piled up and no matter how hard she tried to dig herself out, they just kept coming. "I don't even know who that person he became tonight... he was a stranger."

"From what I hear, he's changed a lot." She rubbed a comforting hand up and down Sansa's back. "He used to go around kicking ass and taking names every day. Now he's boring and it's all your fault." Her sister suddenly burst into tears and covered her face. "Hey don't cry, I'm kidding!"

"It's not that..." Sansa fell back onto the bed as fat tears rolled from the corners of her eyes. "I think he wants to break up with me," she whispered as if afraid to say it out loud.

"That's ridiculous - he's totally crazy about you." Arya curled up on her side facing her sister. "It's obvious that he would do anything you asked." If it had been any less obvious, she might've had a problem with that kind of guy dating her sister. Maybe the hound really did need another talking to - sending her sister home in tears was unacceptable!

"You don't know... it is entirely the opposite." Sansa smiled sadly through her tears. "Who is this person I've become? A year ago, I would never date someone who gets into fights. Now I'm just terrified he is going to get tired of me one day." A sudden sob choked her and she covered her face with her hand. "There's always another wall to tear down just when I think that I really know him. Every time anything bad happens, he acts as if we have to break up. He shuts me out, pushes me away, and has no faith in me. It seems like he doesn't expect our relationship to last."

"You got it bad, sis." Arya propped up on one elbow to look down at Sansa, understanding exactly what she felt like. Just when she thought it was impossible to love Gendry any more - he went and acted like some prince charming. With all of his loving smiles and 'my lady' bullshit - he always said the right thing. Then her heart would freak out and she'd think 'is this really my life'? She couldn't imagine Sandor being even half as charming but he looked at Sansa as if she was made of gold. "Personally, I like the new you - less stick up ass."

"I will be the bigger person and ignore that." Sansa uncovered her face and relaxed a little as a hint of a smile stretched her lips. "I do like that we are closer now; it feels good to know you are on my side no matter what." Arya was just about to admit that she liked their new closeness but... something wasn't quite right. Alarms suddenly went off in her head - code red - code red!

"Wait a minute - something smells." Arya snorted a laugh when Sansa hesitantly sniffed her shirt. "Not you, this situation! Don't you think it's a bit fishy these guys just happen to pick a fight with the hound? How many people would actually do that? No offense - he's damn scary to look at." Her older sister glared at her but Arya made an insistent gestured to emphasize her words. "Listen, I can think of only one person who'd love a fight with Sandor but too chicken to do it himself."

"No!" Sansa gasped, covering her gaping mouth as her eyes moved back and forth. "Oh my gods, it does make sense." Her blue eyes snapped to Arya's face and she pulled her hand away. "But how can we know for sure that Joffrey is responsible?"

"We can't!" Arya sat up and thumped a fist against her knee, furious to know that cretin pulled one
over on them. "Damn that slippery fuck!" That was it, no more Miss Nice Girl - time for action! "We gotta go DEFCON one on his ass."

"What does that mean?" Sansa sat up too, a worried expression pulling her features tight.

"Drop the incest bomb," Arya explained with a roll of her eyes. "Finish him off once and for all."

"We can't!" Sansa panicked and clung to Arya's arm with both hands. "There are other people to consider. Myrcella, Tommen... even Mrs. Baratheon and Mr. Lannister. All of their lives would be ruined!"

"And we should just suffer Joffrey for them?!" Arya pulled her arm free of her sister's grasp. "What if he comes after me next? Or even Gendry or our friends! That shit-stain needs to be washed out for good." She couldn't take any more from that disgusting twerp - soon she was just gonna snap and kill him herself!

"Can you at least let me think about it?" Sansa clasped her hands together and assumed a begging pose. "Give it some time; you don't know that Joffrey sent those men." Arya didn't need proof, her gut told her it was him and that's all she needed to know. If this wasn't his revenge then he would strike someday and she couldn't just wait around for it!

"Don't think too long," Arya crossed her arms. "If anything else suspicious happens I am going straight to dad to tell him everything." Dad would tell Robert Baratheon and Joffrey would fall from a prince to a pauper overnight. Then he wouldn't be able to wield his so-called father's wealth and power like a weapon! There was nothing she hated more than people who were handed everything and still acted like they deserved it all and then some. It was in Joffrey's voice when he threatened Sansa - that entitled shit thought he 'owned' her.

"I understand." Sansa nodded and let her hands fall into her lap before giving Arya a knowing look. "Now you tell me what is wrong." Arya shrugged like she didn't know what her sister was talking about and looked away. "Don't give me that, I know there is something up with you and I want to help. You've helped me so much; please let me do something for you."

"Nothing is wrong - I'm fine - I'm great!" Arya eyed her sister sideways to see if she was buying her bravado only to be confronted with a raised eyebrow of disbelief. "Fine, I could use your help with something but you have to swear an unbreakable sister oath to never breathe a word to anyone."

"I need to go see a doctor because my period didn't come - I already took a bunch of pregnancy tests and they were all negative." Once the words poured from her lips, it was like taking off a hundred pound backpack! Oh gods, it felt good... she could breathe again! Gendry forcing her to confess before she was ready to face it was a nightmarish. Sansa's concern felt comfortable and freeing.

"You thought you were pregnant?" Sansa appeared to be struggling to contain her freaking out and Arya nodded, blowing out a deep relieved breath.

"I didn't know what to think - I didn't even realize it until I noticed you were on the rag." Arya
crawled up the mattress and flopped onto her back. "Then I was like... Oh, shit!" She slapped herself in the forehead. "But I didn't really have time to think about it - there was so much going on with all this Joffrey shit." And being grounded, and being on dad's bad side, and being forbidden from dating the person she loved. Enough already - she could barely breathe!

"I'm so sorry, Arya." Sansa crawled up to lie beside Arya and tucked an arm around her waist. "That must have been really scary." She didn't know the half of it! Up until the moment Gendry questioned her, Arya refused to consider the possibility she might be pregnant. As soon as he said the words it became real and she 'knew' his coward ass would run away so she did it first. But then... he didn't run except to chase after her and it made her feel better and worse all at once.

"Anyway, I'm pretty sure I'm not - you know." Arya shuddered at the thought of having to decide what to do. If she were pregnant, he'd want to keep it and 'do the right thing'. "It all kinda killed my weekend plans. Gendry was hovering worse than mom with Bran." He wanted to talk about it but she just asked him - told him to shut up and take her home. That as the last thing she said to him. She just couldn't think with him crowding and worrying all over her! "I tried to tell him it's not unusual to miss a period sometimes but he's..."

"He cares about you," Sansa gave her a light squeeze. "That's a good thing." Good? Try impossible to reciprocate! Gendry acted like a knight in shining armor and all she did was cry like a baby and yell at him. And it only made it worse that he just looked at her like she was something he needed to protect. She didn't need anybody to take care of her! He was the one who needed her... Arya knew she was full of shit.

"Yeah, I know..." Arya didn't want to dwell on all she did wrong - she wanted to fix this problem so she could move on. "So, do you know if I can go see a doctor without dad knowing?"

"I was actually wondering the same thing," Sansa blushed with a shamed expression. "We forgot to use protection once. Fortunately I got my monthly the next day so-"

"Everything just works out for you, doesn't it?" Arya couldn't stand it - Sansa was born with all the luck and didn't leave any left over for her! "We never once 'forgot' but I still missed my period anyway. The human reproductive system is stupid," she sulked. "I was looking it up online but you walked in on my research."

"I'm sorry," Sansa's look of pity reminded Arya too much of Gendry so she averted her eyes and stared at the ceiling. "Do you feel sick?"

"That's the thing," Arya scratched her prickly scalp a little too hard. "If it was just a missed period I wouldn't even think something was wrong - it happens." She looked away from her sister's concerned expression. "But I've been throwing up, get dizzy sometimes, and... I'm just not hungry anymore." She didn't mention the insomnia, spacing out, and getting distracted. Arya didn't want to admit she might be losing her mind - the teen years are usually when psychotic diseases crop up. At least, that's what the internet said.

"You do need a doctor," Sansa's voice quieted with worry, "maybe we should tell dad-"

"No!" Arya struggled to control her panic and lowered her voice to a normal level. "No... he might find out about Gendry." Her sister didn't look convinced. "If I ask him to take me to a doctor for missing my period he is going to get suspicious. You know how he is about sex, especially with us."

"That would not be good," Sansa nodded slowly in acknowledgment that Arya spoke the truth. "He could not even handle knowing I have sex and it would surely destroy his approval of Sandor."
"Mom would be worse - telling us how we've disappointed the Maiden." Arya snorted, annoyed with her parents outdated reliance on religion and 'conservative' values. "Ugh, I wish we had parents who lived in the modern era."

"They are better than most," Sansa chided gently. "They both love you and just want what is best for all of their children." She was right - they didn't really have the right to complain about their parents when there were so many kids who went without. Gendry's dad didn't even care enough to introduce himself to his son. How fucked up is that?!

"I know..." Arya turned onto her side and cuddled up into Sansa's embrace. "Sometimes parents suck and boyfriends usually suck." She smiled against the soft flannel of her sister's pajamas. "Sisters are awesome."

"Truer words never spoken," Sansa stroked her hair before pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "Sleep now and don't worry, I will find you a doctor so you will be feeling better in no time." Arya was reminded of when Sansa used to sneak into her room after a nightmare.

"Thanks sis." Arya couldn't admit how much she needed someone to take care of her and help her figure out what to do. Lately everything was just so overwhelming. "Will you stay with me?"

"Of course I will stay," Sansa tightened her hold. "Goodnight little sister, dream sweet."

"Night," she mumbled, already falling asleep with no trouble for the first time in days. Her dreams were sweet - she was with Gendry at the forge on a sunny day that wasn't too hot. They worked together to make something and it didn't matter what it was, they were happy and carefree.

Chapter End Notes

Writing this fic is rewarding, fun, inspiring, confidence-building (most of the time), and I love doing it. That said: it's hard fucking work and until you've written fiction you have no idea how hard it is. The work is its own reward but I would like to give the opportunity to fans of my fics to show their love.

My heroes are the determined indomitable women entrepreneurs in developing nations. You know in "Doctor Quinn Medicine Woman" how everyone who meets Doctor Mike is like "a *lady* doctor?!” I'm talking about places where people currently react "a *lady* store owner, farmer, etc.?!” With kiva.org, I am not a 'donator' - I get paid back the same amount I lend. I lend to women in the countries where it is most difficult for women to start and own a business. See the links below if you are interested in contributing. Thank you for your attention.

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For some reason he actually didn't expect Ray to be waiting inside of the restaurant but there he was. Rhaegar Targaryen was easy to spot due to his platinum hair contrasting against the red booth he sat in. The diner was mostly empty because it was mid-afternoon, between the lunch and dinner rushes. Jon approached the man who provided half of his genetic makeup and sat down across from him.

"I'm glad you came-"

"I'm not here to have a relationship with you." Jon cut Ray off before he could turn this meeting into something it wasn't. "There is somewhere I have to be but I came to get answers." Today the group was gathering to help put together Sam and Gilly's baby room. He knew Ygritte would be there and he still hadn't decided what he would say to her. They rarely spoke since they saw each other on Winterfest.

"Would you like to order something to eat?" Ray offered a menu but Jon shook his head and crossed his arms.

"I won't be here that long." Jon observed disappointment flicker across Ray's face before the man resumed his relaxed smile.

"Ask whatever you like and I will try to be honest." Ray seemed a nice enough guy: charming, friendly, and easygoing. Jon could see how all of those good qualities swept his mother away but that barely scratched the surface. What he really needed to know was 'why'? If his parents loved each other so much, why didn't it work?

"What happened between you and my mother?" Jon braced his forearm on the table and leaned forward. "Give me the short version, like I said: I don't have all day."

"The short version?" Ray features tightened with unease but he nodded and leaned back against the booth. "We met while I attended a university in the north and your mother snuck into one of our fraternity parties. She had a tendency to get into trouble back then... Lyanna was the most enthusiastic person I ever met." His eyes glazed over as if he was swept away into the past.

"Anyway, everything that happened between us lasted only three months from start to finish. Those three months were the happiest of my life and losing your mother is my life's biggest regret."

"If you regretted it so much," Jon allowed his words to drip with doubt. "Why wait seventeen years to try to get her back?"

"If you want an apology, I can give one to you." Ray held Jon's eyes without looking away, no frustration in his expression: only regret. "But if you want the truth... there is no 'short version'. I can only tell you what I know from my experience and memories. There is no guarantee I even remember the events correctly, or just the way I want to remember them." Oh, he was good but Jon wasn't in the mood to be sweet-talked: he wanted straight talk.

"Fine," Jon twisted around in his seat to make eye contact with a server clearing a nearby table. The
woman approached and pulled out her notepad to write down his order. "Can I get a cup of coffee please?" After the waitress left them alone, Jon turn back to Ray. He folded his hands on the table and prepared himself to hear some hard truths. "I'm listening."

"Lyanna and I had a 'whirlwind' romance, or so some might say," Ray tilted his head as if he disagreed. "It was not love at first sight for either of us. Actually, we had a bit of a row the night we met. However, by the end of that night I was madly in love and even told her so. She laughed at me and said 'of course you do'... I'll never forget that knowing smile on her face until the day I die. Three months passed in a blink of an eye and then it was over before it could really begin. My father called, telling me to come home and from the tone of his voice I knew something was very wrong."

"I had never seen my father so afraid." Ray's eyes glistened and he paused to control his emotions. "He cowered in his desk chair with a whiskey in his hand. He told me his heir was hearing voices, which led to a diagnosis of schizophrenia. I wanted to be a doctor, you see, and I was pre-med. Father told me it was my 'duty' to my family to return home and study business. I was to replace my brother and hold up the Targaryen Empire. I asked Lyanna to wait for me but she told me to go to the seven hells, that I was weak and spineless. She was right but I still went home."

"Where was I in all of this?" Jon had to distance himself from the story in order to absorb it, pretending he was listening to someone else's story. The server came back with his cup of coffee and Jon stirred in half a packet of sugar as he listens to Ray's answer.

"I didn't believe her..." Ray's voice tightened and he glanced away to clear his throat before resuming his focus on Jon's face. "Lyanna could be a bit dramatic and she has that temper, which I am sure you know." Jon did not care to reminisce fondly about mom's quirks so he just stared at Ray until he continued. "She told me she was pregnant and I told her to stop being childish. A few weeks later, she called back to say she never wanted to hear from me again. I thought there would be time to win her back but I got caught up in-"

"Is this going somewhere?" He did not come here to listen to the tale of woe of a man who abandoned his family. All of his life, Jon had wondered how someone could make a child and then not acknowledge their existence. Excuses were never going to make absolve Ray, but perhaps the brutal truth might open a path to forgiveness.

"My father wanted me to marry the daughter of a potential business investor so I went along with the engagement." Ray closed his eyes and inhaled deeply through his nose before exhaling slowly. "Some childish part of me wanted to hurt Lyanna for breaking it off and for lying about being pregnant. Eventually I broke down and went looking for her, finding her very pregnant with you, only then did I realize how badly I failed her. I begged her forgiveness and pleaded on my knees for her to take me back."

"And she wouldn't?" Jon could not imagine his seventeen-year-old mother, a hopeless romantic to the core, refusing the father of her child.

"She accepted me," he whispered, studying the plastic table with glazed eyes. "I went to my father to tell him about you and Lyanna. He was... unreceptive to say the least, fearing a 'shot-gun' marriage to a teenager would tarnish our family name. He called the paternity of the child... you into question. Then he shocked me by kneeling, just as I had before your mother, to beg me to help him save the business. They needed the investment from my wife's family or else several large projects would fail."

"And that was it?" Jon was pretty bloody disappointed and disgusted. "Money over family?" Uncle Ned would never give up his children for money!
"I was walking out on him when we smelled the smoke..." Ray's haunted expression sent a chill down Jon's spine. "The nursery was on fire and my baby niece was inside, helpless in her cradle. My brother, her father, set it. Only by some miracle of the gods did she manage to escape being burned, I got to her just in time. Back then, psychiatric medications were less reliable. My brother had a psychotic break and thought his child was immune to fire." Jon saw no need to mention he and Dany were friends but the story of her brush with death unsettled him.

"I saw firsthand how much my family needed me," he continued resignedly, "and I could not abandon them. To quell my conscious, I offered Lyanna financial support but she saw it as being a 'kept woman' and I do not blame her. I expected too much of a young girl and I was young too. At the time, I convinced myself she wanted me to leave her alone to live her life. Now I recognize I was absolving myself of my responsibility to you and your mother. Seeing my brother attempt to kill his child blinded me to my own child. I know that is no excuse but it is the truth."

"If you truly loved my mother, how could you abandon her... us?" Jon pressed for the answers to the questions that haunted his sleepless nights since he could remember. "Why didn't you fight harder?"

"I hope you never have to choose between your family and your love, Jon." Ray had the good grace to bow his head with a shame. "I knew Lyanna would protect you and that Ned would take care of her-"

"You knew my uncle?" Jon wondered why uncle Ned never once told him about his father. He could understand it was painful for his mother to talk about.

"Not well but we had few conversations, about your mother..." Ray smiled as though fond of the memories but there was a preoccupied sadness lingering in his eyes. "He did not approve, I suppose looking back he was right about everything. Even though he did not like me, I found him a remarkable young man, dedicated to his family. There was no one to protect my family from my bother and he needed me most of all. When he was stable, he remembered bits and pieces of his episodes and nearly every day he thanked me for my support."

"It was an impossible situation that I wish I handled better but I did the best that I could." Ray shook his bowed head, his eyes closed, and brows drawn together. "My best was not good enough for that I dare not ask for forgiveness." Jon looked at the man who abandoned him, broke his mother's heart, and left them to start another family. And he could not hate him. Who could say that he would not do the exact same thing in Ray's position? When he was younger, no excuse would have satisfied him but the story he just heard was more of a tragic tale than justification.

"I don't forgive you," Jon did not say it to be cruel but rather to be honest. If they were ever going to have a relationship, honesty would be the only thing that might heal the pain and resentment. "But I don't hate you either." After hearing Ray's story, it was too sad to hate him, a young man barely older than himself dealing with such tragedy. "So... I have siblings?"

"Yes, I have two other children." Ray seemed to relax and he smiled as he talked about his children, bringing up an unexpected jealousy that Jon tried to suppress. "Rhaenys is fifteen and Aegon is thirteen."

"And your wife?" Jon knew he was treading on dangerous ground. But he could not shake his curiosity about the woman who essentially replaced his mother. "Are you going to divorce her?"

"I would rather not discuss her." Ray's relaxed expression became more guarded. "She never knew about you or your mother."

"Do you love her?" It was a simple straightforward question but Ray seemed shocked to hear it. Jon
noticed that though there was a full plate of food and a steaming cup of coffee in front of Ray, he did not touch either.

"She's a good woman and I admire her very much." Ray's jaw clenched when he spoke of his wife and Jon barely contained his curiosity. "Some men claim they can love two women at once but I've never found that possible. I loved Lyanna from the moment I saw her eighteen years ago and I love her still."

"You never got over her?" Jon recalled Ray's insistent pleading for his mother to take him back. "After all this time?"

"Never," Ray's bright violet eyes burned with a sudden intensity. "There has never been a day I did not think of her... and you. At times it was impossible to stay away."

"Didn't you stay away?" Jon cleared his throat and turned his focus to his cup of coffee.

"Over the years I would lose my resolve and fly up to Winterfell to pray at that sept your mother used to visit." Ray braced his elbow on the table and put his fist over his mouth, staring down despondently. "But no matter how I prayed to the Warrior for courage, he never gave me enough to finish the journey. I could not face her telling me she did not love me anymore, that I lost her love because of my own failings. I only discovered the truth on the night you found me at your home."

"What truth?" Jon could admit Ray turned out to be a surprisingly likable person but he carefully guarded his expression. He wasn't quite ready to give the man his approval.

"She still loves me." A new light shone through Ray's eyes and his boyish smile melted the years off of his handsome face. "Lyanna is fond of saying love is not enough but I disagree."

"So what do you plan to do about it?" Jon decided it wasn't really his business if his mother decided to give it a go with Ray again. They were adults and didn't need his blessing or approval. Part of him always wondered if she hadn't sabotaging all of her relationships because she was still hung up on his father.

"Find a way to win her back." As Ray spoke, it was impossible not to notice the physical similarities between them. Their noses looked the same and their hair curled the same way. Sometimes mom looked across the table at him as if she wasn't seeing him but someone else. He wondered at those times if he did something to remind her of Ray. "I want to win you too, Jon. You are my son and I love you."

"You don't even know me," Jon narrowed his eyes at the man: they might look alike but they were still strangers. A single conversation about Ray's version of events wasn't nearly enough to win him over.

"You remind me of Ned," Ray chuckled as he lifted his coffee mug to take his first sip of the hot beverage. "He used to give me that look when Lyanna would sneak out to come meet me... It seems a lifetime ago now."

"I think that's enough bonding for one day," Jon pushed his empty coffee cup to the center of the table. "I have your number now so I'll call you." He scooted to get up off of the booth but hesitated when he saw Ray's disappointed expression. "This wasn't as horrible as I thought it would be and I would stay longer. But there's a girl I have to go see, or else I might regret it for the next two decades."

"Good luck," Ray smiled encouragingly but it did not quite reach his eyes. For a moment, Jon
considered staying and answering some questions but he already had a lot to process. Besides, there really was a girl waiting for him. Ygritte waited long enough and now he wasn't going to let his hang ups about his family hold them back anymore. She was the girl of his dreams and he'd be a fool to let her slip away. He could only pray that she hadn't given up on him yet.

"I'll need it." Jon nodded his farewell and granted his own small smile appreciation. He knew it could not be an easy thing for Ray to face his past so literally but at least for Jon, the meeting made him feel better. "Thanks for this, I'll see you around." Then he got up from his booth and walked out of the restaurant without looking back, his mind focused on moving forward.

Chapter End Notes

It is surprisingly difficult to write someone telling a narrative. I hope I did okay! Ready for Sam and Gilly's baby room to be decorated by the DnD group? I bet Drogo is a hell of an interior decorator - horses everywhere: done. I can just see Dany being all controlling with the paint color... It should be fun to write.
Babies

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Babies

**GENDRY**

He sat on the third from the bottom concrete step outside the apartment building, trying not to think at all. His mind was a river flooding the dams he put up to try and stem the flow of his rushing thoughts. Arya wasn't pregnant: crisis averted. So why was he even more worried? Fatherhood was not his worst fear, though it was high up there on the list of things that terrified him. She wasn't the same after coming back from Winterfell, less confident like someone had put out her fiery spirit. In her eyes, even when she smiled, an unshakable sadness hid within the dark depths: but not from him. She wouldn't admit what caused the change in her and when he tried to guess she clammed up even more. Gods forbid she ever let anybody see that most fragile part of her... even him. After several pregnancy tests eased his fears, Gendry felt like the gods had given him a second chance. At the same time, she shut off except to yell at him. It seemed like the news didn't relieve her at all, destroying his assumption she was simply afraid of being pregnant.

These unstable moods were unusual for Arya, even though she was usually a passionate person. Most of the time she was positive and happy but more recently her enthusiasm for life faded in the two weeks since her return. Already a small person, her face got thinner and her porcelain skin turned sickly pale. His mind conjured the memory of his own mother, lying in the hospital bed and wasting away. That was the most painful experience of his life because mom was the most important person to him at the time.

Would he be fated to go through that with Arya? Only this time he wouldn't be able to save the person he loved... A ridiculous expensive car interrupted his thoughts when it pulled up to drop off Arya and Sheri. They were chatting about something, only noticing him when he stood up to greet them. Sheri waved to him as they approached but Arya kept her eyes glued to the cement, refusing to look at him. It would be better if she were angry, annoyed, or even yelling would be less painful than utter冷ness.

"Hey Sheri," he returned her friendly wave, attempting to force some cheer into his dead voice. "Everyone's already upstairs: Hot Pie made some muffins you have to try." Sheri glanced back and forth between them with a worried expression before smiling brightly at him.

"Thanks for the tip," she moved past him towards the stairs. "I will see you both up there." As Sheri climbed the stairs, Arya stepped toward him with a downcast unreadable eyes.

"You didn't have to wait for me," her eyes darted towards the stairs with a scowl. "I'm fully capable of walking up some steps all by myself." There was no bite to her barb, more like she was reading a script written by her old confident self.

"I wanted to talk to you," he tried for a smile but it felt unnatural on his face. Something in his expression lit a fire in her grey eyes and for a moment, she was his Arry again.

"Can we not?" She glared at him but then quickly looked away with apologetic shame. His feisty lady disappeared and in her place stood an unhappy lost little girl. "Sorry..."
"Nothing to be sorry for," he kept his tone light and shoved his hands into his pockets as he leaned back against the railing. "Can I ask if you're feeling okay?"

"I'm alive," she shrugged but then shook her head like she wasn't satisfied with her own answer. "I'm fine." Arya peeked up at him like she was trying to see if he believed her, which he didn't. "I'm okay, really," she insisted a little stronger, rolling her eyes. "I took another test this morning - still negative. Congratulations, you're not a father!"

"That's good," he couldn't think of what else to say.

"Yeah..." She stubbed her toe against the cement and crossed her arms, staring down at his feet. "Sansa found a clinic and made me an appointment. It's probably nothing but I can ask about getting the pill so it won't be a total waste of time."

"Do you want me to go with you?" Gendry had a feeling his offer would be refused but he had to ask anyway.

"Sansa is coming with me," she said it like a denial and he couldn't help being disappointed. He never dreamed he'd see even less of Arya after she was ungrounded: funny how stuff works out sometimes.

"Good," he nodded his head in acceptance and they stood around for an awkward silent moment. "Let's get up there, everyone is already working." Gendry swung around the railing to start up the steps.

"Wait!" Arya suddenly launched at him from behind and wrapped her arms around his waist. "It's not that... I don't know how to say... But I don't mean..." Gendry wondered if this was how fairytale princes' felt when their loves were carried off to towers by villains. Only his princess built her own tower and locked herself away, refusing to let him rescue her because it would hurt her pride. But he couldn't resent her for being too strong because it was something he loved about her: perfectly imperfect.

"I know," he patted her hands locked together around his middle. "I won't bring it up anymore: you tell me when you're ready to talk." She gave another tight squeeze before unlocking her arms and dashing around him to take the stairs two the time.

"Let's go slowpoke," she called over her shoulder with a grin. He caught up to her at the top of the stairs and they walked together to Sam's apartment where the door was already open. Inside Dany was directing everyone with her usual commanding presence.

"Arya!" Dany immediately crossed the room to take Arry by the shoulders and pulled her into a tight hug. Arya gave him and questioning look but Gendry just shrugged. "I can't tell you how much I owe you for helping Marge."

"No big deal," Arya uncomfortably patted Dany's back. "It was all Sansa anyway."

"I will find a way to repay you somehow," Dany pulled away and released Arya. "Oh good," she smiled at him, "Gendry we need your help."

"Need an artist's perspective?" It felt good to be appreciated until Dany's a smile turned sheepish and she shook her head.

"I need you to help Drogo move a chest of drawers." Dany pointed down the hall towards the hallway.
"You got it, boss." Gendry started to follow her orders but she held up a hand to stop him.

"Hold on just a moment... Can I have everyone's attention?!" Dany clapped her hands as everyone gathered around to listen. "Thank you all for coming together to set up the nursery for Little Sam. This is a small space so organization will be essential to productivity! Come to me if you need directions. The washroom is the second door down the hall and there is hot coffee in the kitchen. Let's get to work!" Gendry headed back towards the baby's room but stopped to check on Arya one last time. "Arya, I need you helping Ygritte assemble the crib."

"Aye-aye, cap'n!" Arya saluted Dany with a grin on her face and Gendry decided that she was doing just fine without him. He headed back towards the nursery where Drogo was already waiting and they worked together to bring the dresser out.

"Dany, where do you want the dresser?" He called as they shuffled through the tight hallway.

"It just needs to be out of the way so over here by the sofa is fine." Dany watched them carefully as they moved the dresser into position and then applauded their efforts. "Thanks boys!"

"Aright, what's next?" Gendry turned to Dany for more orders.

"Dany," Arya interrupted, "we need help over here!"

"Or hard liquor," Ygritte added wryly, "either should move this along."

"Gendry, go help them." Dany waved her hand in the girl's direction then crooked her finger at Drogo. "Follow me, handsome. Let's put those muscles to use." Gendry approached the girls to sit down between them in front of the pile of the disassembled crib.

"How can I be of service?" He looked down at the mess and it seem like they hardly got anything done.

"We can't find part G-A1," Arya grumbled and she tossed him the booklet of directions. "Or really any other part. See this funnel-thingy here?" She pointed at the picture in the booklet before throwing up her hand in a hopeless gesture. "What the fuck is that?!"

"These aren't the right directions..." He skimmed through the book to be sure but it looks like nothing in the directions matched with what lay in front of them.

"What?! Well, no fucking wonder!" Ygritte scoffed and leaned back to holler down the hallway. "Dany, where did this crib come from?!"

"It was given to us by Torgo's parents," Dany's voice floated down the hall.

"They gave us the wrong directions," Gendry clarified the problem and Dany hurried down the hall towards them.

"Torgo and Pod already went to the store for supplies," Dany put her hands on her hips and bit her lip as she stared at the crib parts. "I trust that you can all figure it out." She shrugged before turning around, just as Jon walked in the door. "Jon, thank the gods! Go help them please." Dany pointed in their direction before heading back up the hall to continue whatever she was doing.

"What's the trouble?" Jon sat down next to Ygritte, pulling off his jacket to toss it over the back of the sofa.

"The crib doesn't match the directions." Ygritte thwacked a hand against the booklet. "So, this is
useless." She tossed the directions over her shoulder and they dug in to give it their all. The four of them put their heads together and somehow managed to assemble the crib, taking a ridiculous amount of time to do so. There was some arguing and name-calling but in the end, they got it together with no spare parts left over. It looked good and was sturdy so they were all satisfied with their work.

"We are the smartest people who ever lived." Arya stood with her hands on her hips and a satisfied grin on her lips. "Dany - come witness our awesomeness!"

"It looks great! Well done everyone!" Dany looked pretty damn impressed with their work, the earlier tension easing from her features. "Shall we take a break?" Everyone agreed enthusiastically and she led the way into the kitchen. "Hot Pie has prepared some sandwiches, help yourselves." They all attacked the food laid out on the countertop except for Arya. She lingered in the background, staring at the food.

"Aren't you hungry?" Gendry offered her part of a sandwich but she shook her head.

"I had a big breakfast," she made the weak excuse and he gave her a knowing look. Arya was born with a hole in her stomach and was always 'starving'. "Don't worry, I'm just not hungry."

"Well I'm hungry and never pass up Hot Pie's cooking." He took a big bite of the sandwich and chewed it appreciatively. "Mmm... this is so good." Gendry held out his food in front of her, reminding him of the first meal they shared. "Try just a bite." She bit off a corner and slowly nodded her head before swallowing.

"It's pretty good," she acknowledged and accepted the rest of the sandwich while he grabbed another.

"Everyone!" Dany stood in the kitchen entrance. "It is time to paint the nursery. Gilly and Sam, go for a walk in the fresh air and try to stay out while we paint." Sam took Gilly's hand and let her out of the apartment as Dany rattled off orders. "Rick and Hot Pie, let's leave their kitchen spotless. Everyone else, follow me." They all quickly finished eating and followed her back down the hall toward the nursery. "Torgo, use some painter's tape to protect the window. Sheri and Arya, cut in the bottom of the right wall. Drogo and Gendry, start rolling the opposite wall."

With all of her orders out, Dany grabbed a roll of painter's tape and started taping off the door. They did not have much paint so the first coat had to be perfect. Gendry and Drogo set to work on one wall, rolling the paint out into a thin but even layer. When they finished covering most of that wall, the girls had completed their portion of the opposite wall. Dany surveyed the work that had been done with approval.

"Alright, now let's rotate - boys take the window wall." Dany pointed to the window and Gendry moved to their equipment to that side of the room. "Torgo and I will help Arya and Sheri cut in the bottom of the other walls." Everyone set to work again and when he and Drogo finished the window wall, Gendry turned to Dany.

"Should we move on to the door wall?" He didn't want to mess up whatever plan she had.

"Wow you are fast!" Dany's turned her wide eyes at the window wall. "Go ahead." She nodded her permission and they moved across the room to paint around the door. The progress moved quickly because there were so many well organized people working together. "Alright, let's bring in the step stools to cut in the ceiling and then we're done! Girls, I'm afraid our heights give us a distinct disadvantage in this area so let's leave it to our taller friends. Keep up the good work, boys!" Gendry watched Arya follow behind the girls but she didn't look back at him.
They followed Dany out of the nursery and down the hall into the living area. There was one upside to having a small apartment - it would certainly be easy to clean. Dany led them to the dresser in the living room and placed a hand on it.

"I thought it would be cute to dress up this chest of drawers so I bought these stencils." Dany pulled out a set of plastic stencils and handed one to each of them. "Just pick a side and paint the stencil on wherever you think will look good. It doesn't have to be perfect." Sheri and Arya worked on the front drawers while Ygritte and Dany worked on the sides.

"You really are a natural born leader, Dany." Sheri was admittedly envious of Dany's ability to command a roomful of people.

"Not at all," Dany disagreed modestly. "It's a matter of stepping up to whatever challenges come my way." To Sheri what Dany described sounded exactly like leadership but she kept her arguments to herself.

"I won't forget this, Dany." Ygritte's voice was stick with emotion and she cleared her throat. "You've done all of this for my cousin. A lot of her friends just ignore her now like she's invisible. All of you - thanks."

"We can hope," Dany lowered her paintbrush to meet Ygritte's eyes. "If any one of us found ourselves in Gilly's situation, we would be cared for instead of ostracized." Sheri looked to Arya when she noticed her brush stops moving to see her friend staring blankly at the dresser.

"Are you okay?" Sheri put a hand on Arya shoulder, seeming to startle her.

"What?" Arya's wide eyes turn to meet Sheri. "Yeah, I'm fine." Arya turn back to finishing her stencil work. They worked mostly in silence and soon the older dresser came to life.

"We're done," Gendry announced from behind them.

"You girls finish this up," Dany got up to follow Gendry into the nursery. They added colorful decorations to the dresser until it looked finished and then cleaned the supplies. Before long, Dany came back shadowed by Drogo, both walking to the front door to retrieve their coats. "Well done everybody, it all is looking just perfect. Now we have to wait a couple of hours for the paint to completely dry. Drogo and I are taking Sam and Gilly out for dinner so we should be back in time to move in the furniture."

"I think I'll just take a nap on the couch." Arya walked to the sofa to curl up on it and Gendry joined her, coaxing her to rest her head on his lap. Sheri walked to the kitchen to see Rick and Hot Pie still cleaning up and unloading the dishwasher.

"Rick," Sheri got his attention, "do you want to catch a movie? It might be slightly more fun than watching paint dry."

"Sounds great," He grinned and wiped his hands on a towel before following her out of the apartment. The sun was working its way down beyond the horizon, turning the air colder so they both pulled their jackets closed. "How goes your long-distance love?" It was so like Rick to be genuinely interested and concerned without being patronizing.

"Surprisingly well," she smiled happily as they descended the stairs. "I miss him but we are really getting to know each other over the phone." Sheri could not think of a single secret she had yet to divulge but they never ran out of things to talk about. "He is the smartest person I've even spoken
with. Sometimes I swear he knows what I'm thinking just by the sound of my voice." Rick led the way to his car, unlocking it remotely as she walked around to the passenger side. "And he's shockingly charming... I don't know what he sees in me."

"You could've been describing yourself just now: smart, charming, and intuitive." Rick always knew how to give a compliment. "It sounds like a good match."

"Thanks Rick, you always know what to say." Sheri smiled at him over the hood of the car before they both sat down inside. "I think soon the person you secretly admire will recognize you are a catch."

"From your lips to the gods' ears," he joked as he turned the engine over and Sheri cranked up the heat.

"I am starting to think the gods actually do answer our prayers." Sheri smiled up at the sky through the windshield, silently sending her gratitude to the gods for bringing Bran into her life. There were times when she felt burdened by the distance between them and worried they might never reunite. But then she saw how couples could still be miles apart even sitting on the same sofa... She recognized there was something wrong with Arya, just as she knew her friend would talk about it in her own time.

Chapter End Notes

Oops I did it again! So I can admit it took a stupid long time to make a room collage but it's so freaking cute!!! But then the decor got me all inspired and I started writing a GoT fic with all my favorite pairings as mermaids and sailors/pirates. :D So after this fic is done I'll have plenty of material to work on. Yay? No, definitely a solid 'yay'! Someday I will figure out an end to this fic and it will be masterful. Just haven't puzzled a natural ending out yet. But I have made some more notes about the upcoming battle with The Devourer - that'll be fun!

Gritty gets the next chapter!
Mothers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mothers

GILLY

Her own hands covered her face as Dany held her shoulders, guiding Gilly towards the nursery. The sound of shuffling feet indicated the entire group had gathered to watch the final reveal. Excitement bubbled up inside her and it was almost too tempting to peek between her fingers.

"Keep your eyes closed... almost there." Dany seemed to sense her impatience and Gilly's heart pounded as she held back her curiosity. She felt herself being guided into the nursery as brighter light shone through her fingers. "Now open your eyes." Her eyes opened and adjusted to a dream come true! It looked unlike anything she had ever seen, an underwater wonderland made entirely for her unborn child. The gratitude nearly overwhelmed her as she struggled to absorb everything at once.

"Oh good sweet gods in all the heavens!" Gilly wondering around the tiny room, examining each piece that pulled together into a waking dream. "Look Sam! Look at this rocking chair and this dresser is completely different! And... and..." In the end, her heart could take no more happiness and tears overflowed her eyes to run down her face. Sam moved to her side to pull her into his embrace and she buried her wet face against his warm shoulder.

"There-there," he murmured in her ear, "do you like it that much?"

"I love it," she sniffled. "Sam, it's so pretty!" Gilly pulled away to look around the room once more, finding the beauty only grew. She faced the group hanging around the door. They loved her husband enough to do this for them, and she felt indescribable gratitude. "I never thought I would have such a beautiful life. Thank you everyone, you can't know how much this means to me."

"We had a great time doing it. Didn't we gang?" Dany looked around her to her friends who all agreed enthusiastically. "Well, my work is done here! Let's leave the newlyweds to themselves." She grabbed ahold of the fierce and silent Drogo before waving farewell. "Bye Sam and Gilly!"

"Yeah, we'll hit the road too." Arya took a hold of Sheri's hand and dragged Gendry behind by his shirt. "See ya, Smiles - later, Gilly!"

"Bye, drive safe!" Gilly waved goodbye to everyone and as the group left, leaving her and Sam alone in their new nursery. "Sam..." She looked up at his cheery smile and could not help the fresh welling of tears in her eyes. "Thank you."

"I didn't do much at all," Gilly smiled sheepishly. "This was Dany's idea and the group did all the work."

"You are a good person," she insisted, "and that's why your friends love you so much." Gilly thanked the gods every day for giving her such a good man to call hers. All of her life she longed to be considered precious by someone and at that moment she never felt more loved. Maybe she wasn't the best student but she knew she could be a good wife and mother. Because a person doesn't have to be smart to love someone wholeheartedly.

"They're your friends too." Sam raised his hand to stroke the back of his fingers against her cheek,
which flushed under his gentle touch.

"Go catch up with Jon," she rose on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek, "I know you miss him. I'll sit with Ygritte for a while."

"My cute little wife," he lowered his lips to meet hers briefly before pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I love seeing your beautiful smile." A newly familiar rush of happiness flowed through her every time he said the word 'love' to her. It erased all of her old hurts and turned the past into a distant memory, like a bad dream. She still had nightmares sometimes but Gilly always woke safe and sound in Sam's arms. For the first time she understood the true meaning of 'family'.

"I'm so lucky that I get to love you." Gilly stepped back and urged him towards the door. "Thank Jon for me." He turned back once more to give her a cheerful smile before heading out of the nursery towards the living room where Jon sat with her cousin. "Ygritte," she called, leaning against the doorframe. "Come sit with me in here."

YGRITTE

She thought the nursery party for Little Sam would put Gilly into a more agreeable mood but Ygritte's pleas fell on deaf ears. Convincing Gill to go to the police was like pulling teeth but at least her cousin cried tears of joy when she saw the new nursery. It had become the nicest room in the apartment! The rest of the place was a fucking joke - it wasn't big enough for the roaches to live in. This was what that pudgy fucker considered taking care of her cousin? And to top it off, that bastard Craster was still on the loose.

"I know it's hard but you have to tell someone."

"No I don't!" Gill huffed in irritation. "I know it happened... someone else knowing wouldn't change anything." She crossed her hands over her stomach and looked away. "Sam can barely stand what happened as it is-"

"Fuck him!" Ygritte grabbed her cousin shoulders and forced to Gill to face her. "I'm talking about you!"

"There is no 'him and me' anymore..." Gill shrugged out of Ygritte's hold. "We are an 'us', a family." She placed one hand over her stomach with a determined expression. "It's his baby, that's what we decided."

"You can't just can't consider talking to someone?" Ygritte gave up, sinking down onto the plush rug with a heavy sigh. "I don't want you to bear this all alone..."

"I'm not alone, I have you and Sam and the baby." Gill actually smiled - the same silly grin she'd been wearing since she got married. "I'm not unhappy at all! I'm free and feel safe for the first time."

"He deserves to pay for what he did." Ygritte couldn't stand knowing that Craster was getting away with hurting Gill. What was to stop him from getting into one of his drunken rages and finding Gilly?

"I believe the gods will punish him someday." Gill could take solace in her religion but that wasn't comfort enough for Ygritte.

"The gods," she insisted, "help those who help themselves."

"Call it 'justice' or 'revenge'," Gill waved a hand like the matter was behind her. "I'm happy in spite of all he did to keep me miserable. He told me every day that I wasn't worth anything and nobody would love me." She put her hand over her heart and smiled that silly devoted grin again. "He was
wrong, Sam truly loves me." Ygritte knew there was no convincing her cousin to use the law to seek justice against her father. That only left her one choice-

"Ygritte," Jon poked his head in, interrupting her thoughts. "I'm heading out now. Can I talk to you?"

"Yeah," she gave Gill one last pointed look before getting off the couch in a huff. "What's up?"

Ygritte had to feign nonchalance all day being stuck with Jon in such a tight space but inside she just wanted to grab onto him and beg... For what she didn't know but anything would be better than pretending they were just friends. Earlier he smiled at her and she felt torn between launching at him to kiss him while also resisting the urge to punch his lights out.

"Actually, just come with me," he pulled on her hand and started walking to the door but Ygritte held back. "Please," his soft grey eyes pleaded and she knew it would be impossible not to follow him. She nodded, tightened her hand in his and allowed Jon to lead the way out of the apartment. They grabbed their jackets and other belongings before stepping outside into the crisp night.

"Can't you just tell me where we're going," she groaned as they walked down the steps and Jon froze mid-step to turn around.

"I don't know where we should go," he moved up a step to stand closer and looked up at Ygritte. "All I know is we should be together: it should be you and it's always been you." His words sunk in, as her mind slowly comprehended their meaning.

"What made you change your mind?" Her voice was breathless but she could still see the smoky wisps puffing between her trembling lips.

"I avoided getting close to anyone before: worried I'd regret having sex." His hands found both of hers and held them lightly as he gazed up at her with unmistakable adoration. "I realized that I'll regret it more if it's not you. I want you to be my first, my only: right now."

"This is usually the part when I wake up." It really did seem like she had fallen into a dream but the warmth of his fingers holding hers felt real enough.

"Do you want me?" His absurd question almost made her laugh because there was very little she wanted more. Like pretty much only eternal world peace topped having Jon.

"So much..." Words failed her to describe how much she needed him but then her instincts kicked in as she gripped his hand tighter. "Let's go to my place." Ygritte moved around him to continue down the stairs, still holding onto one of his hands as she headed for her car. Jon stopped before opening the passenger door to look at her over the roof of the car.

"Uh... what about your father?" His worried expression was just about the most adorable thing she had ever seen.

"He's cool," she pulled open her door to sit inside and he got in next to her. "His whole idea of a 'sex talk' was basically him threatening to disown me if I ever ruined my chances of going to college."

"I met my father today," he suddenly announced, "actually talked to him for the first time." His word surprised her so much that her key missed its mark. It poked impotently at the keyhole several times before finding its way inside.

"That's some heavy shit," she finally managed to turn the engine over and glanced at him sideways. "Are you okay?"
"I'm not quite sure of that myself." Jon shook his head in confusion as she braced an arm on the back of his seat to pull out of the parking spot. "He told me that he regretted losing my mother for my entire lifetime. I thought about how I'd feel in twenty years... If I lost you." The breaks screeched when she applied them suddenly, turning her head to gape at him in disbelief.

"Really?" Her astonishment seemed to amuse him.

"Do you doubt it?" His handsome smile made her heart race but the organ sputtered to a full stop at his next words. "I love you."

"Careful with those words, Jon." She turned her focus back to pulling her shitty car out of the parking lot and heading to the working-class suburb she lived in. "To me sex is sex and love is love - they go together but they're not the same thing." Her warning came from life experiences that he did not have... yet.

"Fear has run my life for as long as I could remember," his voice was quiet but her ears tuned into every word. "But I'm not my father: I won't let my fear of repeating his mistakes hold me back from what I want. And I want to have sex with you because I love you." The simple statement rang in her head and her brain felt high as a pleasant ache pulsed between her legs. Ygritte couldn't believe this was really happening after wanting it so much she worried it might drive her crazy.

"Same here," she grinned at him before accelerating a little too fast to her house. On the way, they chatted about practical matters. Mostly her current usage of hormone birth control, and the availability of condoms. His fear of unintended pregnancy seemed to have disappeared after speaking with his father. Though they focused on distinctly un-sexy topics, her anticipation mounted as she pulled up in front of her house. Ygritte parked behind her dad's work van and turned off the engine to get out.

"Should I introduce myself to your father?" He got out of the car and stared at her house with worry etched into his features.

"Not unless you want to get sucked into a conversation about hunting," she joked but it did not ease his expression. Ygritte walked to his side and tugged on his hand to gain his attention. "Don't worry - he's less like a dad and more like an older brother. He wants to protect me but he also knows I have my own life."

"It's still seems a bit weird," he persisted, "to come in to his house and not even introduce myself."

"You can be honorable in the morning," she smirked, "I need you now." His concern faded as heat rose in his eyes and she turned around to lead him inside straight to her room.

"I'm actually sorta nervous," she closed and locked her bedroom door. "Never took a guy's virginity before."

"You're not taking it, I'm giving it." His eyes never left hers as his hands thrust into her hair and he pulled her face close to his. Ygritte gasped as Jon crashed his lips to hers in a kiss desperate and sweet, full of hard longing and soft passion. Her senses were swept up in his raw desire as his restless hands held her closer while trying to feel everything at once. A moan escaped her mouth as his tongue pushed against hers - made her heart race so fast it made her whole body throbbed with longing.

She arched against his chest, humming at the contact of his body's heat against hers. Her eager hands pushed his jacket down over his shoulders. The coat fell to the floor as she gripped the font of his shirt to pull him back towards the bed. When her legs touched the mattress, she broke their kiss to sit
down, pulling off her own jacket, and tossing it on the ground. He tugged his shirt over his head while she attacked the button on his pants. Ygritte succeeded in unfastening his pants and lowered them down off his hips.

"Jon, you're so gorgeous," she stared at him in awe of his beauty. His pale skin glowed in the dim while every muscle of his body sculpted and defined but retained an appealing softness.

"You're stealing my lines," he put a finger under her chin to tilt her face up. "You're the most beautiful girl in the world."

"Don't know about that," she chuckled, "but I sure am the luckiest." Ygritte whipped her shirt over her head as he stepped out of his shoes, kicked them aside to kneel in front of her. He unlaced and removed her boots and she could not resist plunging her fingers into his soft curls. Everything about him was a contrast of hard and soft. His soft grey eyes stared hard into hers as he curled a hand around the back of her neck and pulled her close. Their lips met in another searing kiss that only previewed what was coming.

He groaned as her tongue invaded his mouth, thrusting into the wet heat with wild abandon. There was wildness to her desire for him, something animal and primal that she never felt with anyone else. At the same time, another consciousness within her mind battled for control, urging her to make sweet soft love to him. The untamed beast and the sentimental lover battled for dominance within her. She shivered when his hand palmed her bare breast and arched into his touch as his fingers slid down to tease the hardened peak.

Ygritte moaned her muffled protest against his mouth when his hand left her chest. His fingertips grazed down her stomach to unfasten her jeans. Her fingers kneaded the firm muscles of his shoulders, spreading a tingling rush of pleasure under her skin. A hot flush of anticipation covered her face and chest as she broke the kiss, laying back to lift her hips as he helped remove her pants.

"Condoms in the top drawer," she pointed to the dresser by her bed. Godsdamn those dark briefs made his ass look good when he bent to rummage through the drawer. From the curly tips of his dark hair to his toes, Jon was gorgeous and she admired him with predatory focus. Ygritte removed her last scraps of clothing as he whipped out a strand of condom packets and ripped one off. Jon stood before her again and she wasted no time tugging down his briefs and letting them fall around his feet.

A soft moan declared her admiration better than any words as her eyes wandered over his flawless form. How could a cock be beautiful? It didn't make any sense but there it was, straight and proud as anyone could want. Stranger things had happened but she realized she missed the taste of him while they were apart... Time enough for that later, perhaps to wake him in the morning. Ygritte pulled on his wrist to have him sit down beside her and he held up the packet with a questioning look.

"Um," he cleared his throat, "how do I...?"

"Let me," she snatched the package out of his hand and deftly ripped it open. Ygritte played the gentle lover and rolled the condom slowly down his hard shaft and it throbbed under her touch. He didn't seem at all nervous but still a little unsure.

"Tell me that you want me," she turned her eyes up at him, curling her fingers around his cock.

"More than anything," he murmured as he leaned towards her. The heat of his body warmed her skin as he bowed his head to press his lips against her neck. She clung to his shoulders as he curled an arm around her waist to haul her to the center of the bed. Instead of getting right to it he slid his body down hers to surround the peak of her breast his lips, teasing her with his talented tongue. Her body arched up to his mouth and she shoved her hands into his hair again, tangling her fingers into his
Jon rose over her, his hands braced on either side of her head and gazed down at her with such immense emotion. She could not tear his eyes away - the sight of him about to become hers was achingly beautiful. The passion held within those grey eyes overwhelmed her senses, driving her into a frenzy as the beast won over the lover. What remained of her mind blurred, drowning in the desire to get closer, to have him inside of her.

Ygritte's hand slipped between their bodies to curl her fingers around his hardness and guided him inside her. He trembled as he sank down onto her, pressing his cheek against hers, panting in her ear as he filled her. Her fingernails clawed his skin with impatience as he remained still except for the shivering. The lover would've cooed and coddled him but the beast demanded action, bucking her hips up to draw him deeper. Jon hissed a gasp and mimicked the motion, plunging into her as she locked her legs around him.

Nothing prepared her for how it would feel to get what she wanted - it was unlike anything she ever experienced. She arched into his thrusts as they found a steady rhythm that only just satisfied her growing need. Just knowing it was him - Jon was at last hers in every way - had her nearly sobbing from the maddening pleasure. Every muscle of his body held taut as his rocking motions remained fluid, unhurried, but unrelenting.

To call what he was doing to her 'fucking' was nowhere near as dreamlike and ethereal as the ecstasy she experienced. It was raw and messy and animalistic - right, pure, heavenly. Far too soon, Ygritte felt a familiar spiraling sensation building inside of her. She mocked herself for wanting to come before a virgin. But he didn't fuck like a virgin - or what she thought a virgin would be like - it was as if he was born to it.

Her entire body shivered as she her hips up to meet his thrusts, teetering just on the cusp of something powerful. She threw her head back and howled her as her pleasure peaked - seeming to last forever until it inevitably subsided. His own release followed as she still trembled from the aftershocks and held weakly onto his waist. As his motions slowed to a stop, he held her so close she could not tell whose heart pounded against her chest.

"So," she panted to catch her breath, "was it worth the wait?" Ygritte pushed back the wayward strands of her hair sticking to her face as she loosened her limbs from his body.

"Only because I'm with you." He stared at her hard and unblinking before lowering his lips to hers to brush his lips softly over hers. Jon was the type to take tenderness seriously - she liked that about him. Ygritte cupped a hand to the back of his head and held the kiss a moment longer before pushing him onto his back.

"Tie it off before you toss it in the bin by the bed," she smirked up at the ceiling. "Else it leaks all over the place." Whoever said she wasn't a romantic? That was practical information every man should know.

"I'd be lost without you," he chuckled as he fumbled with removing the condom but got the hang of it quickly. Jon followed her instructions before turning back to collect her into his embrace and sighed against the top of her head. "It's weird but I want to thank you."

"That good, huh?" She laughed as she curled an arm around his waist to splay her hand against his back to wiggle closer.

"I'm grateful to you for not giving up on me," his arms tightened around her and she slipped a let between his to move even closer together.
"You know I'm in love with you," she whispered against his chest.

"I know," he pressed one last kiss against the top of her head and reached behind her to cover them with the coverlet. Ygritte didn't fall asleep right away, listening to his soft breaths and feeling his strong heartbeat.

Chapter End Notes

An internal debate has waged within me the entire time I've been writing this fic but I settled it once and for all: smut chapters are getting two days. They are at least twice as hard to write and edit so they should get twice the attention. When I rush those smutty chapters to the press I am never satisfied. So, from now on I will take two days and get it done right!

Next up is Sansa's POV - expect the chapter to take two days. :D
Beautifully Suddenly

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Beautifully Suddenly

SANSA

She hummed to herself as she sat in front of the bathroom mirror applying a light swipe of blue eyeshadow over her eyelid. Less was more as a general rule of thumb but also because it would only be mussed up later. Sansa blushed over her lustful thinking and gave into the urge to smile at her reflection. Joffrey had been sent away to boarding school! V-I-C-T-O-R-Y! It felt like a proper justice for his hateful and vile crime and she hoped he learned a valuable lesson. Never mess with the Stark sisters!

It pained her to be the only one enjoying the triumph, especially considering Arya accomplished most of it on her own. The evidence against Joffrey resided in a safe place only they knew and would be ready if ever they needed it. That was more than enough to put Sansa's fears to rest but her sister remained listless. Her quietness was so unnerving even daddy began to question his youngest daughter's odd attitude. The other person who she wanted to celebrate with was an even bigger concern.

Sandor was under too much stress lately and that was why he lost his temper at the movie theater. He should be able to control himself but those men were saying the most horrible things so she at least understood his anger. Sansa already forgave him by the time he dropped her off that night but it was still hard to call. How could she encourage such unacceptable behavior? But that would all be left behind them tonight. She hoped the extra effort she put into her appearance would show him that she still cared to impress him.

Every facet of her outfit was put together to facilitate a perfect romantic night. Her hair was swept up in at loose bun that could easily be undone later. The strapless dress was better suited to spring but she noticed he liked bare shoulders and it would be easy to remove. The thin sheer fabric would offer little protection against the cold so she layered over a warm trench over top. She slipped on her strapless shoes and added the bare essentials of jewelry, nothing that would get in the way.

Dressed and ready, Sansa spared one last glance into the mirror to see a flushing young woman in love. That was the self she wanted to show to Sandor, the sweet girl he fell for. The anger that had made its home in her heart disappeared when she saw how damaging it was to their relationship. True, she never physically attacked anyone but she had been short-tempered with both her father and Sandor. Now that justice had been served to the guilty party, she wanted to put the whole matter to rest.

While riding down on the elevator she practiced what she would say in her head but nothing sounded right. She walked out of the front entrance to see the Skylark waiting for her and a flock of butterflies fluttered in her stomach. As she approached the car, she mused that she had not felt this jittery since their first date. Sansa opened the door and slid into the passenger seat.

"You look pretty," he greeted her with a gruff compliment as she pulled the door closed.

"Thank you," she smiled at him and waited expectantly for him to tell here where they were going. Instead, he just sat there like a lump and gazed at her with a somewhat confused expression.
"Sandor?" The blank look in his eyes cleared as he put the car into drive, only to pull around the parking lot and park again. "Are we not going?"

"I have something to say," he turned off the engine and sat quietly another awkward moment. "I messed up, Sansa," the words rushed out of his mouth. "All I ever wanted was to make you happy and I fucking failed miserably." She opened her mouth to insist they should put the past few weeks behind them. "Don't argue," he cut her off before she could start. "See? I did it again - I'm always an asshole and I'm no good to you."

"Please tell me you're not..." Her eyes flickered over his casual clothing and his averted eyes... Sansa could not even tell anymore! "Are you breaking up with me?"

"What? No, that's not," his eyes opened wide, "not even slightly!" Sandor groaned while rubbing his knuckles over his forehead, closing his eyes and puffing out a heavy breath. "I'm... trying to beg you to stay with me," he mumbled, "can't even do that right. I told you I would suck at this boyfriend shit." Her man was big and strong and heavens knew he could be described as 'manly' but he sat there sulking like a grumpy child and it made her oddly happy.

"I have been upset lately but not with you, not really." Sansa turned to face him but bowed her head with shame. "I understand your anger better than you know. I hate Joffrey... and I never hated anyone before in my whole life! I guess I'm not the same innocent little bird you fell for."

"Good," he set a finger under her chin to tilt her face up to see his teasing smirk, "you could be a bit dense."

"Hateful," she pouted and narrowed her eyes at him.

"Honest," he countered with a grin before reaching into the backseat to retrieve a parcel. "I figured I should give you this." Sandor handed her the messily wrapped package with too much tape. "I was gonna give it to you after the movie..."

"What is it?" Guilt in all of its thick heavy weight suddenly fell straight onto her head. "Oh my gods, I forgot to get you a Winterfest gift."

"It's no big deal-"

"Of course it is!" Sansa felt overwhelmed by the horror of her inconsideration as she stared at the simple ivory wrapping paper. "I feel horrible, I'm so, so sorry Sandor. How could I forget? That's not like me..."

"Aren't you gonna open it?" A nervous edge tinged Sandor's rasping voice and she quickly unwrapped the present to reveal a small hardcover. "It's a book of poems," he explained sheepishly. "I guess you can see that."

"You got me a book?" Sansa stared at the book in her hands with disbelief. "Of poetry? By E. E. Cummings?" She considered the possibility that she was having a vivid dream.

"In my Literature class we studied this guy," he explained in an embarrassed tone. "There was one poem that made me think of you." Even if he told her he pulled the book at random, she would still cherish it. Not jewelry or candy or perfume but a book of poetry. To know he actually thought of her while reading a poem made her head swim.

"Will you read it to me?" She held out the book, praying he would not deny her request. Sandor blinked in surprise a few times before nodding and accepting the book. He searched for the poem and began reading as soon as he found the page.
"Somewhere I have never travelled - gladly beyond any experience - your eyes have their silence."
As always, his voice was harsh but the words were spoken softly. "In your most frail gesture are
things which enclose me, or which I cannot touch because they are too near. Your slightest look
easily will unclose me though I have closed myself as fingers." His eyes never left the page as hers
fixed on his face, falling under a spell created by the tender honesty with which he read to her.

"You open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens - touching skillfully mysteriously - her first
rose." A hint of a smile pulled at the corner of his mouth as he took a breath before continuing. "Or if
your wish be to close me - I and my life will shut very beautifully suddenly, as when the heart of this
flower imagines the snow carefully everywhere descending. Nothing which we are to perceive in
this world equals the power of your intense fragility. Whose texture compels me with the color of its
countries - rendering death and forever with each breathing...

"I do not know what it is about you that closes and opens," he glanced at her for briefest of instances.
"Only something in me understands the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses. Nobody - not
even the rain - has such small hands." Sandor closed the book and handed it back to her casually, as
if unknowing he just melted her into a puddle. "If I was any good with words - that's how I'd say
what you do to me."

"I feel so sorry for everyone who isn't me right at this moment." Sansa took the book back and
hugged it against her chest. "This is the best gift I've ever received in my entire life," she sniffled and
tried to fight back her happy tears from ruining her makeup. "You certainly never fail to astonish
me," a soft laugh of disbelief escaped her throat.

"For the other day, I'm sor-"

"We can spend the rest of the night," she interrupted, "making apologies for our recent treatment of
one another. You would tell me how sorry you are that you lost your temper. I would stammer
regrets for being so distant..." Sansa shook her head determinedly as she tucked the book away in her
purse. "What if every time we get over an argument, we start over?" He narrowed his brows and
stared at her like he did not understand. "Hello," she stuck her hand out, "I'm Sansa Stark. I like
puppies, ice cream, and tall grumpy boys. I dislike bullies and spiders."

"Start over?" Sandor stared at her outstretched hand with puzzlement until smirking and accepting
the handshake. "They call me the hound but that's not who I am," he held onto her hand, caressing
the back with the pad of his thumb. "I'm Sandor Clegane - I like basketball and teasing pretty little
birds. I hate fire and also don't care much for bullies."

"I hope this won't seem to forward," her lips pulled into a wicked smile, "since we only just met... But
I would love to go on a date with you." Sansa remembered the first time she thought of asking
Sandor on a date, the first day they met. That flirtatious boy with the pitiful face turned out to be so
much more than meets the eye. He was strong and tough but felt more pain than one person should
endure and needed love like anyone else.

"As long as it's a surprise," his grin turned boyish. "Forgot to mention I love surprises."

"And I forgot to mention that I hate surprises." Sansa retaliated with a flutter of her eyelashes and he
scoffed at her obvious intention.

"That's the one thing we'll have to disagree on," he teased and she pursed her lips into a slight pout.
"I recognize that look."

"What look?" Sansa opened her eyes wider and bit her lower lip. "I don't know what you are talking
about."
"Girl," he growled, "don't even think about seducing me into giving up where we're going." Sandor leaned forward, trying to stare her down with his steely gaze. "Not gonna happen."

"I haven't even tried yet," she accepted his challenge by bracing a hand on his shoulder and scooting closer to him. "Sandor, please tell me where we are going." Sansa kept her voice low but she did not have to feign the breathlessness caused by his nearness. "Please... I want to know so badly." His gaze heated, turning his grey eyes darker as his jaw slightly tensed. "I recognize that look, you want to give in."

"Wrong," he pointed at his face, "this look means I'm about to drag you to the backseat." Sandor grinned at her face flushing but Sansa scooted closer to him, determined to win their flirtatious battle.

"Don't be so mean," she placed her palm over his heart, feeling his warmth through his shirt. His dark eyes flickered down to her hand before returning to her face with an aloof expression. Sansa slid her hand up his chest, curling it around his neck underneath the collar of his jacket. "Please tell me where we are going?"

"Not going anywhere right now." His hand curled around her waist to draw her body flush against him. Sandor cupped the back of her head and he pulled her face close to press his warm lips against hers. Her eyes fluttered shut and her heart beat faster as the gentle kiss turned more urgent and hungry. She nudged the tip of her tongue to taste him and he reacted by thrusting his tongue into her mouth. All of her senses were filled by him but it only called attention to the aching emptiness between her legs.

"Sandor please," she pulled away breathless as her head swam. Sansa could hardly breathe or think as tormenting passion consumed her. "Take me somewhere we can be alone." Her face felt hot, not from embarrassment but desire.

"What about the date?" The question was only meant to tease her, she could tell by his victorious expression. Sandor thought he won but Sansa smiled knowing this was her plan all along. Dates were all well and nice... But it was only a prelude to what she truly wanted anyway.

"Forget the date," her eyes locked with his. "I only want to be with you."

SANDOR

She was all dressed up - sitting up straight and eager like she couldn't wait to get where they were going. But he wasn't taking her anywhere special, just the bridge lookout because at least it had a nice view. Someday he'd give her everything she deserved. He'd take her to fancy restaurants and buy her jewels that would never compare with the brightness of her eyes. Most of all he wouldn't fuck her in the backseat of his car. Sansa found romance in everything, it was part of her charm, but it didn't stop him from wanting to give her more.

Sandor parked in the usual spot, turned off the engine, and removed his seatbelt with his game face on. Some guys buy flowers and candy when they want to apologize - but chocolates get eaten and roses wilt. Tonight he was on a mission to make Sansa forget their last two disaster dates and remember this night forever. Even if he fucked up everything else, he knew how to make his little bird sing. He studied her body more attentively than any textbook and memorized every sigh, whimper, and moan.

Gods, the way she looked at him as she released her seatbelt - she could melt ice with the heat in her eyes. A wicked smile curled her lips before she opened the door and stepped out to climb into the backseat. He wasted no time following her, silently repeating his resolution to take it slow and make it good for her. Sandor pulled his door closed behind him and turned to find her watching him
"Tell me what you want," he leaned towards her to press a tender kiss to her throat and Sandor felt her warm breath on his ear. His lips trailed along her jaw and across her cheek to brush briefly over her panting mouth. Her arms circled around his waist, stretching to continue the kiss as he pulled away. "Anything you ask - I'll do it."

"Love me," she gasped breathlessly and loosened her arms around his waist to cling to his shoulders. Sansa raised herself up to kiss him again and he slid a hand into her hair as she moved her mouth over his. A few tugs sent her long hair spilling free around her shoulders and she moaned when he grasped a handful. She nipped and kissed his lips as he untied her jacket's belt to slide his hand around her warm body. Sandor trailed his hands down her hips and grasped her thighs to pull her into his lap.

"How do you want me to love you?" Last time he fucked up and rushed things between them so he gently pushed her jacket off her bare shoulders and tossed it aside. Her glassy eyes gazed heatedly into his as she lifted a hand to caress his cheek.

"Tell me sweet things," she whispered, bowing her head so that a curtain of red hair fell into her face.

"Is that all?" He lifted a hand to sweep her hair behind her shoulder. "Don't be shy when it's just you and me."

"Of course not," she looked up with a smile, "there is no reason to be embarrassed in front of my man." Sansa's cheeks glowed pink as she averted her eyes again. "Can I whisper it to you?" Sandor smirked as he nodded his answer and she leaned forward to put her lips against his ear. "I want to feel your skin against mine and I want you to touch me and kiss me..." Her voice lowered so quiet he could hardly hear. "And I want you inside me."

"Anything my love wants," he growled and she shivered in response as his hands and ran up her back to find the zipper to her dress. She clutched his chest and writhed against him, making little whining sounds against his neck that drove him crazy. His hands wanted to tear the flimsy fabric and fuck her until she sang a pretty song for him. And though she'd not complain if he acted rashly, he wanted to show her the same gentleness he gave her the first time. "My sweet girl," he pulled the zipper down. "I would do anything for you - all you have to do is ask."

"Sandor," she whimpered and lifted her head, "please kiss me." He cupped his fingers around the base of her head to tilt her face up and covered her mouth with his in a firm kiss. When he lifted his head, she strained up to follow and he chuckled at her eagerness. The little bird knew how to push him but this time he wouldn't lose control.

"Let me see how pretty you are," his hand gripped around her body to gently pull her off his lap. Sansa crossed her arms and pulled the gauzy dress over her head, mussing her hair even more. She was so fucking beautiful he couldn't even think of anything that came close to comparing. "I wish I knew the right words to tell you... You're more gorgeous every time I see you." Sansa reached behind her back to unclasp her bra and removed it while shivering under his gaze. "Are you cold?"

"Not when you hold me," she moved closer and tugged on his jacket. "You are beautiful too, lover." Sandor quickly shrugged the jacket off and tossed it aside before pulling his shirt over his head. "Mmm..." She hummed appreciatively as her eyes wandered over his head. "Very beautiful, I always thought so." Sansa wrapped her arms around his shoulders and sat across his lap. He lifted her chin to turn her face up, seeing the adoration in her eyes, and she tilted her head back in invitation. His arm supported around her back, curling his fingers around the curve of her shoulder.
Sandor kissed her sweet mouth before moving to her neck and her arm fell limp to her side to allow his lips to trail further down. He ran his hands up her ribs and over her heaving chest and cupped her breast as the pad of his thumb caressed the silken skin. Her chest rose and fell with her quickened breath as he bowed his head to trail kisses along the swell of her breast.

His lips and tongue teased the hard peak of her breast as she clutched his head and moaned. His fingers gently kneaded the soft flesh, letting her soft whimpers and moans guide him. As he buried his face between the valley of her breasts, he could feel the pounding of her heart under his lips. She twisted and writhed in his hold but she froze as his hand slid down to slip under the hem of her silken panties to find her slick and hot. He pulled back to see those pretty eyes gazing up at him with something like dazed wonder.

"You want me," it wasn't a question - he could feel how much she wanted him. More like he was always in awe of the reality that this beautiful girl was even his to hold and kiss and touch.

"Yes," she gasped again as his fingers stroked the hot flesh between her thighs and moved lower to explore her wet entrance. "Please, I need you..." Sansa's words trailed off with the softest little whimpering moan and it tore a groan from his own throat. He could not resist easing one finger inside her and she gasped in response. She curled her hands behind his neck and pulled herself up to slide her lips along his collarbone and down to his chest.

Sansa pulled him closer to her and primal hunger tore through him, testing his resolve to concentrate on pleasing her. The intense need to have her wasn't helped at all by her ass wriggling around on his stiff cock but he kept his focus. He embraced her tight against his chest until she was whimpering incoherent pleas for him to 'love' her. Sandor once would have laughed at the idea that fucking was 'love' but he knew better after being with her.

"How do you want me to love you?" He removed his hand from her panties to and gave her a moment to catch her breath. She puffed out a loud breath and blinked a few times before sitting up to graze her cheek against his.

"I want," she whispered in his ear again, "for you to hold me close to your heart as we make love."

Sansa smirked at her flowery words but his pulse did speed up at the sound of her quiet strained voice. She kissed under his ear and down his neck as his hand fitted around her hips to lift her off his lap. Sansa protested the loss of contact until he dug into his pocket to pull out his wallet. He removed the condom packet from the center fold and held it up.

"You didn't forget, did you?" Sandor smirked at her guilty expression - the silly little bird actually did forget. "At least this time I spared your panties." Sansa flushed and set herself to the task of removing those panties while he freed his cock to sheath it in latex. He hooked an arm around her waist and his other hand around her thigh to pull her back over his lap. From that point, he was bound and determined to let her do as she liked. She braced one small hand against his chest and used her free hand to guide his cock.

Her tight heat enveloped him so slowly it strained his intentions to let her be in complete control but somehow he managed to not rush it. She leaned towards him and softly kissed his throat, pressing butterfly kisses down his neck as she sank down. He ran his palms up her trembling thighs as she lowered herself against him and her soft hum made his head spin like he had a few too many drinks. Once she was flush against him, she curled her arms around his waist and nuzzled her face against his chest.

She pulled him closer to her and the soft warmth of her chest made his cock twitch and throb inside her. Sansa made happy little humming sounds as she squirmed closer to him and he wrapped his arms around her. As she tried to press their bodies closer together, every tiny shift and wiggle pushed
him nearer to madness.

"Hold me tighter," she murmured against his chest. Sandor was already afraid of crushing her but she moaned quietly when he tightened his hold. Her fingertips dug into his back as his hands grasped her shoulder and waist. "Tighter," she wheezed and he crushed her body against his and she moaned in response.

"You're mine," he growled in her ear and she arched her back in response as her tight heat fluttered around his cock. "You'll always be mine." Sandor squeezed his eyes shut and buried his face in her hair, his body shaking from the restraint a she rolled her hips. "Everything about you is perfect and good - I don't deserve you." She released an impatient cry and rocked her hips to an erratic rhythm. "But I'll never give you up, I'll keep you forever."

"Please," she wailed breathlessly, "I need..." Sansa desperately bucked against him on trembling legs. "I need..." Sandor knew what she needed and twisted his body to lay her back onto the seat, keeping one arm curled around her waist. His boot braced against the front seat while his hand splayed against the side of the car. She wrapped her arms around him his body curled against hers as he buried himself deeper into her tight heat with a groan. "More," she panted and clung to him.

"I love you, Sansa." He bowed his head to rasp in her ear as he withdrew only to thrust into her again, earning him a high-pitched cry. The first note of a melody he would never tire of hearing. "I will never stop loving you, not ever." Sandor drove into her at a steady pace and she pulsed around his cock. "You're a dream - my dream." Her body felt limp as she began to tremble turning her face towards him, she released a louder note against his neck. "My Sansa, my love, sing for me."

"Sandor," she sang his name, arching against his chest, her face buried against his neck. Her body shuddered and a bright blue flash blinded him as he pumped his release deep inside her. Sandor struggled to catch his breath and fought the urge to slump down on top of her. But when he tried to sit up she clung to him with renewed strength.

"Can we stay like this?" Her voice was muffled against his neck and he was still breathless so he nodded in response and relaxed. "I love you so much." He wanted to tell her she was the reason his heart still beat in his chest. She was his motivation for actually living instead of pissing away his days waiting for life to happen to him.

"I love you," he answered simply. Sandor wanted to promise to do better and swear that he'd never disappoint her again but he settled for holding her close. She sighed with contentment and nuzzled against him as her breathing slowed to a steady pace. As he held Sansa, he nearly laughed aloud at what an ass he'd been to think her silly for equating sex and love. He was the fucking idiot! All along the naive little bird had it right - though he wasn't good at saying it, at least this way he could show her how much he loved her.

Chapter End Notes

I've lived a while and seen a few things on this crazy ride called life but nothing compares with make-up sex. It's like no other experience that comes close to being the physical expression of past anger, renewed passion, dwindling fear, and hopeful bliss. I hope I did it justice!

About 80% through this chapter I was kicking myself for not making it two chapters but now that it's FINALLY done, I really like it. This chapter was inspired by the irrefutably
clever MissMallora's fic (http://archiveofourown.org/works/2540084) - if you haven't read that yet I highly recommend.

I've had an obsession with gravely voices reading poetry because I watched Beauty and the Beast when I was a kid (the 1987 TV show). Nobody ever understood my deep and abiding love for Ron Perlman but I could live forever hearing him read poetry. I imagine Sandor's voice has that same lovely gruff baritone quality. *Sigh*
ARYA

The cold clinic waiting room smelled of anti-septic covered with overpowering floral potpourri. Though the room was at least half-full with patients it was too quiet, everyone spoke in hushed whispers. Arya tried to amuse herself with one of the old and crinkled magazines that sat on a coffee table in the center of the room. In normal circumstances, she would never touch any one of those magazines. Like she needed advice on how to please her man or lose ten pounds.

"So... date last night?" She turned to Sansa, too bored to stay quiet.

"Yes," Sansa blushed and focused on the magazine she was holding. "We had a good time." Well, Arya was glad at least somebody was getting some.

"Did you tell him about coming here today?" Arya didn't really care but couldn't think of what else to talk about and just couldn't stand the silence. Sansa shrugged and turned the page of the magazine she read.

"What's to tell?" Her sister smiled as if she didn't have a care in the world and it made Arya want to slap her across the face. "I can handle this myself." It was so enviable to have a boyfriend who wasn't halfway up her ass about everything.

"Aria?" The nurse stood in the doorway looking around the waiting room.

"It's Are-yah." Arya stood up to meet with the nurse but Sansa caught her hand.

"Do you want me to come?" Her sister tried to hide it but she was clearly worried about Arya. "My appointment isn't for another half-hour."

"I'm fine," Arya pulled her hand free and turned away to follow the nurse beyond the door.

"This way, please," the nurse led Arya to a scale, "let's get your height and weight." She stepped up onto the scale and held her breath while the nurse measured her height. "One hundred and fifty three centimeters and..." Then the nurse slid the weights along the bar and Arya blew out her held breath in disappointment. "Forty-four kilograms, have you lost weight recently?" Arya nodded in answer and the nurse scribbled something on her clipboard before she handed Arya a cup and pointed to a door nearby. "This is for your sample, there's the bathroom."

"Okay," Arya stared down at the cup in her hand with resignation. No matter how much she wanted to run away and hide - it wouldn't help anything. Even if she walked away from this appointment with bad news, at least she'd have answers.

"When you're finished," the nurse continued her instructions, "head into the exam room down the hall." Arya's eyes followed the woman's finger to an open door at the end of the hallway and bobbed her head to signify she understood. Inside the bathroom one of the fluorescent lights flickered and Arya looked up into the mirror. The ugly girl who stared back didn't even look like her - dark circles, ghostly white, and skeletal. She looked like death even to her own eyes...
Arya hurried to do what she needed to do to get out of that strobing eighth hell, leaving her filled cup in a cupboard marked 'samples'. While she washed her hands, she avoided looking at her reflection again and left the bathroom to walk down the hall into the exam room. She sat down on a stool and waited, trying to force her mind to focus on trivial things. The nurse from earlier came into the room with a blood pressure cuff.

"Last thing is your blood pressure and then the doctor will be with you." The nurse wrapped the cuff around Arya's arm and pumped it up while listening to her pulse with a stethoscope. "Let me check again..." The nurse frowned and repeated the process. "Eighty-nine over sixty-two."

"Is that bad?" Arya tried to peek at what the nurse was riding on the clipboard.

"It's a little low but nothing to worry about," the nurse smiled reassuringly. "The doctor will be with you in a moment, remove all of your clothing and put on the gown on the examination table." With that, she left Arya alone to undress and wrap herself in the flimsy paper gown. She only had to wait a few moments, sitting on the examination table, before the doctor walked in.

"Arya?" She was pretty with brunet curls and wore a friendly smile. "I am Dr. Westerling. How are you feeling today?" A young nurse accompanied the doctor and stood off to the side of the room.

"Not great," she shrugged, "my period didn't come." She didn't say that she felt scared all the time and every morning her whole body ached. Her stomach lurched at the sight of food and before today, she didn't bother to step on a scale to watch the weight slip away.

"We tested you for pregnancy and it was negative." Dr. Westerling smiled like it was great news but it did not reassure Arya one bit.

"Yeah," she nodded, "I took a bunch of tests too."

"When was your last gynecological checkup?" The doctor sat down in on a stool next to the examination bed, holding a clipboard on her lap.

"My mom took me after my first period last year." Arya mused that year felt like an entire lifetime ago. "It's been regular since it started for the most part, it never stopped before. A few times it's been late but nothing like this."

Dr. Westerling nodded along, sometimes writing a few notes on her clipboard before setting it down. She pulled her stool in front of the examination table.

"First, let's do a pelvic exam." The doctor put on a pair of latex gloves while Arya laid back to think of her happy place. Winterfell in the middle of winter, snow falling over the giant pine trees in the woods behind her house. "Has there been any spotting or cramping?"

"No," Arya struggled to relax and ignore the fact there was a stranger between her legs. It was a good thing she hadn't eaten anything that day because she probably would've thrown it up already.

"Everything looks healthy, you can sit up." Dr. Westerling stood up to throw away her gloves before returning to sit on her stool in front of Arya. "Is there anything you want to tell me?" Arya shook her head and stared down at the floor. "I can only help if you are honest. Let me tell you what I see. You are underweight, pale, and have low blood pressure. I assume you are not sleeping nor eating well. I have to ask... is someone hurting you?"

"No, nothing like that." Arya crossed her arms and blew out a long breath. "I don't know... I just... Lately everything feels impossible. I can't concentrate in school, the sight of food makes me sick, and I'm tired all the time but I can't sleep."

"I am going to order some blood tests but I think you would benefit more from a recommendation."
The doctor scratched down some more notes on her clipboard before standing up to pull a pamphlet out of the drawer. "This facility offers free counseling to teens."

"Counseling... you mean like a shrink?" Arya accepted the brochure with a smiling conventionally attractive teenager on the cover.

"At your age it is easy to get overwhelmed and feel like no one can understand." Dr. Westerling gave her a sympathetic smile and gestured at the pamphlet. "This center provides an opportunity to let you talk about anything you want and no one will judge you."

"My parents don't have to know?" Arya wasn't quite sure what to think but there was no way her parents could ever find out. They would overact as usual and blow the whole situation way out of proportion.

"It is completely confidential." The doctor's interest in helping Arya seemed genuine so she didn't argue. "They won't know anything unless you decide to tell them."

"Thanks, doc." Still, Arya had a hard time believing that all of her problems were somehow in her head. "What are those blood tests for?"

"We will check your blood sugar and thyroid," she explained. "You will get a call to let you know the results. In my professional opinion you will greatly benefit from having someone to talk to."

"And birth control pills?" Arya almost forgot the most important reason she came to the clinic in the first place.

"We can do that for you." Dr. Westerling wrote up a prescription and handed it to Arya. "You can pick up the prescription at our in-house pharmacy, up to three months at a time. I would like to see you back here before then. Can you come back in a month?"

"Sure, I'll stop by the front counter and make an appointment." Arya folded the prescription and slipped it into the pamphlet.

"Make sure to ask for a day Dr. Westerling is on." The doctor stood up and gave Arya another kindly smile. "Nice to meet you, Arya."

"Sure, see ya doc." Arya watched Dr. Westerling and the nurse leave the room before dropping her forehead into her hand. "Fuck..." She had been worried that she was cracking up but hearing a doctor say she needed counseling felt like punch in the gut. Just another weakness she could add to her growing list of faults. It wasn't enough that she was unattractive and unsociable - now she was cracked too!

She snapped out of it, jumped down from the table to dress, and headed out to the counter. There she was directed to another room to have her blood drawn before being sent back to pay for the visit and blood work. The woman behind the desk scheduled Arya's appointment and accepted the payment. Back out in the waiting room she took a seat and just stared at the floor as she waited for Sansa.

"How did it go?" Sansa's voice snapped Arya out of her daze.

"They're doing some tests," she stood up, "and want me back in a month."

"I'll come with you then," Sansa put her arm around Arya's shoulders and they walked together out of the office. "You should call Gendry."

"You should mind your own business," Arya retorted without thinking. "I didn't mean that... You're
right, let's go home and I'll call him later."

"Do you want to stop and get something to eat?" Sansa was always offering her food lately. "My treat?"

"I'll get something at the house." Arya broke out of her sister's loose hold to walk around to the passenger side of dad's car. They told him they were going to see a movie... it seemed all they did was lie to him. The ride home was quiet as she stared out the window, trying to think but finding her mind blank. When they got home, she went straight up to the apartment, grabbed a few things, and then left again without a word to anyone. Fuck them anyway.

'I'm at the park by my house', she texted Gendry on the walk over to the small park nearby. 'Pick me up when you get off'. Arya played her favorite playlist on her phone and covered her ears with headphones to drown out her dark thoughts. When she reached the empty park, she lay down on a bench to wait for Gendry. After a time, there was still nobody around so she fished a thin joint out of her pocket and sparked it up.

Arya puffed on the joint, trying to keep her mind clear of morbid thoughts. The weed didn't really help ease her mind and actually sorta made her paranoid that every passing car was a cop. If it was up to her, she didn't want to go anywhere but anything was better than sitting around the house. Both Sansa and dad were constantly questioning what was wrong with her - like they didn't know exactly what was wrong. Her sister was acting like her old naive self instead of the new stronger version she could respect.

Gendry had to work the afternoon shift so it was already close to sunset by the time he pulled up. Arya put out the joint butt against the bottom of her sneaker and dropped it on the ground. She walked to the Lincoln to wrench open the door and plopped down in the passenger seat, pulling the door closed with a bang.

"Hey, Arry." Gendry looked at her with a wary expression like he was expecting her to bite his head off - a distinct possibility. Even Arya had no idea when she was about to explode over nothing.

"Hey," she greeted him halfheartedly - apparently, she wasn't in the head-biting mood. Arya braced herself for his questions about her appointment but they never came.

"You wanna go to the forge?" He pulled the Lincoln away from the park to head in the direction of the forge. It didn't matter where they went, Arya couldn't escape herself. How could he even want to be around her when she was this sick of herself? The doc was right, maybe she was fucking nuts.

"Whatever..." Arya honestly didn't care where they went - she didn't care much about anything lately. What was the point of caring? Who noticed how hard she worked? Who cared about what she wanted anyway? No one.

"So," he tried to force some conversation, "how should we celebrate?"

"Celebrate what?" Arya crossed her arms and stared out the passenger window.

"Your dad got Joffrey Baratheon sent away," he said it like a question - with a higher pitch on the last word. "Justice is served." Justice? If the cops caught her puffing on that little joint, it would've been serious trouble! Her father would've grounded her for eternity and she'd probably have to serve community service. For smoking a plant! Oh, but Joffrey can commit a serious crime - in which there was an actual victim - and he gets off with a slap on the wrist!

"It's such bullshit," Arya raked her hands through her hair. "What justice?! He committed a crime so
he gets sent to a better school - in what fucking universe does that make sense?! He's a senior - he'll be out of there by the end of the school year. Think he's just going to 'forget' what we did to him? You, Sansa, dad - you're all fucking idiots! Why am I the only one who sees what that asshole really is? Some people are just rotten to the core."

"You did the best you could," he eyed her sideways and she caught the anxiety in his expression though he tried to hide it. Gendry was making an effort to cheer her up while she just took her anger out on the wrong person. Typical - hot-headed, loud-mouthed, and don't forget horse-faced! She was in a room with that doctor for all of fifteen minutes and she could tell Arya was off her rocker.

"And my best wasn't good enough - what a shock." Nothing she did would ever be good enough - not for her parents and not even for Gendry. He might act like her attitude didn't bother him but eventually it would drive him away. But, even knowing all of that, she couldn't stop herself from treating him like shit.

"I'm at a loss here, Arry." Gendry kept his eyes on the road but she could still see the hurt etched in his face. Great - a nice thick layer of guilt to go along with all the worry and bitter disappointment - lovely. "I can see right through you: I know you're not mad... You're upset but you don't let me comfort you. You might be sick but you don't want to talk about it. We promised to never have lies between us."

"I'm not lying about anything," she protested stubbornly. Except he was right she was holding out on him. But what was she supposed to say? 'My whole life feels like one long run-on joke but don't worry about it'. Or how about 'I think I might be insane and so does the doctor I went to'. Oh no, it would have to be - 'I lay awake ever night fantasizing about murdering Joffrey'. None of those things would totally and completely freak him out.

"But you don't tell me the truth either," he mumbled miserably. Gods, what was wrong with her? She had the greatest boyfriend in the world and all she wanted to do was scream at him to shut up... But he was only making her feel even shitter!

"Just drive, stupid." Arya slumped down in her seat and kept quiet until they pulled into the park and Gendry parked the Lincoln. Neither of them got out, they just stared straight ahead at the trees. "If I really told you what's in my head... You'd never talk to me again and that would kill me."

"I don't doubt your head is a scary place to be," he tried to lighten the mood with a joke but she wasn't having it. Gendry unbuckled his seatbelt and turned to face her but she continued to stare into the forest. "Nothing you say would make me wanna not talk to you." He reached out a hand to touch her but gave up halfway and let it fall limp between them. "Talk to me, please: I'm here for you."

"I don't doubt your head is a scary place to be," he tried to lighten the mood with a joke but she wasn't having it. Gendry unbuckled his seatbelt and turned to face her but she continued to stare into the forest. "Nothing you say would make me wanna not talk to you." He reached out a hand to touch her but gave up halfway and let it fall limp between them. "Talk to me, please: I'm here for you."

"I wanted it so bad that I even scared myself - I've thought about it every night, how easy it would be." Poison would be the best way but that wouldn't be as satisfying as sticking her sword straight through his heart. "Joff has plenty of enemies and I'm too young to be tried as an adult... My dad would get me a good lawyer who could probably spin some insanity defense. But then I thought about how I might lose you and it was the only thing holding me back." A sidelong peek confirmed he knew exactly what Arya was confessing.

"Don't ever say this to anyone else," he grasped her shoulder and turned her to face him. "Promise me." Arya never saw his eyes so serious before but at least she could not detect any disgust or rejection. But if he really knew what was inside her head he would be revolted so she had to stop herself from spilling her guts!

"I promise," she nodded her head and let it loll forward. "I'm really messed up, huh?"
"We're all a little messed up in our own way: at least you can admit it." Gendry relaxed his grip on her shoulder to hold her hand. "And everyone wishes someone dead at some point in their life."

"I didn't wish for it," she whispered, "I planned it." Arya swallowed the lump in her throat and prayed she would be struck mute by the gods. Why would she say this to him?! "I know exactly how I'd do it and get away with it. My dad only protected Joffrey by sending him away." Arya shoved open the door and slammed it shut before marching into the woods towards the forge. Gendry caught up to her and took ahold of her hand.

"I don't think any less of you," he fell into step beside her, not trying to hold her back. "I know how much you love your family. When my mom got sick I would've done anything to save her, even kill someone if it would make any difference. We like to pretend we're all civilized but inside we're still just animals with instincts to protect the people we love. I get that Joffrey's punishment doesn't satisfy you but you said Sansa is happy about it. Isn't that what you wanted: for your sister to feel safe again?"

"You're right, you're always right." Dried leaves crunched under their feet as they walked deeper into the woods. "You act like I'm the smart one but it's you." He was smarter, older, more attractive... Beautiful girls like Margaery were always going to flit around him until he realized how much better he could do. Arya didn't distrust his loyalty but she did doubt her own ability to not rip out the eyes of the next girl who looked at him.

"What's six-thousand eight-hundred forty-one minus eighty-five divided by twelve?" Gendry suddenly challenged her and the calculation took only a second in her head.

"Five hundred and sixty three," she answered automatically. Arya shrugged, knowing being quick with calculations didn't mean shit. "That's basic and doesn't mean I'm smarter than you."

"Ha! 'Basic' she says." He hooked his arm around her shoulders and ruffled her hair. "Only my Arry can be arrogant and modest at the same time."

"Cut it out," she shoved him off and patted her mussed hair down. Gendry stood beside her with his lopsided smile and looking more handsome than he had a right to be. He didn't look down on her for her murderous thoughts at all. Since the beginning, she couldn't understand how he loved her despite her innumerable faults. But she always held out hope that someday she'd catch up with him and become someone he'd be proud to call his. That hope slipped away over endless insomnia-induced hours filled with doubts and dark intentions.

"Here," he stepped closer, "it's still sticking up." His fingers were gentle as he smoothed her hair forward and swiped her bangs away from her eyes. "What am I going to do with you, Arry?" When he stood close, her heart still pounded and her stomach tightened. She made the mistake of glancing up into his eyes and with one look, he knew exactly what she was thinking. "You wanna..." Gendry quirked his brows and tilted his head toward the tent. All the physical reactions were normal but for some reason she stood frozen.

"Nah," she gulped and took a step back, "let's do something else."

"No problem," his lips pursed as his eyes darted around and he nodded for way too long. If Gendry was trying to hide his disappointment, he wasn't doing a very good job.

"I want to," she cleared her throat, "I'm just..." Arya couldn't explain what she didn't comprehend herself! It didn't make any sense - she still wanted him but the mere thought was enough to make her panic. "I honestly want to... I just... can't." Bile rose in her throat as overwhelming pressure crushed her from all sides. "Sorry," she choked on the word and swallowed hard.
"Hey, don't sweat it," he assured her. "There's about a million other things we can do."

"Like, what kind of things?" Arya fidgeted with the zipper on her coat and stared down at the dead leaves under her feet.

"Let's see..." Gendry glanced up to the treetops with a thoughtful expression. "We could explore the woods and take pictures or I guess we could always study." He smiled at her and shrugged. "As long as I'm with you, that's all I care about: we can do anything you want. Oh! We could go grab some breakfast for dinner if you're hungry."

"Nah, I'm not." Arya never felt hungry anymore, she lost her appetite in Winterfell.

"I don't know," he got all moon-eyed. "Crispy hash browns and runny egg yolks sure sound pretty good right about now. English muffins, regular muffins, bagels and spread..." His eyes glazed over and he smacked his smiling lips together. Gendry had a serious of obsession with breakfast foods, it was almost unhealthy. But who is she to say what is and isn't healthy?

"If you're hungry," she relented.

"Come on," he grabbed her hand and started for the car, "once you smell it your stomach will start growling." Arya stopped and jerked her hand loose from his and Gendry whirled around to face her.

"What if I stay like this?" There was something seriously wrong with her and it wasn't going away - it just got worse! "At the doctor's appointment..." Before, Arya couldn't keep her mouth closed but her tongue froze in her mouth. '"They ordered some tests," she finished in half-truth. "What if there's something really wrong with me?"

"What if?" Gendry stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets and stepped closer so she had to look up at him. "I don't deal in what ifs, but I do know one thing for certain." He pulled out one hand to pat it against his chest. "I love you and nothing is ever going to make me leave you: you're stuck with me." His face scrunched up and his brows tightly knitted together. "I only wanted to come here because I hoped it would make you feel better." Arya shrugged and wished she could explain. "Guess I'm as stupid as you say I am," he laughed softly.

"I never once meant that," she knew it was wrong to put him down like that all the time but couldn't help it. "I don't know why I'm like this."

"I can't tell you everything will be alright." He reached a hesitant hand to cup her cheek. "But you don't have to worry about me going anywhere. I'm yours and you're mine. Through thick and thin we're in this together." Pretty words - he was always good at saying them at the right time.

"Can I have a hug?" Arya hated how small and pathetic her voice sounded but at least she stopped saying stupid shit. There were so much more she wanted to tell him but it terrified her to think of him being scared off... But at the same time she almost wanted to scare him - which only confirmed the bat-shit crazy theory she had about herself. So she hid her secrets in her heart where they could only hurt her.

"Come here," he opened his arms and she stepped into his embrace, tilting her head against his chest. "I'll give you anything you want, you just have to ask." In Gendry's arms was the only place she felt like she belonged. It was almost too tempting to ask him to come away with her... He'd say no and then she'd see the limits of his love - it couldn't be as boundless as he pretended.

"Can't you be a little less good to me?" Her arms encircled his waist and nuzzled her face against his soft t-shirt.
"That's milady," he puffed out an exaggerated sigh, "you ask straightaway for the one thing I can't do. Can you be a little more difficult?" Arya tilted her head back to scowl at him but he only smiled. "Then she gives me that face, I can't win!"

"Dumbass..." She pulled away and grasped his hand tightly in hers before turning towards the parking lot. "Let's get something to eat." Honest to gods, Arya truly wished she could just keep him all to herself and live in these woods. No rules to follow, no parents to disappoint, no social norms to conform to. And no pretty girls who'd try and steal what was hers.

Chapter End Notes

I'm fully besotted with a delicious new fic by the eternally brilliant Jillypups:
http://archiveofourown.org/works/2576291 (Head over heels, people.)

This is the part when I tell you how I'm moving temporarily and it's a pain in my ass bla-bla-bla-bla-bla, nobody cares! I need a packing drill sergeant who just screams at me that I don't need ALL of my polyester vintage dresses. I just have to unpack it all in a few months anyway! Anyway, things will be bumpy for a period but I'll likely still be writing this fic when I get to come home. Never give up - Never surrender!
Through My Eyes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

GREY WORM

The television set in the den was blaring some game show mama and pop were watching as Torgo raced around the house getting ready. He had been both dreading and looking forward to this night for days but found himself unprepared for its arrival. A light knock at the door announced Missa's arrival and he scrambled to put his jacket on and button the front. The bulge in his right pocket let him know his wallet was in place and the jingle in his left meant he had his keys but what was missing?

"I got it!" Torgo rushed to the door but stopped when he realized everything was blurry. "Oh right..." His frantic hazy eyes looked around and spotted his frames on the entryway table. He lurched forward to put them on before wrenching the door open. There stood a vision of loveliness, glowing in the light of the front porch sconce. She wore little makeup, just a touch of gold twinkling at the corners of her eyes when she smiled at him. "Wow, you look... incredibly beautiful." The most incredible part was this vision came just for him.

"Thank you," her smile brightened, "so do you." Her voice echoed in his head as if it floated to him down a long hallway, all of his senses were dulled by her radiance. The dark ringlets of her hair shone like gold-touched coils spilling around her face. Missa held out her hand palm up, inviting him to hold her hand and bringing him back to reality. A usual tightening clenched his stomach as he linked his hand in hers. "I'm going!" He called a quick farewell to mama and pop and closed the door behind him. They walked together to the driveway and broke apart to get into her car.

"Don't be nervous," she reassured him once they were seated inside, "it's just Dany and Drogo." Missa checked her mirrors and blind spots before putting the key in the ignition, meticulous as always.

"Nervous?" Torgo cleared his throat to get rid of the embarrassing high pitch. "I'm not nervous," he squeaked even higher. Oh smooth... yeah, that surely convinced her.

"Good," she put the car in reverse and turned around to carefully back out of the driveway. "I have wanted to do this for a long time... a double date I mean."

"Ah, me too." Torgo pulled at his jacket cuffs nervously before tugging his seatbelt over his chest and fastening the buckle.

"Really?" Her surprised tone made him realize that he was just agreeing with whatever she said without really listening. He was really on a roll tonight, already making an ass of himself and they barely left the driveway.

"No, not really." Torgo laughed and rubbed a hand over his hair self-consciously. "Guess I never thought I'd have a girlfriend so I didn't dream of double dates."

"Well, you had better get used to it." She tossed her head to smirk sideways at him, causing all of the ringlets on her hair to shiver. For an awkward moment, Torgo was lost in her stunning beauty. It
took several seconds for him to understand the words uttered from her perfect lips.

"That might be hard..." Because he was constantly hypnotized by her voice and mesmerized by every aspect of her appearance. His heart had the bad habit of racing or stopping at her every small gesture and expression.

"Dany and I used to talk about it all the time, if I ever found someone up to my impossible standards." She ignored his weirdness and continued the conversation for the both of them. "We knew we could never double with Marge because of... him." Torgo shared Missa's anger over Joffrey's actions after hearing the whole story, though he did not know Margaery well. Who wouldn't be disgusted and angered? Missa suddenly huffed an angry breath. "The lack of legal action still infuriates me but she swears she is fine so what can I say?"

"You're a good friend, Missa." He wished he knew how to comfort her better but he also empathized with Margaery. It's just a fact that any pain that can be avoided should be avoided. Suing or pressing charges would only create the very scandal the Margaery wanted to avoid. Torgo loved Missa's boldness and moral sense but she had a black and white worldview that only came from growing up safe. His childhood was one of uncertainty and fear until he came to live with mama and pop.

"Sometimes I wonder..." Missa exhaled a long breath and visibly shook off her gloom. "I think you are more qualified to judge my quality as a girlfriend."

"My experience is limited and I might be biased..." Torgo did his best to sit back and relax, shrugging his tense shoulders to loosen them. "But I think you're the best girlfriend in the world."

"Just this planet?" She flashed another heart-stopping smile in his direction. "You're underselling me." About a million and one replies rushed through Torgo's mind but each one of them only left him paralyzed by indecision. Should he be funny, charming, romantic, or confident? "It's a little strange but I miss being your tutor... I think we used to talk more openly then because you did not worry about saying the wrong thing." Bang! She shot straight through his thinly veiled uncertainty.

"Actually, I worried all the time but figured the worst that could happen is I'd have to find another tutor." Torgo gave up trying to be anything but his own oddball self. "You're irreplaceable as a girlfriend."

"I thought I was a wonderful tutor..." Despite the dejected tone of her voice, he saw the mischievous sidelong glance she gave him.

"I was a little distracted," he pushed his confession even further, feeling sorta brave for doing so. "Every time you smiled I would start to feel faint." There, if that's not bravery Torgo didn't know what was.

"I noticed," she smiled but kept her focus on the weekend city traffic, "that was my first clue that you might like me. I really started to suspect something at the beginning of this year, when you gave me that pen for my birthday. It was very expensive."

"I mowed about a hundred lawns last summer to save up." His body ached just thinking about it but he imagined her reminded of him every time she used the pen and it soothed the pain.

"So you liked me last summer?" Missa's question made him chuckle as he remembered the first time he laid eyes on her. Torgo felt like he was strapped to a rocket and blasted off into space and then he heard her speak... It was all over for him then.

"I liked you from the first time I heard you say my name," he admitted. "Everyone else says it for the
first time like a question. Like they're asking, 'am I pronouncing it right'? You said it like I was somebody."

"You are somebody," her voice got that little worried edge to it and it always made him feel just a bit pitiful. They arrived at the restaurant and she parked the car. But neither of them got out due to the particularly tense junction in their conversation.

"I mean somebody special," he elaborated, "someone worth knowing." This was why he guarded his every word, he was bound to mess up and say the wrong thing.

"That's what I meant too," she insisted as she removed her seatbelt and turned to face him. "Don't you know how much I admire you?" Torgo copied her, unlatching his seatbelt and facing her.

"I'm still getting used to it," he confessed as his eyes locked with hers. Then he just leaned across the distance between them and pressed his lips to hers. A kiss seemed better than anything he could say. Her warm breath sighed against his mouth before her soft lips caressed his. Missa's eyes fluttered shut so he closed his too, seeing blinding flashes of light behind his eyelids. His hands settled lightly on her shoulders, pulling her even closer. The kiss knocked all the air from her lungs, as usual, and his heart raced erratically.

"We should go," she inhaled a shaky breath as she pulled away, "I'm sure they're waiting for us." Torgo just nodded mutely because direct lip contact with Missa always stole his breath away. They got out of the car and walked into the restaurant, which served French food and the decor matched the fare. They found Dany and Drogo waiting for them just inside and all the customary friendly greetings took place.

Soft tinkling piano drifted through the murmurs of patrons, percussion provided by flatware clinking. Before long, the hostess guided their group to their table and Torgo watched how Drogo seemed to lead Dany by the small of her back. It seemed a romantically masculine thing to do. He personally preferred Missa's soft finger entwined with is. After they were seated, a waiter came to take their drink orders.

"So, Dany have you picked a university yet?" Missa broke the awkward silence that followed after the waiter left.

"Oh, don't even..." Dany held up a hand to wave away Missa's question. "I am currently ruling as the Queen of Procrastination. I've avoided planning my future so far and even your lectures can't dethrone me."

"Don't put it off for too long," Missa chided. "All you have to do is decide what you want and go for it."

"Oh, is that all?" Dany smiled wryly before nodding in resignation. "You're right, it's high time I figure out what I want. Of course, mother still hopes I will study law with a minor in Political Science but I'm less convinced every day..." The waiter came back with drinks and took their appetizer order, baked brie en croute and escargots in garlic butter. Missa ordered for them, perfectly pronouncing the French words, and the waiter whisked away. "I assume you already have a school picked out," Dany looked to Missa over her menu.

"The decision is more difficult than I expected," Missa lifted her teacup to her pursed her lips and blew over her hot tea. "I am between Bravos University and the Sunspear Institute of Technology. However, to assure my acceptance to either, I need to pick up a few extracurricular activities. Perhaps win a few awards to pad my applications next year." Torgo sipped his fizzy water through a straw, gazing in awe of Missa's ample independent confidence. She wouldn't accept the compliment
but her strategic skills would make a good addition to their DnD group.

"With your grades all you need is a decent score on your college entrance exams." Dany could not hide her deflated envy, which Torgo shared. It must be nice to have the future so well planned.

"From your lips to the gods' ears," Missa lifted her eyes heavenward. "You know how I fret about tests... All those bubbles float around like swarming flies."

"What about you, Torgo?" Dany turned the attention on him. It had been too much to hope the girls would allow him to remain silent as Drogo.

"Uh..." Full-on panic coursed through his body, knowing academics were paramount in Missa's opinion. He didn't want to seem lazy or apathetic but those words currently described his attitude towards college. "I haven't really given it much thought. I mean, I keep my grades up."

"Don't be so modest," Missa placed a hand on his forearm, "he has a three-point-nine average." That was only because he had her for his tutor for the last year and a half. "You know, Torgo, it's never too early to start thinking about which school you might want to attend."

"First I would need to get a job, attending even a local college would be expensive." Pop set aside a quarter of the money he received from Child Services to save for school but Torgo knew how little it was. They barely got by on the income from Social Security and pop's pension. But mama always had this almost magical way to stretching money when it got tight.

"With your grades I think we should look into some scholarships first." Missa only imperfection was thinking everyone had the same priorities as her. It was just as well that she had at least one flaw, or else she would be too perfect to be real. Her beauty was undeniable but her true appeal was her intelligence and raw passion for learning. She inspired him to find enjoyment in studying when no teacher ever had before. "A job is all well and good but it should not interfere with your studies."

"Uh," Torgo cleared his throat. "I guess you're right..." The waiter suddenly arrived and served the appetizers, saving him from having to make life decisions. Honestly, the prospect of going off to school and leaving mama and pop by themselves didn't sit right with him. He was their last child before they reached an age when they were too old to foster. His parents would've adopted him if they could afford it but he didn't need a piece of paper to tell him they were his family. They were getting on in years and it was becoming his responsibility to take care of them. The waiter took their entree orders and left them again.

"Listen to us droning on about school," Dany thankfully agreed with his hope they'd change the subject. "We're boring the boys to death - let's talk about anything else." Drogo amusingly refused to try the snails but did tolerate the brie. Torgo watched Missa as she used a tiny fork to expertly remove the escargot and popped it in her mouth. He imitated her and found the snail chewy and flavorful but altogether alright. "I have an exciting hour planned for tomorrow," Dany continued to carry the conversation as they ate.

"I'm really looking forward to it," Torgo perked up, honestly more comfortable in a fantasy world than in the real one. "Give us a hint," he begged as he dished another escargot onto his plate, "will we face the Devourer?"

"I never reveal my secrets, Torgo." Dany wagged a finger and shook her head with a smug look on her face. "I can guarantee it will be action-packed. For which you can thank Drogo," she shot a wry look in her boyfriend's direction, "he just would not shut up about what a boring DM I am. On and on he went, endlessly nagging."
"I think you exaggerate," Torgo accused playfully. But then he miscalculated the maneuvering of his tiny fork and the snail shell slipped off his plate.

"Naturally," Dany quirked a brow and smirked at his trouble, "that's a sign of a great story-teller."

"We are ready for battle," Drogo added solemnly, he could always be counted on to take the game seriously.

"I've never looked forward to school so much," Torgo laughed as he wrangled his buttery snail back onto his plate.

"I hate to be a stick in the mud but none of you can afford to be skipping so often," Missa scolded. "Once a week is excessive!"

"You are being a stick in the mud," Dany chided. "Besides, I told counselor Melisandre that I needed a free study period."

"And for me I'm only skipping gym." Torgo hastily added his excuse, disinclined to bear Missa's classic worried-but-a-bit-disappointed stare-sigh-shrug combo. That was her unblockable move, a power for which he had no defense. "I can make up the credit this summer."

"I don't approve," Missa's narrowed dark eyes slid between Dany and Torgo. Then her expression relaxed into reluctant resignation. "But I won't lecture either. What class are you skipping, Drogo?"

"English," he replied in his thick Dothraki accent and the other three erupted with laughter. Torgo covered his mouth to try and muffle his laughing.

"Oh," Dany panted to catch her breath. "Forgive me, my dear, I'm not making fun. Your English is far better than my Dothraki could ever be."

"That is true," Drogo gazed down at Dany with an expression resembling amusement. Still, Torgo never saw the big guy smiling so much, if that tiny smirk could be called 'smiling'.

"Listen to him, and this from my tutor." Dany crossed her arms and scowled playfully at Drogo. "I might as well have Missa learn Dothraki and then have her teach me."

"I know a few phrases," Missa interjected.

"How?" Dany's jaw unhinged as she stared at Missa, her arms falling lose from their stubborn position. "I'm calling your bluff."

"Aena shekhikhi, hash yer dothrae chek? Fonas chek!" The Dothraki rolled off Missa's tongue like she was born speaking it and the whole table stared at her in amazement. "Just simple expressions really."

"Your pronunciation is much better than mine," Dany grumbled.

"Her tongue is sharp enough for Dothraki," Drogo actually managed a full sentence that had nothing to do with DnD. Dany's influence was indeed powerful and Torgo was in awe of how much his friend had changed.

"Here we go again with the softness of my tongue," Dany poked Drogo's arm. "I'll show you just how sharp-tonged I can be! Anha vassik yera ma zirisselat lekh." Drogo actually chuckled quietly! In the years had they been friends Torgo could count on one hand the number of times Drogo laughed. And they spent the majority of their time together playing a game!
"What did you say?" Torgo leaned forward on the table, eager to learn what she said.

"I will defeat you and cut off your tongue," Dany translated proudly.

"Not zirisselat - 'azirissek'." Drogo monotone correction wiped the confident smile off Dany's face and Torgo laugh at her pouting. Why was he ever nervous about this double date? But just then Missa joined in, her breathy demure laughter caused his chest to seize and left him completely awestruck. Oh, that's right... He was reaching so far above his level it wasn't even funny.

Chapter End Notes

I'M BACK IN THE SADDLE AGAIN!!! Now we're getting warmed up! With the move and the holiday over I am honestly only too glad returning to bask in the white-blue glow of my laptop (ah, delightful isolation). It was one thing after another! My iPad was severely wounded - a shattered screen. Did you know Batteries Plus fixes broken glass screens fast for a fair price?! Aigoo, they saved me! That's neither here nor there - just a tip. Then it took three Comcast techs to get my internet working properly. I can't live without internets! I have an important fanfic chapter to post!!!

Several commenters have questioned how to find the items I use in my collages (sorry for being lax in answering; best of intentions and all that). Basically, I use a website: polyvore.com. If you click on the specific collage it should be linked to the Polyvore page, from there you can see all the items that were used to make the image. No 100% guarantee that the item you want will be available for purchase but do a little exploring on the site and you can find 'similar' items by the same designer or in the same style. Happy hunting! Oh, and don't get hooked on making collages like me!
Brighter than the Moon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Brighter than the Moon

DROGO

The ride home went quietly, except for the unsteady thumping of his reliable but aged truck. The moon hung high and bright in the sky, lighting the road as if paved with silver. The long stretch of road inspired deep thoughts to run like a river in his mind. Memories of home often invaded his mind lately, though he never thought of Bravos as 'home' when he lived there. His people were his 'home' as they held no nation of their own. Dothraki once had such a strong culture that all the neighboring peoples trembled to hear their name spoken.

Then a new world came, a world that rode towards peace and those who lived to fight only brought sadness to the blood of their blood. This time of peace was not meant for Drogo and his hot blood caused insolence to his father and mother. He brawled in the streets of Bravos because he was never welcome among the Bravosi citizens. They considered his kind as less than dogs. They were once strong warriors, but as refugees, his people were called lazy, violent drunks. Most Dothraki felt shame for their heritage and lived falsely as if as born of another culture.

Drogo's father begged him to cut his hair and hide the tattoos representing his heritage, but he refused to be ashamed of his own blood. Then he shed too much of that proud blood and almost lost his life. In the end, he obeyed the command of his father to cross the Narrow Sea to Westeros. After arriving, his heart still beat for the old times, but no longer. A life of rebellion and fighting cannot please him if the night sky is dark. Without Dany, his darkness can never be brightened with the hollow victory of petty rivalry.

"That was fun," her voice was a soft breath of wind that blew through his thoughts, "don't you think?" His woman was strong and fierce - it is known - truth is hers to demand as the ruler of his heart.

"No." If he blew untruth into her ears she might be appeased for a time. Then his mount would turn to a goat and she would ride further ahead because he would not be worthy of riding beside her.

"I know it is not your cup of tea," the meaning of her words escaped his grasp.

"Tea?" What did a hot drink have to do with fun? It was water he drank when they ate...

"Sorry, idioms are our downfall." Her words raced forth from her lips but his ears hunted them too slowly. "I meant that I know you dislike such activities." Idiom means 'common saying'... But before he could piece together her whole meaning, she continued. "However, I do think we make an attractive couple. I hardly ever get to dress up any more so I put in a lot of effort tonight. Did you notice?" Though her words ambled lazily through the foggy field of his mind, he caught their tails and captured their meaning.

"Yer zheanae sekke," this truth came more easily and not only because it was told in his tongue - her beauty was easy to see. "Zhey shekhikhan tihat yom jalansoon." Even as the moon galloped across
the sky, its light could never compare with Dany's brightness. The first time his eyes laid on her, a shadowed figure in the blinding light of the doorway, lighting his dark retreat. That light never went out - only shone brighter the more he watched her.

"Yer chomoe anna," she inclined her head in a small bow. "You know, we have not discussed our plans for after graduation... Even thought I have absolutely no idea what I am doing... I don't want us to be apart," her last words whispered soft as summer breeze.

"I will go where you go and work there," a man had to use his strength after all. What other choice did he have but to stay in her light? For what reason did the Great Stallion send him across the water, if not to meet her?

"Really?!" Her distrust no longer offended him, only heartened his will to earn her faith. "Do you mean that? You will come with me?"

"I mean what I say," he said again - and would say the words as many times as she needed to hear them. Dany unfastened her seatbelt and slid across the seat to lean her silvery head against his shoulder.

"I wish this old truck moved a little faster," she covered her yawn with a hand.

"Sleep," he told her, "I will wake you."

"Just for a bit," she drifted off into her dreams as he drove them to the ranch and at least his thoughts left him in peace. The house was already dark - ranch work hours always meant sleeping early - and he parked out front. Drogo eased her limp head from his shoulder onto the headrest before getting out to walk around the truck and open her door. Dany stirred, rubbing her eyes before smiling at him, looking more a child swaddled in her drowsiness.

"I'm fully awake now," she told him but then smiled and held out her arms to be carried. Drogo gathered her light weight into his arms, carried her into the house, and back into his room. He set her down and Dany held onto his shoulders as she looked up at him expectantly. "Drogo, ezzolat anni lekh dothraki." It was clear that his woman envied her friend's natural skill with language.

"Ajjin?" It pleased him, her interest in learning the Dothraki tongue, but the late hour made her tired. "Yer ray haqeqqe," he said it with concern but she shook her head to deny the plain truth.

"Anni ezolat alikh kijinosi," she pulled off her jacket and let it fall to the floor before reaching out to remove his. Dany pushed the leather from his shoulders and his coat joined hers on the ground. "Kisha vos zigereo qemmosor zimemelat anna." It pleased him even more that she preferred their lessons unclothed. Drogo watched her unhurried fluid motions as she removed her adornments. She set the jewelry atop a dresser before returning to stand before him. He waited for her to remove his clothes, as she seemed to enjoy the task and so did he.

Impatience shone in her eyes but her movements were unhurried as she unbound the buttons to his shirt. The soft skin of her fingertips skimmed down his revealed chest and stomach. Already his manhood grew strong and ached to be within her. Her light and beauty pulled him to her with fierce attraction that went unchallenged. To fight his own happiness was a failing he would tolerate no longer. His heavy breath was drawn into her lungs and he felt jealous of his own exhale for becoming part of her.

When his body was free of all covering, she stepped back to admire him and he allowed it because it pleased him to satisfy her hungry eyes. Before his patience died out, she finally shed her own dress and undergarments to reveal her heavenly form. Dany was the very image of the mother of
mountains, her eyes shining like stars. Her silver-white hair floated around her shoulders like a cloud. All but her body fell aside from his vision - all solid things and even the passing of time floated away.

Not in her tongue or his could he speak the words to express the peace and calm her perfection instilled in his heart. All of her was flawless, soft, and delicate but from within shone the strength of a warrior. The air between them thinned and heated, both of them peering through heavy breath but delaying contact. And he could wait no longer to touch her, lifting his hand to trace the slope of her collarbone. At his first touch, she shivered and released a soft encouraging moan that nearly undid his calm but Drogo stayed strong.

"Hash fin jin?" He lowered his hand to hold onto hers, testing her knowledge while allowing only the slightest touch.

"Qora anni," she answered in the right way and moved closer so he could feel the warmth of her breath washing over his chest.

"Ma jin?" His fingers glided up her smooth arm and he waited for her answer.

"Qorraya," her voice trembled and he slid his touch higher to her shoulder and waited for her answer. "Elme," the word caught in her throat as his fingertips grazed up her neck. "Lenta," she whimpered and moved closer so that their bodies almost touched. She tilted her head back, closing her eyes - an invitation to kiss. Drogo traced the soft curve of her cheek, which lifted as her mouth curled into a smile. "Dech," her lowered eyelashes fluttered as he lightly traced the delicate skin of her eyelid. "Tih," she whispered the word for 'eye'.

"Qemmotihan," he taught her the word for 'eyelid' as he tucked her snowy hair behind her ear. She appeared as a goddess of winter but never felt cold - she burned hotter than any flame. Her eyelashes opened and even in the dim, their purple brightness shimmered. "Tihi yeroon zheanae." Drogo would never tire of gazing at her beautiful eyes - they burned with light that rivaled the stars. "Ma sekke lainat." The backs of his fingers grazed down the side of her face and he traced her plump lower lip with his thumb.

"Gomma," she answered the word for 'mouth'.

"Heth," he improved her answer to the word for 'lips'. "Ma has lekh mra," he teased her, recognizing that her tongue had become sharper.

"Sekosshi kisha vastoki vos alikh," she took in quick breaths between her words, "shekh ma shieraki anni." His woman's patience had reached its end, though she was the one who insisted on words in the first place. She never once showed shame for her passion in front of him and her eagerness suited him as he was impatient as well.

"Fin yer zalat," he pretended not to know what she wanted, "zhey jalan atthirari anni?"

"Zoqwa anna," she demanded and he pressed his mouth over hers, granting the kiss she craved. Their lips came together as their limbs entwined, an attack of hands clutching tightly and arms linking. Her soft tongue searched for his as her small fingers squeezed his shoulders until all he could taste, touch, and feel was her. Drogo dragged himself from her honeyed mouth to catch his breath.

"Yer lekh gizikhven ven gizikh," he praised her sweetness as his lips trailed lower. He kissed the soft skin under her ear and her scent increased his hunger as he gently nipped her neck. She gave voice to her desperation with small whimpers that panted from her kiss-swollen lips.
Drogo felt her warm palms sliding over his shoulders as his mouth pressed over her thundering heart and she pushed her hands into his hair. He bent towards her as a tree does when pulled by a gust of wind and she shivered as one hand released her waist to cup her breast. Her fingers tangled in his hair as his arm circled around her slim waist and his mouth tasted the rosy tip of her soft flesh. Dany melted in his arms, her hair flowing back as her strength failed. She moaned and clutched his arms as he lifting her closer to continue teasing her with his tongue.

"Please, Drogo, I need-!" Her breathless plea was silenced when he moved his mouth up to cover hers and she opened to his tongue's attack. Dany lifted herself up by clinging to his shoulders and freed his hands to wander over her body. His touch was rushed at first but then slowed, wanting to keep her in his hands longer. He teasingly caressed her breast while his other hand lost itself in the softness of her hair. His hands wanted to explore his treasured one but they were defeated by impatience. They lowered first to her hips to tug her close and then slipped behind her thighs.

She moaned as he slid her legs around his hips and lifted her up into his arms. His hands held her thighs as he carried her to the bed and supported her with one arm to lay her down. Drogo braced against the mattress and gazed down at her, wanting to cover her body with his but never wanting her hidden from his eyes. Her limp hands fell from his neck to spread out helpless onto the pillows as she stared up at him with unashamed longing in her eyes. At that look, his need to possess her overwhelmed any other desires.

He covered her body with his and curled his arm around her waist, molding her soft form to him. Dany welcomed him, soft thighs cradling his hips as she arched her body to fit his and curled her hands around his shoulders. His free hand guided his manhood to the slick heat between her legs and he groaned as she writhed in his hold, impatient to receive him. She tilted her hips to accept his first deep thrust and her fingers tangled in his hair, demanding his mouth on hers.

Drogo embraced her close to capture her sweet lips again, their quickened breaths mingling as their tongues met. His tongue pushed against hers as he matched every driving thrust deeper inside her. She was as a woman drowning, gasping for breath, and struggling to match the pace of his body surging against hers. He was the sea, creating waves that crashed over her and plundered the air from her lungs and still she demanded more.

Her fingertips dug into his back as she curled against him and abandoned herself in the desperate attempt to match his pace. Her hands grasped his shoulders she rocked against him, throwing her head back to cry out her pleasure. He tightened his arm around her waist and she moaned eagerly, arching against his chest as he embraced her closer. Then her body felt limp and she began to tremble as her cries grew louder and her womanhood clenched around him.

She wanted her release too soon and his would certainly follow but he was not ready to let her go yet. He rolled onto his back, bringing her on top of his chest. She rested to catch her breath, craning her neck to kiss his throat as he caressed the soft skin of her spine. He molded his hands down her back and over her legs before returning one hand to the silken waves of her hair. She shivered in response to his gentle touch before lifting her head to seek his lips once more.

He cupped the back of her head as she languidly kissed him. He opened his mouth against hers and her tongue flitted between his lips before pulling away. She slid her legs down to brace against the mattress and pushed against his chest to lift herself up. Dany rose like a showery white cloud riding the dawn, blurring his eyes, and heightening his senses. His hands found her hips but he did not seek to guide her movement, waiting for her to take control.

Her soft hands roamed his body, tracing down the lines of his chest and stomach and causing his manhood to throb within her. His conscious thoughts were lost to the clasping hot flesh, drawing him
in and holding all of his attention. He lifted one hand to cup her breast, causing her to release an 
eager gasp as he kneaded the soft flesh. Her head fell back as she rocked once onto his manhood and 
he felt her body trembling.

As she rose once more onto her knees and then fell again as he thrust into her wet heat. Saddled in 
her place above him, she moved with perfect balance, both submitting to and controlling him. His 
hand clung to the curve of her waist to urge her to roll her hips, slowly retreating, and then returning. 
The flow of her body drew him deeper within her as she rose and fell, dominating him and 
surrendering to him.

Her desire blew through him like the wind as winds twist and turn without ever being caught or 
controlled. Passion overwhelmed her and she wailed her desperation, shivering and writhing as if 
caught in her own storm. He went to her then, rising up to meet her as she wrapped her arms around 
his shoulders and buried his face against her neck, slipping a hand between their bodies. One muted 
cry escaped her lips as his fingers encircled the pulsing flesh between her legs and gently teased her.

For a moment, all was still except for the slow circling of his fingertips then the eye of the storm 
passed. Her release ripped through her thrashing body, accompanied by a sweet cry to announce her 
pleasure. Soon he joined her, climbing the heights of ecstasy, moaning into her hair until she 
collapsed against him. All was calm once more as he fell back against the mattress, bringing her 
down with him. His palm rested on her back as it rose and fell with her heavy breath that matched 
his. The solid world returned around them and time continued its passing.

If fate should part him from Dany - the memory of her soft skin against his would remain with him 
forever. Her love, though only shown and not spoken... was life. The control this woman had over 
him frightened him more than when he lay bleeding in the streets of Bravos. Not because he was 
worried she might abuse her power over him, but that he might be dismissed from her side one day. 
To be removed from her light was to return to the dark - he would truly experience loneliness only 
after knowing love.

"Yer allayafat anna norethaan," she murmured her contentment against his neck "shekh ma shieraki 
anni."

"Hazi davrae," he lightly trailed his fingers through her loose hair. He wanted her for his own from 
the first time he saw her - a beautiful balance of strength and vulnerability. Drogo longed to hear that 
she felt the same love for him but the pain of her past blocked her confession. Until that blissful time 
came, the sweet words of soft Dothraki she whispered would be enough.

Chapter End Notes

OMGOAN (oh my gods old and new) a Drogo POV chapter - I never thought I would 
do it (for good reason, it was stupid hard)! On the bright side, I think my Dothraki is 
actually getting better but I'm sure it's still horribly wrong. My goal for the month of 
December is to post a chapter every day until Christmas Eve - that means ~22 chapters 
in the next ~3 weeks! Can I do it? Yes, I can! (Possibly.) <3 I'm ready for the next *80*
chapters - let's do it!
The moment Jon entered the room he noticed the palpable tension between Arya and Gendry. For one thing, they were sitting next to each other but as far apart as possible. She was leaning back in her chair with her feet up on the table and a scowl on her face. He was hunched over his backpack and staring into nothingness.

"What's with them?" Jon elbowed Hot Pie as he sat down beside him and pointed to the miserable couple. Was it too much to hope they broke up?! Did that make him a horrible person? Probably.

"Dunno, Gendry's been a right loaf lately," Hot Pie sulked: the two guys had been inseparable before Arya came along. "Think they've been on the outs." Jon suspected that the pair argued and thought about getting answers out of Gendry but decided to mind his own business. Arya was the one who insisted she didn't need his interference. "Never had a girlfriend myself but it seems more trouble than it's wurf."

"I wouldn't say that," Jon smiled as he thought of Ygritte: she was plenty of trouble and totally worth it. "If you ever meet a girl you like more than baking you'll understand then."

"I won't hold my breff," Hot Pie chuckled.

"Alright, gang!" Dany held her hands up to gain the group's attention. "Are we ready to get started?" There were nods all around the table. "You are heading up the side of the Potaro Mountain, where blizzards rage year-round..." The snow crunched under their feet as the group slowly trudged up the side of the blustery mountain. The Protector was leading them to the Ice Witch: known for granting prophecies to whoever summoned her. It was said that she spent her existence frozen under the lake in the hollowed center of the mountain.

When they reached the lake, the group followed The Protector and Grey Worm out to the center, the ice was just thick enough to walk on. The High Elf crouched down and wiped away the snow covering the ice to reveal a sequence of cracks that formed a star. He placed his hand over the star and began to murmur a chant. Suddenly the cracks grew from his hand and the whole group stepped back. The ice started falling in on itself, opening into a black inky pool of darkness. As the group moved back, a shadowy gray figure began to emerge from the depthless water.

The moment the Ice Witch stepped onto the ice a thin layer of frost covered her entire body, giving her the appearance of a ghost. Snow was frozen where he stood as the witch moved directly towards him, staring into his eyes. She stood so close that he could feel her cold breath on his face. Then her pale colorless irises rolled back into her head and her eyes turned black.

"The Arena is not as it Appears," the voice that croaked from the Ice Witch's mouth was inhuman. "A wolf senses what Eyes cannot see," she gasped a deep breath. "Other's eyes see a child who can bring The End. She must challenge The One who consumes and herself." A hollow rattling sound sounded inside the witch's chest. "The moon and stars see Failure as darkness lives to destroy light. Only Victory in the sunlight will reveal a half-breed's fraud and a New Path." The witch shuddered
and blinked after the last word and her eyes returned to normal.

"Why does it always have to be so cryptic," Arry complained, "can't you draw us a bloody map or something?" Snow didn't know how the Halfling was so unaffected by the witch's terrifying appearance. But then again, he was the one within arm's reach of the creature.

"Please," Nhee begged from behind him, "tell us something more. How can I save my sister?"

"Child," the Ice Witch pointed at Nhee and crooked her gnarled finger, "come forward." The youngling approached the Ice Witch, blatant fear coloring her features as she moved past Snow. "Fire burns in your heart yet you have no faith. Neither in your companions nor even in yourself," The witch bent down the so that her face was almost touching Nhee's. "Why did you come such a long way from home, child?"

"To save my sister!" Nhee bucked her chin up to show she wasn't afraid. "And I am not a child!"

"We shall see what you are before the day ends." The witch whispered so quietly that Snow wouldn't have heard them if he was not standing so close. The Ice Witch's cold eyes turned onto him again and Snow felt a chill run up his spine. "If you fail to defeat The Devourer before dusk, it will not be destroyed in this child's lifetime."

"Dragonborn live a long time," Nhee's brave expression fell.

"Then we best hurry." Snow reached out to grab the youngling's arm and pulled her to his side. "Thank you," he told the witch, not wanting to offend such a powerful creature.

"Don't thank me yet," the Ice Witch smiled horribly. "We will meet again, Snow." He turned away without another word and started to lead the group down the mountain, away from the frozen lake.

"I dunno about all've you," Hot Pie broke the group's silence. "But I've no idea what she was sayin'!" Snow glanced to The Protector and saw the Dragonborn man lost in deep thought. None spoke up to answer the Dwarf's query about the meaning of the Ice Witch's prophecy. They continued down the mountain when Nymeria suddenly sniffed the air and took off running.

"Nymeria!" Arry screamed after her pet but it did not halt so the Halfling took off after the beast.

"Arry!" Of course, Gendry followed the Halfling: soon the entire group was chasing the wolf. A large structure appeared on the horizon, held up by glittering white pillars. Snow knew that the building could only be The Arena, though it was covered with snow it smelled like flowers. The wolf must have followed that scent and led them there... He blew out a nervous breath as they drew near the mysterious building.

"It should be me who holds the soul-eater," Arry insisted when they approached the giant stone doors. On both sides of the entryway, veiled statues gazed down on them sorrowfully and made Snow feel even more nervous.

"How'd you figure that?" Gendry crossed his arms and looked down on the Halfling.

"First, it was my wolf who led us here - just like the prophecy said," she sneered up at the Blacksmith. "That witch also said 'the child in other's eyes' will end The Devourer... Look - I don't really believe this fairytale Boccob prophecy bullshit... But something pulled me to steal that bead and I've never felt anything like it before or since. Maybe I was meant to use it to defeat The Devourer and save Khaleesi."

"I agree that Arry is the one who should hold the soul-eater." Grey Worm spoke up, looking around
the group with a serious expression. "Speak now if you object." No one else said a word. "Very well," he opened his pouch and handed the bead to Arry. "Keep it safe, Wolfborn." She nodded seriously, as she accepted the bead, placing it in her pocket before striding to the door with confidence. Arry grabbed ahold of the handle and pulled the door open. Standing outside The Arena and looking in, the group admired the room's opulence with awe as they stepped inside.

"What the hells?!" Arry searched herself for her dagger and Jon realized that all of their weapons had vanished.

"Weapons cannot be brought into the Arena," The Protector informed them gravely.

"Then how do we fight?!" Arry's irritation was obvious and Snow shared it.

"Go to the altar in the center and think of the weapon you want most." The Protector pointed to the center of the marble covered floor. A large wooden table stood in the center of the room. "It will appear." The Dragonborn suddenly looked behind himself, as if hearing something. "The Devourer is here, I can feel its presence. We exist now on two planes of reality and will not be revealed to each other until the weapons are chosen." He bowed his head and walked to a quiet corner to kneel and pray.

Drogo was the first to approach the altar and the instant he stood in front of it an Orcish axe appeared on the table. Gendry went next: he stared at the altar for a time before a golden warhammer materialized. Arry followed hot on the Blacksmith's heels impatiently, her weapon was also made of gold, a crossbow. Soon Snow would have to choose a weapon as well but his mind went back and forth, troubled by indecision.

The choice of weapon could make or break a battle, rendering any or all members of their group useless if The Devourer was clever. And The Devourer was always clever. Grey Worm came back from the altar with a silver staff in his hand but an unsure expression on his face. Pod predictably acquired a quarterstaff, bearing the markings of his deity. But as Hot Pie walked away from the altar Snow noticed what he held in his hands. Oh, for the love of the gods!

"Hot Pie!" The dumbass Dwarf was carrying his namesake: a hot pie! The pastry had a thin stream of steam curling out from the vent in the center of the crust. Snow held out his hands in an incredulous gesture at his friend's odd choice of 'weapon'. What was he gonna do with it, throw it at The Devourer so that she gets all messy?!

"I couldn't help it," he protested pitifully. "I was so hungry and tired! It just sorta popped into my head that I wanted a nice warm pie to give me strength before the battle." Hot Pie held up the platter and the sweet scent of pastry filled Snow's nostrils. "You want some?" Actually... it did smell really good and his stomach started growling.

"Gods save us all." Snow released a heavy sigh, feeling even less confident as he brushed past his comrades to approach the altar. He only had to stand there a moment when he thought back of the dagger that his father gave to him. It wasn't anything special but it had a nice sharp edge and a balanced handle: too bad, he lost it in his earlier adventures. Then, exactly as it was before, the dagger appeared in its scabbard. Awed by the altar's power to read his mind, he returned to the group and handed the dagger to Hot Pie. "Here, use this and cut me off a slice."

"Me too!" Nhee licked her lips and moved closer as Hot Pie side cut her a slice and handed it to her. Then he passed over another slice to Snow and the first bite was... amazing! "This is the best pie I've ever had," Nhee exclaimed, "and I feel somehow... stronger."

"As do I," Snow took another bite and felt his whole body invigorated with energy! "Everyone, I
never thought I'd say these words: this is a magic pie. We should all have a slice before the battle." He helped Hot Pie pass out the pie to the group.

"Guess I did alright then." Hot Pie grinned like a fool and Snow saved his lectures: maybe this enchanted pastry would actually help them.

"Now that we've eaten the magic pie," he wiped the crumbs from his mouth and looked around the group. "Who's left?"

"Me," Nhee replied in a small voice, hands clasped behind her back and staring at her feet.

"Go ahead then," Grey Worm gently encouraged the girl. She plodded slowly towards the altar with her head bowed forward. After a long while, the girl returned to the group with seemingly nothing. Snow did not want to damage the child's confidence anymore so he did not mention her apparent lack of weaponry.

"I've been waiting for so long," The Devourer suddenly appeared, her voice sickly sweet and cold as ice. "I made my choice the instant I approached the altar." She held out her hand and a ball of flame flashed above her palm. "Isn't the Dragonborn's natural immunity to fire fascinating?" The flame spread up her arm and then it engulfed her whole body as she walked around the altar. "I have waited many lifetimes to possess a body as strong as this one."

"Strength is often and illusion," The Protector responded quietly.

"Ixen Fethos!" The Devourer threw up her arm and the flame covering her form flew upwards, exploding and showering down into a veil of fire around her. "Did you really think you actually defeated me before? I have used you, bent you to my will... All has gone according to my design! I know that you have the hand. Who do you think told The Keeper to let you have it? The hand cannot pass through fire, therefore you have already lost. Admit your defeat-!" Her arrogant taunting suddenly cut off when she grabbed the sides of her head as if in pain. "AGH!"

"Hurry..." The Devourer suddenly fell to her knees and her shield fell with her, burning bright blue before disappearing. "I can't hold... much... longer!" The voice that came from her throat was softer and familiar... Khaleesi?

"Khaleesi!" Nhee took a step towards her sister, hand outstretched.

"Ixen Fethos!" The Devourer regained control and rose to her feet, flames rising around her. "Be still and obey me!" She slapped her own face and only then did Snow truly understand Khaleesi's circumstances: she was conscious and felt everything.

"You are weakening, Devourer." The Protector stepped forward, his voice calm and assured. "None but Boccob can live within the chosen Savior. This time... you will be the one consumed."

"I am stronger than ever," she screeched and the flames surrounded her, forming a sphere of fire. "All shall tremble at my power!" The ground shook beneath Snow's feet as he clutched the useless dagger in his hand. His last hope was lost... What possible defense could they have against this level of power? The flames licked outward onto the ground, driving the group backwards. Once again, the Devourer's shield burst apart and she spoke as Khaleesi.

"I will not let you use me," her voice was weak but grew stronger, "I am in control!" Arry burst into action, sprinting across the room and vaulting over the altar to jump onto their weakened enemy. Just as the Halfling was passing the fallen shield, The Devourer recovered control.

"Ixen Fethos!" The Devourer's protective spell obviously took great effort but still sent Arry went
flying backwards and caught her tunic's sleeve on fire.

"Arry!" Gendry rushed to her side to smother the flame with his cloak.

"Nhee?" The Devourer called out in a soft voice but Snow could hear the cold edge underneath. "Nhee, is that you?" The flare shield flickered but did not extinguish, only continued outwards so that the group had to retreat. "I am trying so hard to fight..." She held out her hand towards Nhee, stumbling a bit in her obvious exhaustion. "Come to me, help me..." The girl started to step forward to meet the flames of the shield.

"Nhee, no!" Pod tried to stop her, stepping dangerously close to the fire, but she slipped from his grasp. "It's a trap!" The Protector explained that if The Devourer changed hosts, it would consume Khaleesi's power. She would be lost to them forever and the new host would be even stronger. Arry sprung up from her the floor and grabbed the hem of the child's cloak just before she passed through the flame shield.

"Don't try and stop me!" Nhee whirled around and threw herself at Arry, talking the Halfling to the ground. The Dragonborn girl broke out of Arry's hold and rolled through the flames. "Sister, tell me how I can help you?" She stood and moved to approach The Devourer as the group shouted for her to run.

"You already have!" The Devourer grabbed the young Dragonborn by the scruff of her neck. "Your sister is strong - she tries to fight my will and blocks her true power. You are but a weak little child - with me inside you, we will be stronger than you can imagine! Even your sister is disgusted by your weakness! At least now, you shall serve my purpose for a time. Don't fight it," her voice lowered into a mockery of a mother's soothing, "accept the inevitable." The Devourer laughed evilly and then began and incantation, black smoke billowing from her mouth. "Cuigna tija! Si geou clax dout mamiss jaka!"

"I am not weak," the child wailed and tried to pull free. "Please, Khaleesi! Take control - save me!" No matter how the girl squirmed or fought The Devourer did not relent, moving her open mouth towards Nhee's terrified face.

"NOW!" Arry screamed and the Dragonborn girl suddenly thrust her fist into The Devourer's mouth!

"Devour this!" Nhee had shoved the soul-eater down The Devourer's throat!

"Ah!" The shield disappeared as The Devourer released Nhee, dropping her to the stone floor. "NO," she croaked and clutched her throat as if choking. "Noooooooooo-!" Suddenly, Khaleesi's body went rigid and her head tilted back to exhale a gust of black smoke from her open mouth. When all of the smoke had dissipated, Khaleesi crumpled to the ground. Then the Arena melted away into a dark lush forest, full of flowers that appeared around Khaleesi. A light blue mist rose from the spot where she lay and seemed to lift her up into the air onto her feet.

"Khaleesi?" Nhee ran forward to her sister as the blue mist thickened before a gust of wind blew it away. There stood Khaleesi, as they once knew her, no longer stained with the darkness of The Devourer. "Come back to me!" Nhee took her sister's hand and tugged on it.

"Nhee?" Khaleesi blinked a few times before her eyes fully opened and looked down on her sister. "You saved me," she smiled and cupped Nhee's cheek. "I'm so proud of you."

"Don't leave me again!" Nhee threw her arms around her sister.

"I'm sorry, Nhee." Khaleesi patted her sister's head and gazed down at the child with a wistful
expression. "I would never willingly leave you. But you must understand that I was born to be The Savior of our people when the time comes I will be The Protector - it is my duty and an honor."

"No..." Nhee began to cry, pleading with her sister. "Please, let someone else do it, don't leave me all alone!"

"You are so brave and strong," Khaleesi tearfully smiled around at the group before returning her focus on Nhee, "and you are never alone." She looked up once more as Drogo approached the sisters. "While I was one with The Devourer it could not hide its thoughts from me - your people are in grave danger. You must return to the position you were born to... as must I." Her hands gently untangled Nhee's embrace. "Be well, sweet sister." Then the same blue mist that restored Khaleesi swirled around her and carried her into the wind.

"No! Khaleesi!" Nhee tried in vain to catch the mist, tears streaming down her face. Arry caught the girl just as she tripped over her own feet. The Halfling glanced around the group in a panic, trying to comfort Nhee as the youngling wept miserably.

"What did she mean, Drogo?" Jon had to speak up to be heard over Nhee's pitiful wailing. Instead of being answered by the Orc, another voice spoke up.

"It seems the time has come to reveal the truth," Grey Worm lowered onto one knee before Drogo, "Prince Drogo." The bell rang.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sure the DnD chapters aren't everyone's *thing* but they are very cleansing for me, allowing me to flex my imagination. I'd say the biggest challenge to writing an "epic" fanfic is squeezing every drop of creativity is out of my muse while other sparks of inspiration (for other fics) keep popping into my head. But I'm feeling good about keeping my December goal! Next up is my boy Gendry: Chapter titled, "No Problem".
The school week passed at a snail's pace, the Monday DnD game being last time he saw Arya but they didn't talk much since then. When she texted him out of the blue Friday morning, asking him to skip school with her, his heart surged with joy. Sure, maybe they shouldn't skip but he'd take just about any kind of break when it came to Arry. They were... not quite 'broken up' but severely 'bent' to the point of almost breaking. So drastic times call for drastic measures. Gendry waited in his car for her at school and when she showed up, he promised her a fun-filled day.

He was determined to show her a good time so he took her to the most fun place in Kings Landing: the junkyard. Arya was still a bit distant but at least her mood improved, though she had been unusually quiet... In truth, this quietness was becoming unsettling 'usual'. When he told her their destination she actually seemed excited by to go look for scrap metal. But she made sure to keep her distance and that was the biggest difference about her. Used to be, even when she looked like she wanted to kill him, it wouldn't be long before she was glued to him again. But he was fine with it: really, he was.

In the early hours, the air was cool enough to stay bundled in his jacket but the weather warmed slightly as the sun came up. Gendry carefully picked over various piles of junk, looking for suitable materials to be reformed into something new. It was pretty labor-intensive work to go through junk piles and sift through scraps. Before long, he shed his coat hung it over the wheelbarrow handles. They spent the morning filling up a wheelbarrow of scrap metal to purchase. Most of it would be wasted as he trained Arry to use the forge but it would be fun.

"How's this?!" She stood on a pile of junk and held up the hunk of metal over her head. It was nice to see Arya looking so happy and relaxed, digging through the junk like it was treasure. So what if she didn't want him anymore? A few times that familiar fire flashed in her eyes but then it snuffed out as quickly as it came. That didn't mean she didn't love him... really, he was fine.

"Great, toss it in the wheelbarrow!" Gendry walked to meet her because that last hunk of junk meant they had enough to leave. He put on his jacket, hoisted up the handles of the wheelbarrow, and she ambled quietly beside him as they went to pay for the scraps. Once everything was loaded into the car, they got in and headed towards the forge.

"I missed you," he finally broke the silence. What he really meant was: 'I miss the way we used to be when you couldn't get enough of me'. Gendry tried, he really gave it his best effort to sympathize with her state of mind. To him, they dodged a bullet by not being pregnant but to her it seemed like her whole world collapsed. This distance between them was invisible so he didn't have a clue how to fix it! He gave her space and still she pushed and pushed him away like he was her problem instead of her... What were they now?

"Yeah... me too," she didn't even put in the effort to try to sound like she meant it. Before, the anger and constant jumping down his throat for every little thing was getting a bit old. Now he just wished she'd yell at him instead of staring off at nothing. They both swore they loved each other but she didn't act like someone in love. Back when they were just friends she treated him better than she had
lately. The lack of radio in his car never used to be a problem because they always had something to talk about.

"Is it me: am I doing something wrong?" The best he could figure, she wanted to break up and go back to the way things were before, but she didn't know how. That left him struggling to hold them together alone while Arya did everything she could to pull them apart. "Arry?" Gendry glanced sideways at her to see her still staring off with a blank expression.

"Huh?" Arya turned and blinked at him like he just started speaking another language. "What do you mean?" Then some kind of understanding dawned on her and she nodded her head slowly as she turned back to look out her window. "Ah no, it's me - we don't have to hang if you'd rather not."

"I didn't mean that at all!" Okay, so maybe he wasn't 'fine'. But... so what? He didn't have to be fine: he just had to stay by her side. It's not like he could run away from her or even let her push him out of her life. Stay with Arya and eventually die, those were the two certainties in his life. "Please tell me what to do: anything."

"There's nothing to do," she answered quietly and the tone of her voice indicated the conversation was over. He might not be so 'fine' with the changes in Arya but he understood: everyone has these moments when they lose themselves. Gendry just had to remind her who she really was: confident, opinionated, bossy, perfect Arry who stole his heart. Because that was the girl he loved more than his own life and she was somewhere inside this frightened creature who took over her body.

She was just like an injured wolf snarling in the corner and ready to strike anyone who got too close. Gendry suspected that was what happened, he got too close: saw her vulnerable and she snapped instead of letting him help. Other people might not understand why he'd stay by her side but there wasn't a doubt in his head. When he said he loved her there was no silent 'but' or tiny asterisk indicating fine print loopholes. 'I love you until it gets too hard': that wasn't him. 'I'll love you even more when it gets too hard': that's what he meant when he said it.

His love was unconditional and unquestionable, as it should be. So he'd watch her struggle, accepting her snips and running away until she let him close again. And after it was all over and he had his girl back to her normal self there'd be no need for her to say sorry. 'I love you and will always forgive you': that's what he meant every time. And she'd do the exact same thing for him: he didn't doubt that for a second. She loved him, no matter how much she pushed him away, it was in her eyes: 'hold onto me, don't stop loving me'. Or, at least that's what he hoped.

Their silence continued for the rest of the ride and even as they unloaded the junk and put it away at the forge. Except for a few orders for how to organize the metals, neither of them spoke much at all. It made him appreciate how easy it used to be between them, when they told each other everything. Instead of getting upset that it wasn't like that anymore he just keep his eye on the prize. They would get over this... whatever it was, and get back to normal. That's just the way it had to be! When the work was done, they stood by the forge in awkward silence.

"It's hard to be around you," she spoke all of a sudden in a hushed tone, "I still want you but I'm... I'm scared." Was that it: she just got scared of being pregnant and that's why she didn't want to have sex? Of course, that made perfect sense! And she avoided him so she wouldn't be tempted or tortured... so it wasn't his fault at all. Gendry blew out a sigh of relief and smiled at her wide-eyed worried expression.

"We don't have to take any risks." Sex wasn't all that bloody important to him: not nearly as necessary as her smiling and happy. "If that's what's bothering you, there's other stuff we could do... you know, if you wanted."
"What are you thinking?" Arya stuffed her hands in her oversized jacket pockets and sauntered closer to look up at him with a raised eyebrow. That little spark in her eye was barely glinting but it was enough to make his heart pound. Was this it? Were they getting back to how it used to be?!

"I'd like to kiss you," he moved closer to her until they were standing so close they were almost touching. "Everywhere." She licked her lips and took the tiniest step towards him, lifting a hand to play with a button on his jacket. This was as close as they'd been in days and the nearness hurt in a good way. It was almost impossible not to drag her into his arms and lock her there but he had to let her come to him. Patience: something all blacksmiths possessed and he needed every bit of it to love Arya.

"But," her eyes turned down to focus on the center of his chest. "I would start begging and you'd give in because you are weak." Arya was the weak one who wouldn't be able to withstand it and she'd more likely be 'ordering' rather than 'begging'. Ah, the lack of faith she had in him was seriously fucked up. Sometimes he worried that he was too clingy but apparently, he had to be a lot more devoted.

"I swear on our eternal love," he took ahold of her hand, placed over his heart, and assumed his most solemn expression. "I won't give in no matter how much you beg."

"What do I get if you give in?" Leave it to Arry to try to turn this into a win-win situation for her.

"This isn't a contest," Gendry protested but he didn't really mind her feistiness.

"Then it's boring," she rolled her eyes and turned away but still held her hand and spun her around.

"Fine," he pulled her closer, seeing the hunger burning brightly in her eyes... she wouldn't be holding out much longer. "How about..." His eyes darted to the forge before he smiled at her: victory was at hand. "I'll make something for you?"

"Anything I want?" His greedy girl was always making the most impossible demands. Next thing he knew she'd be having him forging a rocket ship for her if he wasn't careful.

"Go easy," he pleaded.

"I reserve the right to name a 'reasonable' reward after I succeed," she smirked. Oh gods, that expression was his favorite one. Gendry gulped and did his best to feign aloofness: pretty soon, he'd be the one begging.

"You're going down," he challenged but then thought about his choice of words. "Actually, I think that'd be me." Arya rolled her eyes and slipped her hand into his to pull him along to the tent. Gendry just strolled along beside her but he was singing, dancing, and throwing flower petals on the inside.

"Gendry," she suddenly stopped and looked up at him, "no matter what I say, I don't want to have sex." Arya squeezed her eyes shut and blew out a heavy breath. "And I don't expect you to understand..."

"I do understand," he tightened his hold on her hand, "so please stop trying to push me away."

"You're not pissed at me?" Did she really think he'd get mad at her? What a 'stupid' boyfriend he must've been to earn such low regard from his lady.

"I want things to be okay between us so sometimes I get a little frustrated," he admitted. "But I'm not mad and it's not your fault."
"It is - but thanks for saying that anyway." One corner of her mouth lifted into a small smile before she continued leading the way to the tent. He ducked his head to step inside behind her and they both sat down to kick off their shoes before zipping the tent closed. Her coldness turned into a distant memory the instant the flap was zipped. She was already reaching for him, grasping the front of his jacket to shove him down before climbing into his lap. Gendry had probably been kissed by Arya in every way there was to kiss but this one beat them all.

It was so right, righter than anything had ever been before in the history of all histories. Her lips were warm and desperate as they moved over his while her hands jerked at his jacket, seemingly trying to rip it off. When he couldn't help but smile against her mouth she retaliated with a sharp nip of her teeth on his lower lip. It was like they communicated better without words: she was scolding him for not taking the kiss seriously enough. Oh, he was taking it plenty serious! Gendry burst into action, first ridding himself of his coat and then tugging off hers.

Once free from her jacket, her fingers curled around his head to tilt his face up and descended on his mouth. His hands wrapped around her hips, pulling her closer as she slid her arms around his head and pushed her tongue inside his mouth. Gendry thought he must be the world's biggest dumbass for promising he'd be strong enough to resist having her. Never in his life did he want anything more than he wanted her at that moment. He could feel her heart pounding inside her chest as it was crushed against his: she wanted him just as much. Gods, this was torture!

He couldn't help but slip his hands up from her hips under her t-shirt to feel her heated skin, feeling her body trembling. Wait... what the hells? His fingers felt past the soft warmth of her skin, noticing the prominence of her ribs. She was always small and slender but this didn't feel right at all... Gendry splayed his hand against her back and his palm met the sharp bumps of her spine. She noticed his distraction and immediately stiffened, breaking the kiss to stare hard at him.

"Bloody hells," he breathed in disbelief... Under her baggy clothes, his girl had wasted away to practically nothing and the worst part: he didn't notice how bad it was.

"I knew this was a stupid idea!" Arya pushed off of him and scrambled backwards towards the front of the tent. "Fine - fuck you, then!"

"Don't go," his hand shot out to curl around her wrist, unable to ignore how thin it felt. She yanked her hand away so hard that she fell back onto her ass, bumping into the front flap. "What... Why... How?" Gendry couldn't think of the right way to ask: 'why the fuck are you so bloody skinny like an emaciated twig’?!

"Shut up - you dumb fuck!" Arya shuddered and gulped between her words, her eyes wide with something between terror and rage. "You don't know anything!" Yeah, no shit, he didn't know what the hells was going on!

"I'm sorry..." What could he say? "I was just... surprised." Then the most bizarre thing happened: she curled her knees up, wrapped her arms around them, and set her head down to cry. Arya was crying! Like, not even a little bit but actually weeping! And he, world class boyfriend of the year that he was, sat there and stared like an idiot.

"You," she sobbed, "don't - know - anything!" Gendry felt completely lost and the only thing he could do was crawl next to her side and pull her into his arms, surprised that she let him.

"I'm so worried about you because you won't tell me anything." He tugged her into his lap and tucked her head under his chin. "Please, tell me what to do." Arya fought against her tears, covering her face like she could hide her sadness from him until she finally calmed.
"This feels good," she sniffled, hiding her face against his chest and clutching the front of his shirt. "It's just because I haven't felt good lately and I lose weight easy... it's not a big deal so please don't freak out." How could he not notice?! GodsDamn her baggy clothes and the winter chill and... No, it was his fault for not caring enough to pay closer attention. How could he be so selfish? What should he do?! "I decided to see another doctor next week - I'm trying and it's really hard so... Please, Gendry... please..."

"What?" Never in his life had he felt so lost and scared, not even ten years ago when he wandered away from mom during his first trip to the Kings Landing mall. "I'll do anything, just tell me."

"Don't stop loving me..." Her muffled voice was so small and weak that he can hardly believe this was the same person who used to push him around every day. Who knew he would miss her harsh treatment so much? Gendry was so happy when she was threatening him and using insults as terms of endearments. "I need you," she whispered.

"You don't have to ask for me to love you: I couldn't stop if I tried." Gendry tried his best to keep the tightness in his throat out of his voice. "I need you too." Didn't she realize he was nothing without her? "Stay with me tonight," the invitation was always open but the words spilled from his mouth anyway. Arya was quiet for a long while and he looked down to check if she fell asleep but saw her eyes open. "You don't want to?"

"I want to more than anything," she admitted quietly. "It would be better for you to kick me to the curb. I'm drowning and I'll pull you down... If I loved you more I would give you up but I'm a shit person so I wanna hold onto you." Her hands tightened on his shirt, stretching the fabric in an attempt to pull him closer. "But please, please, please don't leave me. I don't mean to act so shitty, I'm sorry. No matter what I say, I'm just being an idiot... You're the only good thing in my life so you can't let me go."

"For someone so smart you sure can say some stupid shit." Gendry kissed the top of her head, regretting that he hadn't told her earlier how much he liked her hair. It had grown out into pretty dark waves that framed her face. He needed to be better at stuff like that, ignoring her resistance to compliments. "Do I seem like a liar to you? Do you think I say all that about loving you and needing you because what... it's fun? You're beautiful and amazing: I can't be without you." Arya was quiet for a long while so it surprised him when she suddenly let out a soft laugh.

"I've broken them all - the promises." She sniffed and raised her head a bit to look up at him. "I cried, fell in love with you, and told everyone who would listen about the forge." Gendry chuckled in spite of the gloom that hung over them.

"Arry, the Promise Breaker." He cupped the side of her face and used his thumb to wipe away the lingering wetness on her cheek. "It has a nice ring to it."

"Better than 'milady','" she grumbled.

"Nothing is better than milady," he joked. "See what I did there?"

"Hilarious." Arya rolled her eyes but when she looked at him, he could tell she was holding something back. "I'm... I need..." She couldn't seem to get the words out and eventually gave up just rested her head against his chest. "Let's stay like this a little longer - or maybe forever - I haven't decided yet."

"Either is fine with me." He was willing to do anything she asked of him but wished she could trust him just a little bit more. "You know you can tell me anything; I won't think less of you."
"I don't want to talk, this is all I want - this actually helps." She sighed and relaxed more against him. "I'm such a dumbass that I forget how good this feels. Just keep reminding me, okay?"

"You can have all the cuddles you want, milady." He was done giving her space because that clearly wasn't helping anything. "This is all I want too, there's nothing better." From now on whenever she seemed upset, he was just going to hug her until she was happy again. It was better than anything else he did up to that point and he hated feeling so completely useless. They stayed like that, with him holding her, for at least half an hour until eventually Arya fell asleep.

Gendry's arms started hurting after a while but he stayed strong, thinking this was the one thing he could do for her. What was wrong and why wouldn't she tell him? His mind went through all the obvious conditions that caused weight loss but he was no doctor. It had to be something bad though, if she was this weakened and worn down. Her snores were cute but then she started mumbling anxiously, nonsense at first but her words became clearer.

"Don't go..." Those two words from her lips were possibly the most heartbreaking he'd ever heard.

"I won't," he promised. "I'm here and I'm not going anywhere." Her tight features relaxed and he let out the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. Part of him wanted to break down and cry from the frustration but he refused to be weak when she needed him strong. Gendry assumed he was probably doing this all wrong, not having a clue how to support Arya, but he still had to try. And so then and there, in that stupid tent he thought he was so smart for buying, he set his mind to the task of figuring out what to do. He needed help: that was the one and only thing he felt sure of.

Chapter End Notes

Next up I'd like to do a Sandor chapter but the timeline must be consulted and finely finagled before I can make that final call. Really, after the heavy Gendrya stuff going on, I think we all deserve some Sansan smut if I can sneak it in.

"If We Stay" - Cyra Morgan
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOoVONNwVKc
Still Not Used to Her

SANDOR

He was standing in a crowd of students, milling around outside the school auditorium like a flock of unherded sheep. They were all waiting to go into yet another pointless seminar about drugs or some shit. A bright red flash of hair stood out in the crowd, the little bird. The crowd parted without him having to push through and he curled his fingers around her elbow to get her attention. It was funny how her eyes were wide and nervous until she saw his face, and then she smiled. Sandor didn't know if he would ever get used to that reaction - or even if he wanted to get used to it.

"Oh, Sandor!" Sansa beamed happily, taking his hand and led him off to the side of the building so they would be out of the way and she leaned against the wall. "I hardly ever see you at school anymore." It was painfully true - now that they didn't have any class together. "I miss you..."

"You missed me?" He braced his hand on the wall next to her head and leaned towards her, blocking out the nearby crowd. "That's because you keep studying instead of coming out with me." The little bird had been chirping non-stop about her 'poor' grades last quarter, meaning one A-minus.

"You keep turning down my invitations to study," she countered stubbornly. "It would help your GPA considerably if you do well on this quarter's finals." Chirp-chirp-chirp.

"And it won't kill you to get a B on a test." He rolled his eyes but when he looked back at her face, she was pouting unhappily. "I'm kidding, little bird." Maybe she was right and he should study... nah. The only thing he wanted was getting Sansa naked and making her sing, everything else was a waste of time. Sandor looked around as the auditorium doors opened, seeing the teachers distracted.

"Follow me," he grabbed her hand and pulled her into a nearby empty classroom.

"Where are we...?" She narrowed her puzzled eyes as he closed the door behind her and immediately pressed her up against it. "We can't!" Her words didn't match the excited blush blooming in her cheeks.

"Who's gonna stop us?" His hands curled around her waist and drew her to him, kissing her before she could argue anymore. Her eyes fluttered shut as she opened her sweet mouth to release a low hum. Sansa curled her arms around his neck to lift herself closer to him as he crushed her body against the door. She quietly moaned as she lifted one leg to wind around his and he dropped a hand from her waist to curl around her thigh. Sandor cursed the thin fabric of her leggings separating his fingers from her soft skin.

She loudly gasped into his mouth and rolled her hips towards him as he fitted against her, pressing his hard cock between her legs. It was almost more than he could take but it would be useless to try and convince her to skip the rest of the day. In fact, probably the moment he stopped kissing her she'd come back to her senses and insist they go to that fucking seminar. Just a few more minutes... Her hands curled around his head, demanding more as she crushed her chest against his and he grew even harder.

"Oh gods," Sansa released a breathless cry as he ground his hardness against her and moved his lips
down her neck. The aching desire to take her right there against that door was almost crushing him until it's weight. "We really shouldn't-" Not done yet - he captured her lips once more, just another taste before letting her go. His last hungry kiss was rough, devouring her luscious mouth with all of his restrained lust driving him. She turned her head to the side, breaking the kiss and gasping for breath. "Sandor... we might get caught," she panted and pushed on his chest so he took a step back.

"That's part of the fun," he argued as he wiped his grinning mouth with the back of his hand, earning him andouting scowl. Her lips were all red and swollen from his kissing and it made him want to go in for seconds... and then dessert. Sansa was always so sweet and he never got enough of her. How did he ever hold out so long before the Winter Formal? Kissing her used to make him content for hours afterwards but now even looking at her was downright painful.

"And," she blushed and her voice lowered to a murmur, "you're torturing me." Sandor only grinned wider at her admission that she wanted him just as badly.

"Do you have to study tonight?" Please say 'no' - he begged silently. He couldn't focus on anything else lately, spacing out at work and practice.

"I'm all yours," she smiled bashfully and looked up at him through her lashes - tonight couldn't come fast enough.

"Now who's torturing?" Sandor grasped her by her waist and pulled her against his body, smirking when her breath caught in her throat. Her wide blue eyes looked up at him expectantly but he only released her and reached behind her to open the classroom door. "After you," he waited for Sansa to go out first and then followed her. As they attempted to exit the classroom discreetly, Margaery Tyrell approached them. She honestly looked hotter than ever, as if breaking up with Joffrey gave her a new thick layer of confidence.

"Sansa and the hound, fancy meeting you here." Margaery smiled knowingly as her eyes took in Sansa's disheveled appearance. "I'll get straight to the point and beg you to attend my 'Newly Single' celebration party tomorrow. Someone has to take over Joff's position as the King of Ragers. I can certainly fill his shoes and want to try my hand at playing hostess."

"I'll give the little shit one thing - he knew how to throw a party." And that was the fucker's one good quality.

"He's an idiot with parents who have a lot of money," Margaery waved her hand dismissively. "I'm considerably less moronic than him and come from an equally loaded family." Girl made some good points - he was down if Sansa wanted to go.

"Wanna go?" Sandor looked down to the little bird and saw the uncertain expression on her face. "I don't care either way but I can pick you and the kid up." Sansa's expression turned thoughtful briefly when he mentioned Arya and he wondered if he imagined it.

"I can admit that I was the dumb fuck for putting up with Joffrey." Margaery hit the nail on the head, maybe the girl was finally wising up. "Now he's gone and I want to shout from the rooftops how happy I am to finally be free of his arrogant shit-spewing mouth. This party means a lot to me - kind of a rebirth. So please say you will come," she took ahold of Sansa's hand, "because I want to hold the party in your honor - you and your sister, my heroes."

"Arya and I are your 'heroes'?" Sansa's bashfulness was written all over her features, she didn't think she deserved that title. But Sandor actually agreed with the Tyrell girl - the Stark sisters were no joke and he never intended to get on their bad side.
"For rescuing this poor foolish damsel," the girl smiled and put her hand over her heart, "of course you are my hero. And hound, there's no need to hold grudges between us, is there?" He shrugged his indifference. "Good! Say you'll come, Sansa, and bring Arya and the hound too of course."

Margaery clasped her hands together under her chin and assumed a pleading pose. "The more the merrier!"

"Alright," Sansa slowly nodded her head before smiling at Margaery. "Let's all celebrate Joffrey's exile together." She peeked up at Sandor as if seeking his approval but he didn't really care one way or another - he was still thinking about tonight.

"Excellent," Margaery clapped her hands together, "now I only have one more person to invite. Wish me luck!" She turned on her heel, tossing a wave over her shoulder as she walked away.

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone that happy after breaking up," Sansa watched Margaery striding away. "But considering who she dated..." She shook her head and turned her focus back on him as students flooded out of the auditorium. "See you at the game later?"

"I wouldn't miss it," he promised. She looked reluctant to leave so he turned her by the shoulder and gave her a gentle push in the other direction. "You better get to class or else you'll be chirping later about how much of a distraction I am."

"That's not true," she smiled back at him over her shoulder. "I'll miss you, even though I will see you later."

"Me too," Sandor couldn't help but feel a bit awed by how much he smiled since he met her. "Catch you later, little bird." Sansa lifted her hand in a cheery wave and then walked off towards her next class, her long hair swirling around her shoulders. How was that gorgeous girl his - would he ever get used to it? He hoped not. His stomach growled and he realized it was time for his lunch period. As he was strolling towards the cafeteria, a voice called out from behind.

"Hound!" That was the other Tyrell, the captain of the basketball team. Sandor turned around to see Loras coming up with half the basketball team in tow - Joff's old crew, which used to be his group too.

"What?" Sandor looked warily at the guys - they all used to eat lunch together. He'd been eating alone way back since all the shit went down with Joff and admittedly, it wasn't fun. "I don't have time for any bullshit." Loras came up to his side while the other guys just kinda held back and watched.

"Just hear them out," Loras murmured under his breath, "think of the team."

"I am the team," he snorted a laugh. Sandor crossed his arms and glared around the group, lingering a moment on Lancel - always Joff's biggest fan.

"No arguments on that," Loras tried to placate him, "but the rest of us are out there too. Who'd you think keeps passing you the ball?" He waved a hand for the guys to say their piece and they all looked around at each other with panicky expressions. Gods this was fucking painful - just as he was about to leave one finally spoke up.

"We think..." Viserys stepped forward, "Joffrey is not coming back this year-"

"And he was a fucking asshole anyway," Theon interrupted, "just sayin'." One corner of Sandor's mouth lifted in spite of himself, he always found Greyjoy amusing when he annoyed someone else.

"Anyway," Viserys continued his rambling, "it's pointless for us to keep up his petty bullshit with
"We're saying we miss you, dude." Theon jumped in again, clearly not satisfied with the Targaryen kid's passive aggressive non-apology.

"Do you ever shut the fuck up?" Viserys glared at his talkative friend.

"You're not doing it right," Theon argued before turning to face Sandor. "Look, hound, we all liked you a fuck-load better than we liked that asshole. So fuck him and sit with us again for lunch, okay?" Sandor thought about it for a minute and then decided - what the hells, it beat eating alone.

"Don't see why not," he shrugged - these guys might be assholes but they were no worse than him and all of them better than Joff.

"Good man." Loras clapped him on the shoulder and they started walking together towards the cafeteria. It was obvious that the captain just wanted his team to get along so their game would stay sharp but that was as good a reason as any. Sandor shoved his hands into the front pocket of his hoodie and admittedly felt good that the guys all circled around him. It used to be that they'd crowd around and follow Joff while he brought up the rear. "Oh goody," Loras noticed the lunch menu, "some shitty mystery-meat 'sausage' pizza."

"Why eat it if you hate it?" Sandor opened the cafeteria door for Loras and walked inside behind him.

"We Tyrells have to upkeep appearances," Loras grabbed two lunch trays and handed one to Sandor as they got into the lunch line. "That we are the same as you little people."

"Little?" Sandor grabbed some pizza and looked down pointedly at Loras, raising a questioning brow.

"Poor," Loras amended with a smirk as he pulled out his leather wallet to pay for his pizza and it was pretty much stuffed with money. The asshole had to search through his large bills to find something small enough to pay.

"Arrogant fucker!" Theon darted around Sandor and reached up to muss Loras' perfectly styled curls.

"Hey," he protested and shoved Greyjoy off, "watch the hair!" Loras sulked as he used his fingers to fluff his shiny curls. "Some of us have serious dating to do after school." They walked together to their usual table and sat down.

"So it's going well with your mystery bloke?" Theon sparked up the conversation. "Tell us, Loras... is it a member of parliament? A married movie star?"

"I'll tell you this," Loras paused for dramatic effect and Theon leaned forward. "His eyes glitter like endless pools of sapphires I want to drown in."

"Gay," Lancel coughed the word but it was still obvious and Sandor rolled his eyes.

"How observant of you," Loras replied dryly. "Romance is neither gay nor dead, my friend." He waved a hand at Sandor. "Exhibit A. Go on," he flourished his raised hand at the group, "tell us about your girl's eyes."

"Her eyes see me not as I am but as the man I wish I was." Sandor didn't give a fuck what Lancel thought so he just said the first thing that came to his mind. "So when she looks at me I believe I can
become that man." Nothing flowery or bullshit about it, just the simple truth.

"Bravo!" Loras actually applauded and turned a smug look on Lancel. "See, even the most heterosexual man I know is a poet when it comes to his love. Case closed."

"Wow, hound," Theon sniffled and wiped an imaginary tear from his eye. "I'm touched, really."

"Shut the fuck up," he growled and Theon just grinned, putting his hands up in mock surrender. "So, Loras, when is your date?"

"Not until later tonight," Loras got this far-off dreamy look in his eyes, "but I thought about getting a new shirt..."

"Fuck that, the shirt you're wearing looks fine," Sandor shoved half a slice of square pizza into his mouth and talked between chews. "Come with me to the game tonight."

"Game?" Theon asked the question. "What game?"

"There's a volleyball game tonight," he explained. "Sansa is playing and it always pisses her off how nobody shows up." Sandor shoved the rest of his second slice into his mouth and wiped his hands on the front of his hoodie. "No school spirit, she says."

"We have a volleyball team?" Theon's eyes widened in surprise as he gulped a bite of pizza. "Nice, tall girls getting sweaty and jumping around. I'm in," he looked around the table. "Guys?" There were nods all around the table and Sandor knew this would end up being the rowdiest volleyball home game in school history. As they ate school pizza and joked about random shit, Sandor realized he actually did miss hanging with the guys. Even a surly asshole like him needed friends.

School passed as boring as every other day but he was in a shockingly good mood - everything was coming up Sandor today. The guys accepted him back in the group without Joff there to cause drama while he and Sansa were doing better than ever. The only real problem in his life was he was getting sick and tired of his backseat. He pondered on the problem as he and the guys walked together towards the gym where the game attendees were trickling in.

The gym was only about half-full and he couldn't help but compare the turnout to the packed seats for the basketball games. Sansa and her teammates worked really hard and were very close to going on to the state championships. She was right - their school didn't have any school spirit when it came to girls' sports. Why didn't he ever think about how fucked up that was before? It was because he was too wrapped up in his own self-pity to think about what life's like for everyone else. He lived constantly pissed that his fucked-up face meant people judged him based on his appearance.

But if he were unscarred, he'd have every advantage just handed to him for being born male, white, and athletic by chance. Would he be just as arrogant and entitled as Joff if his face were whole? That thought made him sick as he led the guys up to the empty top seats. The girls came jogging out onto the gym floor and he and the guys stood up to cheer like maniacs for their team. Everyone around them stared like they were crazy but his girl had done her fair share of cheering for his team - now it was his turn.

Sansa waved up at him, her bright red ponytail bouncing behind her. Even from his distance, he could see her face turning red at the attention so he motioned for the guys to sit down. Their volleyball team played their hearts out and it was a seriously close game. The game was pretty damned exciting, as with watching any sport played between competitors of equal skill. It made him anxious to move onto college or university already so he could experience a real challenge.
It surprised him that he hadn't thought much about leaving for school lately but it was no mystery why. He didn't want to have to leave Sansa here and not see her for months on end, only visiting during holidays. Sandor felt awed by Sansa's serious concentration as she poised for her serve. Her hair had darkened around her face with sweat and she blew out a breath, tossing up the ball. **POW - the ball sailed over the net and the close game continued.**

While the whole team played well, Gritty was like a machine and it wasn't long before she led her team to victory. After the last winning point, the girls crashed together into a group hug. They jumped around, shrieking with happiness. The guys went nuts - whistling and hollering for their team like a bunch of lunatics. Sansa and her team left the floor, still pumped from their big win, signaling to those in attendance it was time to leave.

"Hound," Theon lightly punched him in the shoulder, "it's been real. Peace out, brother!" He tossed a wave over his shoulder as he bounded down the bleachers, followed by the rest of the guys - following the weed. Only Loras stayed behind to keep him company as he ambled to wait outside the girl's locker room.

"So..." Loras kept his voice down and looked around. "I take it you know what went down with Marge and Joff."

"Yeah," Sandor leaned against the cool concrete wall and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"You know that toe-headed shit as well as I do," Loras stepped closer and looked Sandor straight in the eye. "There's no way he's 'learned his lesson' as his father told mine."

"I'm not letting my guard down," he assured. "Listen - I'm not afraid of that punk and neither is Sansa. She told me that she has something on him and if he tries to come at us she'll be able to put him own once and for all." Sandor held Loras' worried gaze. "I don't know what it is but I trust her."

"Then so will I," Loras nodded his head before turning to leave. "See you later, Sandor." It wasn't much longer before Sansa and her team came out of the locker room, still buzzing from their recent victory.

"You and your friends made quite a fuss up there," she chastised with a smile. "But the team really appreciated the support." Sansa looked tired but pleased with herself, glowing with victory as she put her jacket's hood up over her wet hair.

"I do what I can," he slung her bag over his shoulder and she wrapped her hands around his arm as they set off towards the parking lot. It was all he could do not to toss her over his other shoulder and sprint to the nearest dark corner. She tilted her head against his arm as they walked - unaware of his lust-driven thoughts. All day - since the first time he saw Sansa - he wanted her and the more he had her, the more he wanted. That single thought tipped the scales and he decided - no fucking backseat tonight.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, failure, my old friend. Here's the thing about failure - it's expected. I set a high goal for myself, knowing that I would probably fail. But we don't set goals to be easy but because they are hard. Am I disappointed? Yes, but disappointment gets a bad rap. Being disappointed means I have taken away a lesson from this failure. Get on the horse and try again - set high goals and fail again - and then just keep going.
Because the impossible is never achieved if we don't strive for it, even when failure is inevitable. Do not fear failure but embrace what it represents: room for improvement. I am more afraid of stagnation and self-doubt, those are the real killers of passion and creativity. We only truly fail when we quit trying to succeed. Seventeen days until Christmas Eve - I will post seventeen chapters in that time. Aja! Aja! Fighting!

Oh, next chapter is going to be like 99% Sansan smut - get ready.
She mused quietly as they walked together to the car, her mind pulled in a hundred different directions. All day she had been distracted by the unsettling events of this morning; the inevitable implosion. By the time they got to the Skylark, Sandor figured out that something was upsetting her.

"What's wrong?" He pulled out his keys to open the trunk and set her bag inside. "You had a great game." Sansa was actually touched that he could tell she was upset even when she tried to hide it.

"You're right..." Sansa moved to get into the passenger side as he closed the trunk before getting into the driver's seat. She inhaled a deep breath before letting it out slowly, giving herself a moment to think about what to say. "It's Arya," two words and one little girl contained so much trouble. For weeks Arya had been refusing to eat anything but coffee for breakfast. When Sansa tried to insist on proper food, her 'sweet' little sister actually stepped forward as if she wanted to hit her! That was just the tip of the iceberg; the girl had turned impossible!

"Short stuff?" Sandor turned to face her, giving her his full attention instead of starting the car. "What happened?" It was so moving how much he cared that she was worried about her little sister. Sansa did not have the most experience when it came to boyfriends but she suspected that level of dedication was woefully rare.

"You really care," she gazed at him as her lips pulled into a smile.

"Don't sound so surprised," he grumbled and fidgeted with the keys in his hand.

"I'm not surprised," she reached across the distance between them to take ahold of his hand, "I already knew you were sweet. I am just so ridiculously happy that I scarcely believe it..." In truth, Sansa did not want to waste their precious time together talking about her troublesome little sister.

"Can I help?" Sandor was making an effort to be caring so she might as well get her troubles off her chest.

"I don't know if anyone can help," all of her worried thoughts came pouring out of her mouth. "And the worst part is, I really am unbelievably happy and Arya is decidedly unhappy but she won't talk to me about it. And she skipped school today and she has been acting out at home. And if she does not watch her mouth then she will get grounded again... I'm going out of my mind trying to get through to her but she just tunes me out." Sansa blew out a deep breath; already feeling unburdened just having said it all out loud.

"Maybe I can give it a shot," he put the key in the ignition and turned it over. "Give her a talking to - you know man-to-girl or whatever. Maybe she just needs some straight-shooting instead of you coddling her."

"I don't coddle," Sansa protested under her breath before sighing and shaking her head. "Then she'll get mad at me for talking behind her back," she slumped down in her seat and pulled her seatbelt on. She did not have any right to be disappointed in Sandor's lack of useful advice; even she did not
know what to do. "Maybe I should talk to Gendry about it," that idea occurred to her several times a day. Was she overreacting, as Arya accused?

"Her nerd?" Sandor pulled the Skylark out of its parking spot and whipped through the parking lot towards the street. "He's a nice enough kid but-"

"He's the same age as you," she interrupted in a slightly high-pitched voice, which she tried to remedy by clearing her throat. Sansa was sick and tired of Sandor looking down on everyone!

"Seriously?" Sandor scoffed, that sound really touched all of her nerves. "Still seems like a kid to me." She decided it was better to stay quiet so she just stared at her feet; at least her boots with the fur fringe were super cute. "What? Sansa, I'm not a mind-reader." Seriously, was it that hard to figure out how he upset her?!

"I'm two years younger than him and you call him a kid," she huffed. "That does not feel very good."

"You know what I mean, he's..." Sandor scratched the stubble growing on his jaw and gestured his hand helplessly. "You're a lot more..." Both of his hands gripped the steering wheel and his voice lowered into an annoyed growl. "What do you want from me here? Either I talk shit about this kid or I bullshit you about how mature you are. He wastes his days playing that dumb fucking game and you get straight-A's. Do I have to say more?"

"I guess I'm the tiniest bit sensitive," she ducked her head bashfully and fiddled with her fingers. "I guess I should probably learn to not say shit that'll piss you off," he acknowledged apologetically. "I don't want you thinking I consider you a kid. I respect you - even when I don't agree with what you say I still respect you for saying it." Wow, Sandor was really good at the whole apology thing when he put in the effort.

"I'm really in love with you, you know?" Sansa tilted her head back against the headrest and gazed at him. "Like... a lot," she sighed wistfully. "I wish you would tell me that you love me without me having to ask."

"I love you," he grumbled adorably. "Happy?" Sometimes he reminded her of an over-sized Rickon, just a little boy afraid to show his true feelings.

"It does make me happy... and it makes me want you," she admitted, peeking at him as they pulled to a stop under the glare of a red light. Sandor leaned towards her, his hand sliding into her hair before his lips crashed against hers. A flash of heat overwhelmed her entire body, her eyes fluttered shut, and her heart pounded inside her chest. Then he abruptly released her when the light turned green, leaving Sansa panting and breathless.

"No more distractions, little bird." Sandor stared forward with single-minded determination as he punched the gas with his foot. She fanned her overheated face and turned her flushed cheeks away from him to stare out at the city flying by.

"We passed the supermarket," she pointed out the window as the abandoned strip mall whizzed by. He just flashed a grin at her and kept on driving to their mystery destination. "Fine, I won't even ask where we are going..." Sansa sat back in her seat and crossed her arms but after a few minutes, she could not take it. "Oh, please-please-please tell me!"

"You think if you beg prettily and bat those eyes that I'll spill my guts." Sandor snorted like the very idea was ridiculous even though she had done just that plenty of times. "Well, you're wrong - I have
unbeatable self-control."

"I think I can undermine your control..." Sansa pulled her seatbelt out of the way and turned towards him. "Do you know what little birds do to hounds?"

"What?" He glanced at her sideways and she knew she had him.

"Sing to them," she breathed in a low voice and watched with satisfaction as his hands tightened on the wheel. "Sandor?"

"I still ain't telling you a godsdamn thing," he growled, but it was the good kind of growling.

"Not that," she laughed, "I don't care where we go, just hurry." Sandor sped up even more and drove just a little too aggressively to their destination - a local motel. It did not appear to be anything fancy but at least it had a bed, the answer to her every prayer.

"I wish I had somewhere better to take you," he parked the Skylark in the motel parking lot. Sansa made a mental note to save the debate about paying for the next time, when she was not so desperate.

"There is nowhere better," she assured him as they got out of the car. Their doors slammed behind them before they walked around the Skylark to meet at the front. "I just want to be with you." Sansa leaned against his body, wrapping her arms around his waist and gazing up at him. "So-so-so very badly."

"That bad, huh?" He wiped a strand of hair away from her face, smiling down at her before pulling away. "Wait here," he left her standing in front of the Skylark to go inside the front office. A few moments later, he came out and walked briskly to her, taking her hand and leading her to a nearby room. As soon as the door closed behind them, he tugged her against his body and she loved how he was rough and gentle at once. "One of these days I won't be able to let you go." Sandor leaned his temple against hers, his voice low and rumbling. "What are you gonna do then?"

"You'll have to keep me," her heart beat wildly inside her chest as he cupped the back of her head and drew her lips to his. But he hovered above her, their mouths only separated by their mingling panted breaths. A low impatient moan slipped between her lips as overwhelming desire tore through her body. Then finally he descended to kiss her and she opened her mouth to release a low appreciative hum. Sansa impatiently tugged at the front of his sweatshirt until he tore away from her mouth to tug it over his head.

His arms were around her again as he walked her backwards until her weakened legs hit the mattress and she dropped onto the bed. Sansa giggled excitedly as she cupped the back of her head and drew her lips to his. But he hovered above her, their mouths only separated by their mingling panted breaths. A low impatient moan slipped between her lips as overwhelming desire tore through her body. Then finally he descended to kiss her and she opened her mouth to release a low appreciative hum. Sansa impatiently tugged at the front of his sweatshirt until he tore away from her mouth to tug it over his head.

He stood just long enough to unfasten his pants and tugged them down along with his underwear. The buckle of his belt jingled as he moved above her and his arm slid under her waist to haul her body up the mattress with effortless strength. As he moved over her, his hands bunched her skirt up around her hips before he settled between her legs. She panted as his fingertips caressed the inside of her thigh. Sandor held her gazed as he stroked gently between her legs until holding his gaze was so intense she had to look away.

"Fuck... condom." Sandor groaned and started to draw back but she grabbed onto his shoulders to pull him toward her again.
"Don't worry about it," she explained breathlessly. "I'm on the pill now, we don't need it."
Thankfully, he did not need to hear any more details before capturing her mouth again. Her arms reached up and wrapped around his neck, his warm lips moving over hers and stealing the breath from her lungs. He slipped his tongue between her parted lips and her heart pounded so hard it felt as though it might burst through her ribs. Her consciousness slowed to a crawl as one thought dominated her mind... more.

All day since they skipped the school assembly on illegal narcotics, his tormenting kiss lingered in her mind. Sansa tightened her arms around his neck and pulled his mouth down to hers, aware of his hand guiding his hardness. Sandor moaned against her mouth as he pushed into her, filling her completely as she lifted her hips to receive him. He started pumping slowly, almost carefully at first, then building up a faster tempo.

"Oh gods," she whimpered, biting her lip as she clung to him and demanded more. His palm slid under the curve of her back, pressing her body closer to his as she arched against him. Sandor released a soft groan as she writhed underneath him as he wrapped his arm around her to mold her against his solid chest. Waves of heat simmered beneath her skin as a loud moan tore from her throat. She locked her legs around his waist and rolled her hips up to meet his thrusts.

Sandor growled sweet things into her ear, one hand guiding her hips in a steady motion and the other sliding up into her hair. His fingers twisted in her hair, drawing it back, exposing her neck to bury his face against it and press hot kisses to her throat. Her hands roamed over his arms and shoulders, clinging to his solid form as though it were the only thing holding her together. The cries coming from her throat grew louder and she would not hold them back even if she could. If she were capable of speaking, she would be begging him to never stop.

"Sing for me," Sandor's impossibly deep voice rasped in her ear as he thrust into her, snapping her coiling pleasure. And Sansa was lost to all solid things including him as her body trembled and writhed in his hold. Her voice cried out at the top of her lungs, drowning in her pleasure and not caring who heard. His hands gripped her hips tighter as he pumped his release deep inside her. He collapsed next to her, staring at the ceiling and dragging in shallow ragged breaths.

"I booked the room for the whole night," he turned his face towards her and she felt his hand searching for hers.

"I have permission to stay out overnight," she smiled and slipped her fingers between his. As their breathing returned to normal, they lay watching each other in comfortable silence. "This time," she pushed off the mattress to sit up, and pulled her shirt over her head to toss it onto the floor. "We should-" Sandor cut off her words, leaning forward to capture her lips in a slow and tender kiss. She lost her train of thought as he moved his hands behind her back to unclasp her bra. He pulled back to remove the undergarment and let it fall away.

"What were you gonna say, little bird?" Sandor smirked at her before pulling his shirt over his head and tossing it behind him.

"I was going to say," her voice was unsteady as she was momentarily distracted by his sculpted shoulders and chest. Sansa blinked a few times and lifted her eyes back up to meet his cocky gaze. "W-we should take full advantage of this night," she finally managed to stammer, averting her eyes from his smug smile. Her skirt was already around her waist so she pulled it off over her head as his eyes roamed over her body.

"Couldn't agree more," he grinned and curled his hand around her waist to pull her against his hot chest. Sansa gasped as tingling pleasure rippled over her skin, flushing from hairline to collarbone. She looked up to see his dark eyes staring at her with such passionate intensity. It was impossible to
look away but also impossible to hold his gaze.

"This time you can't let me fall asleep," she whispered, not wanting to waste even a moment of tonight. Sandor traced his fingers along a strand of her hair that fell over her chest before brushing the errant lock behind her shoulder.

"Oh, I'll keep you awake," he promised or perhaps threatened, "all night." Sandor gently pushed her back against the mattress and turned away to attack the laces on his boots and kick them off. He stood up, tugging off his pants and then turning around to get back into bed.

"Wait; let me look at you first." Sansa admired him and when her eyes reached his face, she noticed he was admiring her as well with a hungry look that obliterated her patience. "Lover," she smiled and held out her arms, "don't make me wait anymore." Sandor did not have to be asked twice; he came into her arms and covered her body with his. She slid her legs around him and shifted her hips up as he guided his hardness just into her entrance, settling down to fill her.

Sandor held her tight as she liked while her hands clutched his shoulders. He bowed his head to kiss her and she opened her mouth against his, shivering at the touch of his tongue sliding against hers. She gasped into his mouth as his tongue caressed hers and he ran a palm up her thigh. His fingertips gripped her waist to urge her to match his relaxed pace as they moved together languidly.

Sansa released a breathless cry and rocked her hips as their bodies swayed together, rolling up to meet his thrusts. He set a torturous deliberate rhythm that she eagerly followed, tilting her hips to take him deeper.

"More," she moaned helplessly, "more please Sandor." He thrust deeper and she threw her head back as tremors of ecstasy run up her spine. Sansa cried out when his hand slid up to caress her breast and rolling the sensitive peak between his fingers. She rocked against him in time with ever thrust of his hips and waves of pleasure crashed over her. Her pleasure swelled slower and softer this time but it was no less intense when she peaked. Sandor pressed his face into her neck and wrapped his arms tightly around her as she trembled from her eruption of passion.

"Sansa," he rasped her name as he found his release, holding her so tight she could hardly breathe. He drew back afterwards, rising over her and his chest heaving with heavy breaths, and gazed down at her. "I love you," he said it in her favorite way, a fact he had to admit, and then pressed another brief kiss to her lips. Sandor extracted himself, rolled over to lie down beside her, and gathered her in his arms. Their limbs tangled as his arm wound around Sansa and tucked her against his chest, listening to his strong heartbeat.

"This is the best part..." She trailed her fingers through the patch of springy hair in the center of his chest. "Do you disagree?"

"All of it is the best part," he hugged her snugly against his body and kissed the top of her head. "I love every second I'm with you." The same was true for her but that would only make their time apart more painful when he left. Those thoughts invaded her peaceful mind far too often but she did not dare voice her concerns out loud. There was nothing worse than talking with Sandor about next year; he was allergic to discussion about the future. "Don't worry about anything else, just be here with me." At times, he was too perceptive...

"Sometimes I think I don't have the right to be this happy," her hand slid down around his waist and she hugged him tightly. "But then I hardly care if I do deserve this happiness or not, I love being with you."

"Do I really make you that happy?" His fingers slowly trailed through her hair and though Sansa
knew it must be frazzled she did not feel self-conscious.

"More than you can imagine," she nuzzled her face against his warm chest. "I wish we could stay like this forever." Sansa bit the inside of her lip, wondering if now a good time to voice her lingering worries was. If she put off voicing her feelings then it might come out during an argument instead. "And I wish you won't push me away anymore when... things get hard or... when we're apart."

"You mean - when I go away to college?" The tender sweetness of his voice was gone, leaving only the harsh growling with which she was accustomed.

"That's part of it," she pressed the issue. "I realize it is silly now that I used to think everything would be perfect between us after our first time. Do you truly trust me to wait for you after you leave?"

"I figure you'll do as you like, as usual," he sighed tiredly. "How many times are we gonna have this talk?" Until she was satisfied with her understanding of where they were heading as a couple! "Are you the same person you were a year ago?" Sansa only shook her head in answer and held her tongue. "Neither am I - we're both going to change a lot more, that's just life. If we expect miracles, we'll only be disappointed."

"I don't expect miracles, I want to make them." Sansa rose to sit up and looked down at him. "Do you doubt you will love me in a year... two years? I know I will still love you then." Was it really too much to ask he profess his devotion when they were not mid-coitus? Why could he only say sweet things when her mind could barely register them?!

"I don't like pretending everything is gonna work out just because you want me to." His words were a bit harsh but his tone was remarkably gentle. "Love isn't the magic answer to all problems," he sounded almost disappointed but resigned. "You want me to make promises that I might not be able to keep and that will only hurt you more if I fuck up. It's not that I don't have any faith in you, Sansa - I'm used to being fucked by life, no matter what I want." She opened her mouth to argue but he put a finger over her lips. "I will swear this - I'll never mention breaking up again."

"Thank you," she buried her face against his neck and pressed soft kisses to his skin. Sansa felt her whole body relax and she could almost convince herself that life was perfect. But life was never supposed to be perfect. People have to learn how to cope with life's messes while appreciating the fleeting perfect moments. At that moment, she was happy with Sandor but that did not mean she forgot her troubles. Her happiness and worries lived in balance with each other, orbiting around her like planets around the sun.

Chapter End Notes

Aish! I wish I was just a brain floating around in some electro-goo that would transfer my firing synapses to a super computer - rigged specifically for writing fanfic... Don't you hate it when a 3-day cold turns into a longer-than-three-days cold? I tried my usual homeopathic remedy: Earl Grey and Disney movies. But the suffering is not over yet. Usually I never get sick unless I encounter those walking germ-bags you humans like to call 'children'. Avoid them at all costs - they carry disease! The weather has been like a yo-yo lately so perhaps that's why or maybe the stress of the move wreaked havoc on my immune system. Either way, I'm seriously red-nosed and pissed off. (Pitiful whimpering).
Another Party, by Invitation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

MARGAERY

She had been planning every detail of this party since her parents and grandmother announced they were going out of town. This party had to go off without a hitch - it was a matter of life and death. Her speeches about how this night would celebrate her independence were bullshit. Margaery hoped she would be celebrating a new relationship by the end of tonight, her heart pounded at the mere thought.

But her potential future beau had not shown up yet... What if he didn't come?! When she invited him, Gendry told her he would come if he could but that was not a definite 'yes'. If he showed up then surely that meant he had feelings for her! Guests poured in and Marge acted like a perfect hostess but she was all a titter on the inside. The party was already in full swing by the time Dany arrived with her silent hunk in tow.

"Oh my!" Dany's eyes roamed over Marge with an amused expression on her face. "Aren't we dressed modestly this evening?! I almost did not recognize you without your bosom on display." Her friend could be positively evil at times.

"Ha-ha, you are hilarious." Marge lightly touched up the side of her hair and glanced away from Dany's scrutiny. She knew she looked like a fifties housewife but she was starting to get desperate to gain a certain blue-eyed boy's attention. Every few seconds she was glancing at the door to see if he would even show. Butterflies flapped up a storm in her stomach but she refused to let her face show her nervousness. "I have a reason," she smiled confidently and quirked her brows.

"A guy?!" Dany's shock was obvious, her large purple eyes opening wide in surprise. "Already?! This is big..." Then she crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at Margaery. "Since when did you like men who like modest women?"

"I don't know what he likes," she sighed, "and he is incredibly hard to read so I'm trying something new." Margaery never once caught Gendry checking out her chest but her theory about him being gay just did not add up. He was - against all odds - a gentleman and perhaps that meant he preferred 'ladies'. Hence, her oddly demure attire, which she despised but wore like battle armor - love, is a battlefield. In her bones, she knew fashion would always be her weapon of choice, which she wielded with undeniable mastery.

"Good luck, darling." Dany gave her an encouraging pat on the shoulder. "He's a fool if he doesn't fall for you."

"I'm glad you came," Marge took ahold of Dany's hand and gave it a light squeeze. "Even though I invited Sansa to bring the hound along."

"Missa talked me straight," Dany smiled assuredly. "I don't have to make 'friends', but I can't waste any more effort hating the sight of him."

"That's so good," Marge pulled her friend in for a hug. "I'm proud of you honey." On a hopeful note,
it seemed that both of them were finally putting their shit behind them.

"As am I of you," Dany pulled back to hold Marge by her shoulders. "You know I love you."

"I love only you and Missa," she waved her hand at the gathering of people in her house, "and fuck the rest." She leaned forward to air-kiss her friend on the cheek and then ushered her towards the party. "Have fun, love!" Dany and her looming boyfriend disappeared into the crowd of her guests. Just as Margaery was looking around the party, to see what needed to be done, the guest of honor finally arrived. "Sansa darling," Marge rushed to greet their group, "so good to see you."

"This is my sister, Arya." Sansa held out her hand to a petite and peculiar girl then gestured further to a horrifyingly familiar face. "And her boyfriend Gendry." Did she hear correctly? The words 'boyfriend' and 'Gendry' echoed in her mind - Marge started to see spots popping up in front of her eyes. No, gods... what was this madness?!

"Yo, nice place you got here." The unusual girl waved her hand in greeting but Marge's full attention was fixed elsewhere.

"Gendry...?" She blinked several times, praying he would suddenly turn into another person. Why did he never mention having a girlfriend? It's true they had not spoken much but it should have come up!

"Uh... Hi," he rubbed the back of his neck and smiled shyly at her. "Thanks for the invite."

"Nice to see you again," Marge recovered from the shock with a vanilla greeting she would later want to die over. "And Arya," she turned her forced smile on those cold grey eyes, "it's an honor." Suddenly Gendry's omission of his girlfriend seemed more understandable - she was downright unmentionable. What was she wearing?

"Sure, whatever," the odd little girl rolled her eyes and something caught her attention. "Oh good, booze." Arya threw up a hand and marched towards the keg. "See ya!"

"Isn't she wonderful?" Sansa smiled apologetically at Margaery before she and the hound moved inside to talk to Missa and her boyfriend... Toro?

"Enjoy yourselves," Marge called after them. "Ah, Gendry?" He stopped and spun around to face her. "Here, let me take your jacket," she turned him around to help him remove his coat and then hung it up on a hook in the entryway. "I have some new sketches I would love your perspective on," she put on her most winning smile and pointed at the staircase. "My studio is just upstairs."

"Sure," he shrugged those muscled shoulders and her heart skipped a beat, "why not?" Gendry gazed in awe of her family's house as they headed towards the stairs. "This place is... wow."

"I will pass your compliments onto my grandmother." Marge guided him to the staircase and started leading him up towards her studio. Inside she trembled from head-to-toe but kept up her outward confident persona. "She often questions if the cost of living so garishly is worth it."

"I don't even wanna know how much it costs to live like this," he gawked at the hand-carved banister on the staircase railing. Taking advantage of his distraction, Margaery slipped her fingers around his arm.

"Climbing the stairs in heels can be precarious," she explained. "You don't mind do you?" Her fingertips burned to venture under his sleeve but she restrained them with great difficulty.

"Nah," he looked away and visibly gulped, "it's fine." Was he nervous because of her or just
nervous? Gendry was an entirely different species of male that she had never dealt with before - a shy man.

"Here we are," she reluctantly released his arm and gestured to the first door on the right. Margaery walked ahead and opened the door for him, leading him inside.

"Bloody hells," he let out a low appreciative whistle as he walked to the center of the large room and whirled around to face her. "All this space is just for art?" His boyish enthusiasm was so endearing and kinda sexy is wonderful way.

"My bedroom is next door," she waved her hand at the door adjoining the two rooms and noticed how he glanced away embarrassed. Any other man would be trying to seduce her past that door but the only one she wanted was a gentlemen - what a conundrum. "I need space to create or else I would have turned this room into a closet." She laughed at his incredulous expression but her wardrobe could easily fill this room. Marge clasped her hands behind her back and started walking slowly to meet him.

"This is pretty much amazing," he glanced around again and took a small step back as she approached. "I'm so jealous it's not even funny."

"I still would love to see where you work." She took another step towards him and looked up into his dreamy blue eyes. If only he would give her some sort of sign that he had any interest, she longed to know how he kissed. Would it be soft and tender? Those cold grey eyes invaded her thoughts and she suppressed a shudder. The girl hardly seemed to notice her gorgeous boyfriend even existed! If any female tried to take her boyfriend upstairs, Marge wouldn't run off to the keg like a pint-sized frat boy!

"The forge is alright," he cleared his throat and turned around to focus his attention on her nearby easel. "Can't work in the rain though."

"Let me show you what I've been working on." Margaery joined him at the easel and opened up her sketchbook to her new collection. Ah, what a joyous thing to experience - for the man she was interested in to show an interest in her work!

"I don't know much about fashion but I'd wear this any time." Gendry admired her sketches but did not seem to notice that all of her figures had dark messy hair and blue eyes.

"You would make an excellent model for my line - I based it on you." She glanced sideways to see him staring at her in shock and then she pointed down at her first sketch. "See this detail?"

"Ah! It's chainmail," he grinned as he recognized the theme of her style. "And that's a gauntlet... this is so awesome."

"We could collaborate on this collection." Marge turned to face him and tilted her head into his vision to gain his attention. "I would give you full recognition."

"That would be fantastic," he puffed a little surprised laugh and had the most adorable expression on his face. "Thanks Margaery." Oh... to hear her name from his lips, she barely restrained herself from sighing aloud.

"Call me Marge," she insisted, "all of my friends do. And no thanks needed - I should be the one thanking you for the inspiration." Marge ducked her head and stared at her own design. "It hasn't been easy since I left Joff, I'm sure you know all the sordid details." What a horrible coincidence that the first person she liked aside from Joff was involved with the person who freed her! But Arya's first
intention was to save her sister...

"Just enough to know he's a disgusting animal," Gendry sneered and she was touched that he even cared to be angry on her behalf. "Forget about him, there's about a billion other guys who'd love to date you." Margaery only wanted one - intensely.

"I owe a lot to Arya," she ventured into dangerous territory - bringing up the 'girlfriend'. "She seems like a very... interesting girl." 'Weird' being a more appropriate description - perhaps Margaery was a little tiny bit biased. A rare gem like Gendry just did not make any sense with that odd little girl! Arya obviously did not appreciate him, ignoring him in favor of some beer.

"She's one of a kind," the smile spreading over his face was the unmistakable expression of a man in love. Well, fuck.

"You really love her," she forced some enthusiasm into her voice, "it shows when you talk about her." The girl looked twelve-years-old at the most, skinny as a twig, and that hair! Aside from those 'lovely' qualities, Arya acted just like the twelve-year-old boy she appeared to be.

"Yeah," he nodded his head, "I really do." Margaery wanted to scream 'why' but restrained herself.

"I am happy for you both," she forced a bright smile on her face and then inclined her head towards the door. "We should get back to the party." Inwardly she prayed that he would find an excuse to linger alone with her but he immediately headed towards the door to leave. It was almost enough for her to lie down and give up right then and there.

"I'll take you down to the forge if you're free sometime after school," he opened the door for her this time. Hope rose within her heart like a sunset after a storm... he wanted to see her again!

"Friday is best for me," she smiled as she passed by him, trying to hide the fact that she was dancing inside.

"That works," he closed the door behind them, "I have that day off."

"Perfect," she smiled and took ahold of his well-muscled arm as they descended the staircase at a snail's pace set by her. Margaery's attention was called away to address a minor emergency in the kitchen so she had to say goodbye to Gendry. She watched as he wandered off into the party, likely looking for his strange girlfriend. Even if it was slightly uncouth to covet another's boyfriend, Marge only intended to keep an eye on the situation. If she did not have a chance with him then why would he agree to spend time with her?

GENDRY

He kept one eye on Arya as he made his way through the party, she was chugging a beer bong as a crowd of guys cheered her on. At least she was having fun... She'd been ignoring and seemingly avoiding him all night but he was sadly getting used to that. His eyes searched around until saw a shock of red hair against the cream-colored wallpaper. Gendry inhaled deeply for courage before moving towards his future sister-in-law. Sansa smiled at him as he approached but he noticed she looked a little tired.

"Sansa, can I talk to you a minute?" He leaned against the wall next to her and realized the spot gave her a perfect vantage point to watch Arry.

"Of course," she turned her head to look at him expectantly but his cowardice was choking him. "Go ahead."
"Have you noticed Arya's been...?" Gendry just squeezed his eyes and forced himself to say it out loud. "Different lately?"

"It would be impossible not to notice," Sansa sighed and Gendry opened his eyes to see the strain in her features. "I thought about calling you but we really don't know each other all that well and I didn't want to seem like a nosy big sister."

"I think she needs us to be nosy," Gendry relaxed his tense shoulders. "She seems a bit better after we talked yesterday but it's almost like..." He didn't know how to explain it but he knew Arry wasn't back to her old self.

"She's forcing herself to act normal because she thinks that's what we want." Sansa described exactly what he suspected in a resigned tone. "I know Arya... that is her way whenever something is wrong; just ignore it. Honestly, I'm caught between a rock and a hard place. Our father asks me what is wrong with her, instead of asking her directly, and I don't want to break my sister's confidence." She looked down a fidgeted with her fingers uncomfortably. "I never saw her so afraid, when she thought she might be... pregnant."

"Yeah," he stared at his feet, "I think that got to her. It freaked me out too but I was relieved when it all turned out alright." Gendry was so happy that Mr. Stark and Jon weren't going to kill him that the panic of impending fatherhood was all but forgotten. "But it's like it didn't turn out alright in her mind. Do you know... is she sick?"

"I went with her to the clinic," Sansa shrugged helplessly, "she said her test results came back fine but other than that... I have no idea what is wrong but I do know she's not okay."

"The thing that worries me the most is she doesn't eat," it was hard for him to even say it out loud, like he was betraying Arya somehow. "Even when I do take her somewhere she barely picks at her food. We used to tell each other everything but now I'm afraid to bring it up because she gets really upset. I'm lost here."

"We both are," she admitted. "When I insisted she eat something yesterday morning she flipped out on me. I thought if I could get her to eat something that it would help somewhat... Maybe I went about it wrong but I honestly haven't a clue what else to do and she needs food, it is a necessity!" Sansa sighed wearily and shook her head. "We have to find some way to get her to eat without seeming like we are trying to get her to eat. How do we do that?"

"I agree that getting some food in her seems a good place to start." At least it was something they could try instead of sitting around waiting for Arya to waste away. "Maybe instead of asking or telling her to eat we can just start eating stuff she likes in front of her. Can you text me all of Arya's favorite foods, candies, whatever?"

"That actually seems like a good idea," Sansa looked at him with the most hopeful expression. "We should have done this days ago, for the first time I don't feel completely helpless about Arya."

"Me too," Gendry felt happy for the first time since he heard Arya was ungrounded. "Tomorrow I'll take her by the doughnut shop: she likes the kind with the jelly in the middle. I think once she sees and smells it, she won't be able to resist." He caught her looking at him with a satisfied expression.

"I used to think I was a good judge of character but this year I started to doubt myself." Sansa smiled and turned back to look at Arya. "The first time I met you I thought you would be good for her. I know how much of a pain my sister can be but I also know that she is a really special person. For what it's worth, I intend to support your relationship no matter what anyone in my family says."
"That means a lot," his throat felt a little tighter so he cleared his throat and pushed off the wall. "Speaking of being good for her... I should take Arry somewhere to sober up."

"Drive safe," she smiled encouragingly and he nodded in response: Sansa's faith meant a lot to him.

"Gendry," Margaery approached him from the side and cut off his path to Arya. "Are you having a good time?"

"Uh yeah," he looked past Margaery but Arya had disappeared into the crowd, "actually I think I should get going."

"I just wanted to let you know," she stepped a little closer, "that I'm looking forward to Thursday-"

"There you are stupid," Arya brushed past Margaery like she was a piece of furniture and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Let's get out of here - this party is dead." She smirked up at him with glassy eyes, clearly wasted.

"We're gonna take off," he told Margaery over Arya's head, "thanks again for inviting us." Arry impatiently tugged his arm and dragged him towards the door.

"Bye!" Margaery called from behind as Arya shoved through the crowd towards the entryway. Gendry had to yank his hand free just to get his coat while she griped at him to hurry up. Arry recaptured his hand, led the way to his car, and shoved him towards the driver's side. Before he could even get the key into the ignition, she was all over him. Her fingers plunged into his hair as she pulled his face close to hers and crushed their lips together before he could even think to stop her.

Arry's arms encircled his neck and he opened his mouth to protest but she pushed her tongue into his mouth. Her kiss was desperate and he kept trying to remember why they should stop. Every thrust of her hot tongue against his dissolved his brain and revved up his pent-up longing for her. The unrestrained way she kissed him knocked all the air from his lungs and his cock went instantly hard. Her hungry mouth left his to nip his neck as she arched against him. Bloody hells! Did she have to down half a keg before she could be all over him?!

"Arry," he pushed her back to sit down, "cut it out." Gendry shuddered his head and wheezed a heavy breath to clear the pink fog clouding his mind.

"What?" Arya pouted and squinted at him, her hands still clutching the shoulders of his jacket. "I can't kiss you?" Her mouth returned to his neck, kissing him more gently this time as her lips drifted across his jaw. "Don't be like that... Don't you miss me? Don't you love me?" She pressed her palm against his hard cock and he groaned in frustration. "I know you want me."

"You're drunk," he snatched her wrist away. "And you smell like a liquor store." Gendry huffed a breath and nodded at the nearby mansion. "And we're parked in front of somebody's house."

"So?" Arya leaned her head back and gazed at him through heavy-lidded eyes. "I'm thinking quite clearly - you're hot and I want you inside me." He closed his eyes and tried to think about distinctly un-sexy things, like the crud that builds up in the restaurant sink. "Gendry," her hot whisper tickled his ear, "stop trying to do the right thing and just do me." She nuzzled against his neck but he just sat still as a statue and ignored her. "Why are you being such as ass?"

"Because I'm thinking you'll be pissed in the morning," he gritted through his teeth. "Besides, all the condoms are back at the forge." There was no way she'd argue with that!

"Forget it..." She giggled: Arya Stark actually giggled. "We don't need-"
"Now I know you're too wasted." Gendry pushed past her, jamming the key in and turning over the engine.

"Fine jerk," she slumped back in her seat, "I'm gonna remember this tomorrow..." Her words trailed off as she curled up against the door. "Don't think... you're getting off easy..." Then her head bumped against the window and she immediately passed out and started snoring softly. Gendry stifled a laugh and shook his head: gods, she was so cute. Hopefully she wouldn't remember anything that happened tonight in the morning. When they arrived at the park he went to her side to slowly opened the passenger door, quickly reaching inside to catch her as she fell out.

"Whoa-whoa," he hauled her limp body into his arms and she stirred against his chest. "Arry... a little help here." She grumbled something he couldn't begin to understand and loosely held around his neck as he kicked her door closed.

"Gendry," she mumbled and nuzzled her face against his neck, "I love you sooo much." He chuckled softly at her drunken rambling. "It's true..." She mumbled nonsense as he walked through the dark woods until he approached the clearing and carried her into the tent. "I'ma kill anyone who tries," she hiccuped, "to come between us... I'll kill..." When he tried to set her down, she clung to him. "You're mine and I'll never... never-ever-ever give you up." He pulled her hands free from his jacket and spread a blanket over her.

"Shh, go to sleep Arry." Gendry crawled down to her feet to remove her boots and kicked off his own shoes. After, he set both pairs outside the tent before zipping the flap closed and shrugged out of his jacket. He was surprised to find her propped up and peering at him through squinted eyes.

"Pants," she whined, flopping back and helplessly attempting to unfasten her jean button. He slapped her hands aside and helped get her jeans off, a bit like undressing a wriggling fish. Only then did she huff a heavy breath, pull up her covers and turned over onto her side. "Cuddle," came her muffled demand.

"Yes, milady," he grabbed another blanket since Arya never shared. Then he formed himself around her little bundle and put an arm around her. "I love you," he whispered, wondering if she was already asleep.

"You better..." Arry's voice was somewhere between a slur a grumble. "Or I'll kill you." Gendry was fine with that, he rather die by her hands than ever stop loving Arry. He was dead tired but he couldn't sleep so he just listened to the sounds of the forest as her slow breathing turned to snores. It occurred to him to go to her father: confess everything and tell him he thought Arya was sick. But she expected him to trust her and follow her lead. And she'd kill him. But what was the right thing to do? Before he met her that question was never hard to answer.

"Gods," he whispered, "I know I haven't prayed in a long time and I don't even know if you're there... If you could just give me a sign, let me know what to do-" Gendry felt stupid so he stopped, squeezed his eyes shut, and tried to get some sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I've basically spent the last two days in a mini-coma and feel a tiny bit better (with a renewed hatred for the human body's immune response). A person truly learns the meaning of 'pathetic' when they're wandering through their home - in a torn terrycloth bathrobe that makes me feel like The Dude (without the carpet obsession) - sniveling
because they can't find a trash can that isn't overflowing with used tissues. FML T_T
MYRCELLA

She had been watching Sansa all night, waiting for the right moment to approach her. A little liquid courage from the keg already made her just a teensy bit tipsy but it certainly helped. Also, she felt just a smidgen sick to her tummy. Finally, Sandor walked off to greet some other boy, leaving his girlfriend alone at the buffet table... it was now or never! Myrcella steeled herself for rejection as she stumbled across the room to stand beside the sister of the man she loved.

"I ha-have to a-apologize to you," Myrcella stammered. No-no-no, don't act like an idiot! She needed to befriend this girl if she ever hoped to gain Robb's attention. It was almost too much to hope Joffrey had not ruined everything already, as usual!

"Whatever for?" Sansa's thin red eyebrows narrowed in puzzlement, still pretty as a picture... The entire Stark family was so good-looking.

"You're so nice! I just..." Myrcella had to fight back the tears threatening to from her eyes. "I should have said this when we were in Winterfell," she choked as her throat became swollen and constricted. Her eyes burned and she felt humiliated for not being able to control her emotions like a child. Robb was already a man and she could not afford to keep acting like a little girl if she ever hoped to reach his level!

"There-there," Sansa patted her on the shoulder, "whatever it is I already forgive you. So take your time and tell me what is wrong."

"I wanted us to be good friends but I was too chicken to stick up for you when you had a falling out with the cheer squad." Myrcella bowed her head with shame. "They had no right to judge Sandor unfairly... I know he is a nice person. All of Joffrey's other friends have been mean to me but he never was. But I never spoke up... And on top of that, I knew Joffrey must have done something to make Arya attack him but I did not say anything my parents." She really regretted it and felt like the world's biggest coward. "I'm so sorry, Sansa."

"Thank you for saying so," Sansa gave her a kind of smile, "and I never once stopped considering you my friend. Really, I should apologize for not making an effort to spend some time with you. We are teammates after all."

"Oh not at all, I'm the one at fault!" Myrcella wondered how she ever thought this kind girl would hold a grudge against her. "You're the nicest girl and I'm horrible..."

"That's not true" Sansa protested gently, "I would never expect you to take my side over your brother's, even if you think I am in the right. I'm sure your parents are going through a difficult time right now and need your support. And I completely understand what it is like to worry about what other people think. Wanting to fit in is something everyone goes through and it certainly doesn't make you 'horrible'."

"You're so brave to have stood up to everyone," Myrcella sighed heavily. "I can never be like that..."
Even if she knew he would reject her, she should have expressed her feelings to Robb back in Winterfell. At least then, she would not be living with such tormenting regret!

"I like you very much just the way you are, Myrcella." Sansa smiled brightly and she was so pretty and kind. "How about this... Missa and I are planning a day at the mall tomorrow, do you want to come?"

"I would love to!" Myrcella blushed at her own over-excitement... Finally, something was going good for a change.

"You're so adorable," Sansa laughed, "I know we will have a blast tomorrow. Call me if you need to be picked up."

"Thanks Sansa," Myrcella backed away to find a quiet spot to celebrate. "See you tomorrow," she turned on her heel and practically skipped to the nearby porch doors and stepped outside. "Yes!" She pumped her fist in victory, not quite able to believe it went so well. All she had to do was get on Sansa's good side and it would be her ticket to Robb's side. It had to work... even if it took years she knew what her heart wanted.

DANY

It was clear that Drogo had enough partying for one night so Dany decided to show him around the outside grounds. He was always more comfortable out-of-doors than with making polite small talk and she wouldn't have him any other way. The only reason she came was because Marge really needed the support, having so recently had her heart stepped on by that cretin! She led him out through the side entrance and down the cobblestone path to the rose garden.

"Oops!" The back of her heel caught on a cobblestone and she nearly fell flat on her face but Drogo caught her just in time. "I'm afraid I've had a little too much," she held onto his arms, laughing as she found her footing. Dany stepped back from his steadying hold and looked up to the sky to see the stars were brightly shining. "Ah! It's so beautiful tonight: I've never seen so many stars!" When she looked back at him, he was not gazing in wonder at the stars but at her.

"Zhey jalan attthrari anni dili ale," he lifted a finger to stroke her cheek and Dany felt her pulse speeding up. All of this Dothraki sweet-talking was making her dizzy! A girl never tires of hearing she sparkles brighter than the stars.

"It is a little cold..." She moved towards him again, slipping her arms around his waist and under his warm coat and tilting her head back to look up at him. "Am I acting like a fool?" Surely her drunken babbling about the stars must make her seems so silly when he was always serious.

"Yer tokik charat avvos," his words translated slowly in her head but the meaning of them warmed her heart. He was telling her that she never sounded foolish to him. How did everything in Dothraki sound that much more beautiful?

"Come this way," she slipped her hand into his to guide him further through the garden to a large greenhouse out back. "Marge and I snuck out here once, to smoke cigarettes." Dany pushed open the door and led him inside. "It was horrible and we never did it again," she laughed and turned around to face Drogo. His dark eyes observed her, watched her, and made her feel weak and powerful at once but in the most delightful way. He deserved to know that she loved him but it wouldn't seem genuine at the moment because she was just a little drunk.

Dany lifted her hand to trace his cheek with her fingertips, up the square line of his jaw to curl behind his neck. Liquid heat spread down her spine as his hands circled her waist to draw her closer.
He lowered his face closer to hers, always watching. A small gasp escaped her mouth just before he covered her lips in a kiss that was hungry yet soft, passionate and gentle. The tenderness of his kiss shocked her, not that he was a rough lover or that she didn't like it when he was. But there was a new carefulness to way his hands held her and his mouth caressed hers.

As she drew away to remove his jacket, pulling in down from his shoulders, his quick breathing created a light fog between them. Dany flashed a mischievous smile before carrying the coat to a nearby table and spreading it down on the surface. Then she turned around to face him, braced her hands against the edge and hopped up. It must be a gamer thing that they ended up fucking on so many tabletops. He came to stand in front of her and resumed his tender kissing, holding her face in his hands as her head reeled with beer and lust.

Drogo's gentleness stirred her desire into frenzy, hindering her appreciation of his sweetness. Her hands flew to the front of his shirt, forcing open the buttons to caress his warm skin and tracing the hard muscle underneath. Dany gripped his shoulders and hauled him towards her, licking her tongue over his lips. He opened his mouth to her desperate kiss as her tongue delved inside his hot mouth. The kiss was wet and sloppy but she imbibed just enough to relish the carelessness as she desperately sought more.

Their hands moved aggressively as if they were both allies and adversaries engaged in a single battle. She bunched her skirt up above her knees while he pulled off her panties and stuffed them into his pocket. Her pulse pounded in her ears, adrenaline rushing through her body and making her fingers tremble as she freed his cock. Dany leaned back to brace her hands behind her as his hands fitted around her hips and pulled her to the edge.

Dany panted eagerly, slipping her hand between them to curl around his hardness and guided him to her slick entrance. His arm wrapped around her waist as his hand ran up her thigh to position her hips before he thrust into her. She released an eager gasp, returning her hands to his shoulders as he slowly withdrew and then thrust deep to fill her again. He tugged her flush against his body so that she barely touched the table and tilted his forehead against hers.

Drogo panted as he thrust deeper into her and her hands gripped the strained fabric of his shirt. She turned her face into his neck, unable to breathe or think as his tantalizing heat warmed her body. His pulse thundered under her mouth as she muffled her soft cries against his neck. He bowed his head towards her, his warm lips tenderly kissing her neck and bare shoulder. Dany crushed her chest against his as overwhelming shocks of pleasure tore through her.

"Anha dothrak niqikkheya," her trembling lips brushed against his ear, telling him she was already close. Her head swayed back and she raised her heavy-lidded eyes to meet his, which gazed intently at her.

"Kisha jadat niyanqoy," he groaned in answer, encouraging her to wait for him. Then he dipped his head to capture her lips in a fiery kiss, the gentleness replaced with hungry desperation. She gasped as he released a husky moan against her mouth as he held her flush against him and clutched her hips. His hand running down to cup her thigh and drew her leg higher over his hip. He braced a hand behind her on the table and thrust deep into her, hard and steady as she clung to him.

"Drogo," she called out his name as he quickened the pace, her nails digging into his shoulders. He moaned loudly as he pushed deeper inside her. She was teetering on the edge, of the table and of ecstasy as her body trembled. His cock throbbed within her, his need to release building up, and drew her closer to her own climax. Then a depthless light flashed across her eyes as white-hot pleasure crashed around her. Dany felt as though she was falling and flying at once. The sensation seemed to last forever until he pumped the last of his release and finally stilled.
They held onto each other until their breathing slowed and heart rates returned to normal. He let out a shuddering breath and loosed his hold on her as she leaned back. She sighed, pulling him to down to her for a kiss but Drogo hovered just above her face. Dany's eyes opened wide in dazed confusion but saw the determination glinting in his gaze.

"Anha zhilak yera," his eyes locked with hers, recreating the bumpy start of their relationship. She was on a table, on which she had been properly fucked, and he told her that he loved her. This was her chance: just say it!

"I love you," she found it was surprisingly easy once she said it out loud, "norethaan." He closed his eyes and a look of peace relaxed his features before he pulled her against his chest. In his arms, her life was just simpler and nothing had to be explained. He was a man, she was a woman, and they loved each other, end of story. Everyone had such high expectations of her but all she wanted was to stay with him and live at the ranch. She loved being with the horses and working with Drogo. Was that too ungrateful for her to cast off her privileges and live as an ordinary woman?

Many promising women end up working low skilled jobs because their families were unable to send them to school. Part of her wanted to become the leader she was always encouraged to be but her true peace was found at the ranch. Her future seemed to be hurdling towards her like a runaway train and she could not even step off the tracks. Dany had to make some decisions about her life and fast or else it would pass her by. One thing she knew for certain: she would never let go of this happiness.

LORAS

He already fulfilled his brotherly obligations by helping Marge host her party and he was d-o-n-e for the night. The party was dying down so he wandered outside to the garden and sat on his favorite stone bench. The air was cold but he had enough alcohol in his system to keep warm and his jacket was bundled up tight. Loras fished his phone out of his inside jacket pocket to dial the first contact and waited as it rang.

"Hey babe," Renly answered and all seemed to be right with the world. How could the man have such a beautiful voice? It wasn't fair because Renly was already better-looking than anyone had the right to be. And smart and charismatic and generous... Oh, his drunken state was making his mind overly romantic.

"Hey yourself, what are you up to?" Loras leaned back to lie down on the bench, tucking an arm under his head.

"Studying," Renly sighed and it sounded like a windstorm in Loras' ear.

"Bullshit," Loras snorted a laugh as he lifted a leg up to brace his foot against the stone.

"I'm serious," Renly protested, "there's an exam coming up that I'm bound to fail." Loras rolled his eyes, unwilling to pity someone who always put off studying to the last minute. "What's up with you?"

"I'm stuck at my sister's boring high school party." Loras stared up at the clear winter sky and admired the twinkling stars, twirling a curly lock on the back of his head. It was such a gorgeous night and it was a shame he couldn't share it with the man he loved. This whole 'long-distance relationship' thing had a bad reputation for a reason.

"Coming from a high schooler," Renly scoffed.
"But I am anything but boring, darling," Loras chuckled before he sobered again, feeling too lonely to laugh. "Being at a party made me miss you." It seemed a lifetime ago since Joff's party, where he cornered Renly. He intended to have a single night of passion to get over his long-time crush but that night changed everything...

"I'll try to come south when I can," Renly was always making that same promise but his visits were far too infrequent.

"Hurry, I'm wasting away from boredom." Loras was actually anything but bored lately, dealing with this Joffrey bullshit! "Oh, I almost forgot to mention-

"Here it comes," Renly interrupted with an annoyed tone but Loras had already started.

"Your nephew is a scum-sucking asshole from the deepest pits of the seven hells." It had to be said, as many times as Loras needed to say it. Fuck that piece of shit, if he showed his face in Kings Landing again Joff would wish he'd never been born.

"I know, I know." Renly was obviously sick and tired of hearing about the nephew he barely knew. "You want to book a flight to his boarding school and kick his ass together?"

"He deserves it," Loras grumbled and shifted against the cold bench seeping through his coat. But when he imagined him and Renly giving Joff a proper ass-whooping it made him smile. "You know how pissed he would be that some gays beat him bloody?"

"You need to get over it, babe." Renly did not even consider that these family tensions would lead to problems for them... If their relationship ever got serious.

"Easy for you to say." Loras sulked, "you don't have a sister. She's acting crazy, dressing like a fucking septa, throwing parties when she's heartbroken... I'm sorry... I know that I sound like a broken record."

"It's not that you don't have the right to be pissed," Renly relented, "but I worry about you stressing this much."

"You're worried about me?" Loras smiled in spite of his ongoing annoyance with Joff and Renly's lukewarm reaction to the entire incident.

"Of course I worry, you still haven't applied here yet." That Renly cared to nag him about getting accepted into Stormlands University made Loras giddy. "January will be here before you know it."

"I will soon," Loras promised. "I'm taking the College Admissions Exam next week." And he was so anxious he might die of a stress-induced heart-attack.

"Nervous?" Renly sounded too smug so Loras refused to admit his true feelings.

"Not at all," he lied smoothly, "I've had private tutors all my life to prepare me for this test."

"Careful Tyrell," Renly warned teasingly. "Being a rich spoiled brat can only take you so far in life."

"Coming from a rich spoiled brat," Loras countered. "Enough banter and small talk, when are you coming to visit?!"

"Soon, I swear." Again with the promises, he wanted dates and times and facts not vague pacification.
"Maiden's Day?" Loras tried to sound nonchalant but knew he failed. Who doesn't dream of spending the most romantic day of the year with the person they pined over for years? And then finally got him through some unlikely miracle Loras still didn't quite understand? Well, maybe not that specific but in general.

"You're such a kid," Renly laughed at him.

"Am not!" Loras' protest only made Renly laugh harder. "So...?"

"I'll come for Maiden's Day," Renly gave in but still managed to sound arrogant. "And we'll eat some candy and whatever else you want."

"Candy is for children," he grinned at the night sky, "all I want is you." Loras wanted to talk all night but it was chilly and Renly did need the study time. "I'll let you go so you can study so you better ace that test."

"I really do miss you," Renly's voice was soft and warmed Loras despite the cold air.

"I love you," Loras murmured, they had only said it to each other a few times and it still made him nervous.

"Love you too," came Renly's immediate reply and Loras grinned so wide it hurt his cheeks, "bye."

"Bye," he hung up and set the phone down on his chest, continuing to smile up at the sky. If he could make wishes in all the visible stars in the sky, he'd wish the same thing for every single one. 'I wish I could always stay by his side.' But he was no child to believe in wishing on stars, even if he was kinda buzzed. His flawless transcript and outstanding athletic leadership would get him to SU and Renly's side. Next fall couldn't come soon enough.

Chapter End Notes

A 'non-traditional haiku' that speaks to my current condition:

In my throat.
Along this scratchy air tube,
this cold hurts.

I'm actually on the mend now (never had a fever so *whew* no flu) but I look around and see my house is a mess! How did carrot juice get on the floor? Is that carrot juice...? It's like blood spatter but orange! Was a carrot murdered in my living room?! If I just go to bed and pull the covers over my head it will all just go away...
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A Sheep in Lion's Skin

MYRCELLA

Because it was Sunday, the mall was nearly empty so she and the girls had plenty of space to do some serious shopping. They combed the mall for every cute thing available for purchase and did the whole 'pretty woman' dressing room thing. Exhausted from their shopping excursion, they finally decided to take a break at the food court. After getting some hot coco they sat down at a table and struck up conversation but soon a buzzing sound interrupted their chatting.

"Oh good!" Sansa beamed happily at her phone before looking up. "Sorry... I got some good news." She replaced her phone in her handbag. "My sister has been sick but apparently she was feeling better this morning."

"You're so caring." Myrcella was surprised at how envious she felt of Arya right at that moment, having Sansa for a sister must be a dream. She hoped that someday she could call them both 'sister'!

"Not an abnormal amount," Sansa ducked her head bashfully, "I noticed how well you get along with Tom."

"He's a sweet kid," Myrcella really did like Tommen but she always had to watch over him. She wished she knew what it was like to have someone support and protect her. "I know how awful it must sound but our house is a happier place without Joff there." It was almost unnerving at first, how quiet the house was. Even mother and father argued considerably less, though they hardly spoke to each other at all, but it was still better than them screaming at each other.

"I truly hope that Joffrey can grow up a bit while he is gone," Sansa replied with typical grace and maturity. "It seems as though Margaery does not hold a grudge and neither do I." Myrcella also respected Margaery for her ability to come out of this whole experience stronger than ever.

"She says her freedom from him was worth the suffering," Missa shrugged and smiled wryly. "Marge can be dramatic but I think she means it."

"I'm just grateful she's cool enough not to hold a grudge against me!" Myrcella lifted her eyes heavenward as if thanking the seven heavens. "I think the only person who misses Joff is our mother. He calls her all the time, crying that he wants to come home, it's so childish." She rolled her eyes and heaved a sigh, shaking her head. "But he is my brother... I really want him to grow up and stop being such a jerk. My family owes you a lot," she told Sansa.

"It was mostly Arya," Sansa deflected the compliment, "she's the real hero in the family." Myrcella wasn't in any of Arya's classes but she was already famous among the freshman. She was known for arguing with the teachers over the accuracy of their teachings and other acts of student heroism.

"I think you Starks must be made of sterner stuff," Missa commented before taking another sip of her coco and Myrcella agreed.

"I hope so," Sansa smiled and then nodded thoughtfully. "You know, I think we are." Her phone buzzed again. "Oh! I am so popular today..." She fished her phone out of her purse and studied the
screen for a moment before returning the phone to her bag. "Apparently, Sandor misses me," she sniffed. "Probably because he kept abandoning me at the party last night."

"I had the opposite problem," Missa heaved a heavy sigh. "Torgo was stuck to my side all night."

"Sounds like a 'problem' I wish Sandor had..." Sansa sighed too and stared off into at the ceiling sky with a wistful expression on her pretty face.

"It's so strange that you're his girlfriend." Myrcella took a sip of her hot coco but upon looking up, she saw two sets of eyes staring at her. "Oh, I didn't mean-" She rushed into an explanation. "What I mean to say is he never dated anyone as far as I know so it's a surprise he is dating at all. Of course, we were never friends but I have known him for years. That's why it is so surprising to me that Joffrey started this whole fight, they were friends up until this year. He used to sleep over sometimes; I think his dad was... Oh, I babble sometimes."

"Do you have any stories about Sandor?" Sansa leaned forward eagerly.

"Hmmm, let me think..." Myrcella tapped a finger against her chin. "Last year Tommen and I were playing with a toy plane but it got stuck in a tree. It was a small tree but I was even shorter back then and I couldn't reach. We went inside to ask Joffrey to get it down for us but he just yelled at us... Then Sandor just got up, nobody said anything and he always looks sorta angry so Tom and I were just frozen. And he walked past us to the tree, got down the plane, and handed it to us without a word."

"That is the best story I've ever heard." Sansa exhaled between her smiling lips and rested her chin in her hand.

"I knew he was a nice person from then on and I guess it isn't all that surprising that someone else noticed it too." Myrcella reached forward and patted Sansa on the back of her hand. "You recognized Sandor's goodness and decided to date him no matter what anyone said. Ah, I'm so jealous... I've only ever fell for two guys and both of them are completely out of my reach."

"Anyone we know?" Missa smiled over the top of her cup as she brought it to her lips.

"Loras Tyrell was first," Myrcella laughed at herself. "Obviously everyone knows why he's out of my reach. And..." She hesitated, wondering if it was too soon to admit her undying devotion to the oldest of the Stark brood. "Your brother, Robb."

"Oh dear, he's stolen another heart." Sansa daintily placed her palm over the center of her chest and assumed a solemn expression. "Take from me, and I say this with love, Robb is a player. Adore him with caution."

"He could break my heart anytime..." Myrcella blushed at her honest confession. "I think I might have a thing for older brothers because mine is so horrible."

"Aw..." Sansa made a sympathetic noise.

"I think because I don't have any brothers I do not understand boys at all," Missa sulked.

"Aww!" Sansa thumped her closed fist against the table like a gavel. "Girls, forget boys and their mysterious ways for today. We obviously have more shopping to do!"

"Those pumps with the black lace over nude patent leather are calling to me..." Myrcella raised the pitch of her voice. "Myrcella, buy me, I'm so pretty!"
"Well shoes don't lie," Missa nodded her head seriously, "unlike boys."

"That's the spirit!" Sansa pumped her fist in the air. "Shoes rule and boys drool!" They all got up from their table like they were charging into battle just to throw away their cups. Then their group marched aside one another back to the shoe store. Sometimes, it's really great to be a girl.

MISSANDEI

After dropping Sansa and Myrcella off at their houses, Missa went to a gas station to top off the tank. Sometimes it is near impossible to live one's life as a girl, and there is far too much conflicting information on how to do so. If only it were as easy as carrying the right handbag that matched her skirt... From head to toe there were rules about how to look and carry oneself, even if she followed them all, there was no guarantee of happiness.

In fact, the purpose of fashion seemed to ensure the pleasure of those looking, rather than the wearer. The bonding between women over the sport of shopping was something Missa immensely enjoyed. However, she questioned the outcome; last night was the perfect example. She braved the cold to wear something daring and objectively attractive and it did nothing to serve her intention. He told her how beautiful she looked, as usual, and then Torgo only held her hand. How... utterly unsatisfying.

All of these parties she attended invariably ended with her friends pairing off and leaving her alone to stew in her virginity. After acquiring a boyfriend, she thought that scenario would change. It did, now she had company as she inwardly bemoaned her lack of intimacy. As she pumped the gas, she thought about what she should do with the rest of her day and decided to text Torgo. He should at least know how frustrated and confused she was, hopefully he had some sort of explanation... She got back into her car and picked up her cell phone.

'Do you want to'- She deleted those words and stared at the screen... 'I have some free time, should I come pick you up?' Missa hit the send button, tossed the phone down on the passenger side, and chewed on the inside of her lip as she waited. After a moment, the phone buzzed with his reply.

'Sure,' was all he replied. Missa heaved a sigh, stuffed the phone in her purse, and drove to Torgo's house. She let the car idle in his driveway for a few minutes, considering running away, before texting him that she arrived.

"Hey," he greeted her as he got into the passenger side, acting like his usual self. "You look-"

"Where would you like to go?" She shifted into reverse and held her foot on the break, turning to face him.

"Are you still mad?" Torgo peeked at her sideways through the gap between his face and his glasses frame. Of course, she was scaring him, sometimes the way he looked at her made her feel like comic book villain. Perhaps it was a bad idea to pick him up today, her mind was a mess!

"What makes you think I'm mad?" Missa released her foot and turned around to back out of the driveway. She did not care anymore where they were going, just that they went somewhere.

"I said 'no','" he cleared his throat, "when you asked me to go upstairs last night." Oh how good of him to bring that up, she had almost forgotten about that humiliation. Right after she watched Dany slip away with Drogo, Missa whispered the request in his ear he actually said 'oh, um, I'd rather not'. Who says that?! Torgo then discovered a kinship with Theon Greyjoy over something called 'underground dubstep'. Being a by-stander of that conversation might have been the worst thing that ever happened to her.
"I am not 'mad'..." Just confused, hurt, embarrassed, and a multitude of other unpleasant adjectives. "If you're not going to explain then I really don't want to talk about it." Missa forced herself to drive at an appropriate speed level through the residential area.

"I was nervous," Torgo's weak protest did little to balm the sting of rejection. Of course, he was nervous, everyone in the world gets nervous over their burgeoning sexual life! That is expected! It seemed that he did not like her enough for his anxiety to be assuaged by his desire for her. So no matter how often he called her beautiful, he did not truly find her attractive. In the meantime, shameless licentious imaginings constantly interrupted her thoughts.

"I'm nervous too but I'm willing to brave a little anxiety because I really like you, Torgo," Missa noticed a boarded up house with a realtor's sign out front and pulled into the driveway. She threw the car into park, unbuckled her seatbelt, and turned her body to face him. "It's not like I wanted... I do not want our first time to be at some party. I just wanted to be alone with you! Why would you say no?"

"In case you haven't noticed," he scoffed a laugh, still facing forward and glaring at the vacant house's garage. "I'm sorta entirely pathetic and that's not going to change!"

"I have wondered this entire time if you actually like me," she slumped back into her seat and stared down at her hands folded in her lap.

"I like you too much..." Torgo always said things like that but actions speak louder than words and honestly even his words were too quiet. Where was the passion?! She felt it for him! Missa squeezed her eyes shut and forced herself to calm down. What were they even fighting about? In truth, her expectation that he would be the one initiating or at least receptive to intimate contact was completely wrong.

"I guess this is our first real fight." And it was her fault because she made incorrect assumptions based of a false understanding of male sexuality. "I'm sorry, Torgo..." The other possibility was that she herself was wrong, that her libido was unusual for her gender. "Do you think I am too... fast?" Easy, slutty, whorish, a jezebel... Her mother told her that way of thinking was wrong but the words sliced through her like hot knives.

"No!" He shifted to face her but she did not look up from her hands twisting together in her lap. "Gods no! I do want you... but every time I think about it, I'm scared that I'll mess it up. I'm not the manliest guy, I know that." Torgo seemed to share her doubts about being an outlier of their respective genders. "Does it sound crazy that I want to wait a bit more?"

"Not at all," she shifted to face him but kept her eyes down, "I like that you are cautious and like to think about things." Missa made so many wrong assumptions about Torgo, even when she admired his exceptionality. So much for being a 'genius', everyone is an idiot when they are in love.

"Actually," he chuckled nervously and pushed his glassed up on the bridge of his nose. "I'm trying to work up the courage to ask some of my friends for advice since I am a novice on the subject."

"Excellent idea," she marveled at his insight. Why had she never considered asking Dany and Marge for advice? She spent so long blocking out their stories, which she perceived as bragging, and that blinded her to their value as advisors. "I will do the same and we can compare the information we gather. Sex is just like any other endeavor, preparation can only help."

"I think so too," he smiled at her and she hoped her next words would not be 'pushing'.

"But..." Missa used her most gentle voice and tried not to sound too desperate. "I also think we could
advance our kissing technique in the meantime, as a sort of... research. My house is empty because my mother is visiting her sister... Do you want to come over?"

"Sure," Torgo breathed the word so quietly she barely heard it. Missa nodded once, replaced her seatbelt, and backed out of the driveway to head towards her house. The whole ride over was quiet so she turned up the radio tuned into the classical station. Soft violin filled the silence but her heart was racing like she was listening to 'O Fortuna'. After she pulled up in her driveway, they got out and walked up to the house. She fumbled a bit putting the key into the lock but finally it slid home and she turned it over to let them inside.

"Home sweet home," she joked nervously as she closed the door behind them and then pointed out the shelf in the entry for shoes. "Let me give you the grand tour." Missa showed Torgo every nook and cranny of her house before slowly making the way back to her room. "And here is my room." She led him inside and watched as he glanced around at her spartan room.

"It's nice," he was still hovering in the doorway so she approached and tugged on his jacket until he handed it over.

"Perhaps..." Missa turned away to pull off her own jacket and laid them both over her desk chair. "If you could tell me what you are comfortable with..." She faced him again, bracing her hands on the chair behind her. "Then I would not push you past that point."

"I don't have a hard line that I won't cross..." Torgo tugged at the collar of his shirt nervously. "Uh... I don't know... what's your line then?"

"When she started dating I went on birth control that weekend," she answered bluntly. "I am well past tired of guarding my virginity now that the right person has come along." Torgo stared at her open-mouthed. "To be honest I worried I would have to pick some random guy and just 'get it over with' before I met you. Now that I finally have the perfect boyfriend... I want to actually 'have' you. I acknowledge you are not the 'manliest' but you are definitely the man for me."

"I don't know what to say," his words wheezed through his lips. "Think I need to sit down..." He stumbled forward and plopped down on her bed.

"I don't want to rush you into anything," she hurried to reassure him as she moved to sit by his side. "Just know that I want to be with you whenever you are ready."

"Missa..." Torgo's head hung forward. "The last thing I want to do is disappoint you," he said it as though he thought it was inevitable.

"You haven't yet," she tucked her fingers under his chin and lifted his eyes to meet her to give him an encouraging smile. His beautiful eyes studied her face for a moment before he leaned forward to lightly press his lips against hers. Then he pulled back, blowing a slow exhale between his pursed lips.

"Do you want to..." Torgo choked a bit and cleared his throat, blinking a few times. "Should we lay down?" Missa could not help her wide grin as she nodded, lifting her hands to pinch his glasses and pulled them off his face. She stood up to fold the glasses and set them on her side table. He moved back towards the center of the mattress to lie down and folded his hands across his stomach to stare up at the ceiling. Her heart raced wildly as she crawled onto the bed to stretch out on her side beside him, propped up on one elbow.

"Will you hold me?" Missa held her breath as she waited for his answer. His hands unlocked and his arm circled around her to tuck her against his body. She tilted her head against the same pillow his
was using and even that small action sent a thrill through her. All of her automatic functions seemed to go into overdrive, respiration, pulse, and heart rate. At the same time, her cognitive functions failed to put together even simple thoughts. Her body wanted to press closer to him but she restrained the scorching urge. "Is this alright?"

"Better than alright," he laughed and his hand squeezed her upper arm.

"Can I kiss you?" Missa's breath hitched as he turned his face towards hers, his dark eyes focused on her lips before he slowly nodded. His breathing quickened and their rapid breaths mingled as she lifted her lips to touch his. Her eyes fluttered shut as a growing ache settled deep in her core and her skin buzzed from head to toe. The soft and pliant kiss only made her want more but she only allowed her hand to splay over his chest.

For an instant time stopped when Torgo pulled her against his chest and cupped a hand behind her head to press their lips together. Her whole body was paralyzed from the shock but a rising heat spread from her lips to all of her limbs, unfreezing her. She arched against his chest, humming at the contact of his body's heat against hers. He tore his mouth away from hers as he released a soft cry and she moved her lips to his neck. His chest rose and fell from his breathless panting and she could feel his pulse pounding.

"I'm a true idiot," he panted as he stared up at the ceiling, "to avoid this."

"You should just trust me," she kissed his cheek, "I am a genius." Missa laid her head down, tilting her forehead against his cheek and curling a hand around his waist. His arms pulled her close to hold her and she slipped her shin between his. Earlier she had grievances with girlhood in general... But being Torgo's girl was an entirely different matter altogether, on that front she had no complaints.

Chapter End Notes

Yay, a cute chapter! I needed to write this cuteness because I'm really nervous about the next Arya POV chapter, entitled... "Oh Good, Therapy".
Oh Good, Therapy

ARYA

In the end, she caved, not knowing where else to turn after getting a clean bill of physical health. Arya guessed it was good news that she wasn't dying... Therapy - even the word made her sick to her stomach but in fairness, everything made her sick lately. After school, she took the bus to the mental health center in the city and found the building was larger than she assumed. The facility appeared newly built with stylish modern furnishings. It was all a bit suspicious to her - as this was supposed to be a non-profit organization.

She signed in and sat down on a comfortable sofa in the impressive waiting room, which provided free wireless internet. A few kids were already seated inside - one of them had what looked to be his mother with him. It was quiet but it felt more like the silence of a library than a doctor's office. Arya spent the wait organizing her music playlists until her name was - correctly - called. A woman led the way back to a private room set up like an office with a desk shoved in one corner and two chairs facing each other.

Arya explored the room - there were bookshelves next to the desk covered in texts. They ranged in topic from psychology to astrology. Some of the books were old and worn while others were still shiny in their plastic covers. While the shelf was bursting, the desk was bare in comparison with only a few nick-knacks and no pictures. She played with the newton's cradle until a surprisingly handsome man walked in.

"Hello Arya," he closed the door behind him. "I am Dr. H'ghar." More like Dr. Hottie - what a babe! "How are you today?" Doc H'ghar took the seat opposite her and gave her a friendly smile. Oh, so he wanted to be friends - psh. Fuck - that.

"Cool accent - where are you from?" She was only here to check it out and see what 'therapy' was all about - not to 'share' how she was 'feeling' today. Arya plopped down in the seat across from him and threw her bag onto the floor.

"I am originally from Lorath," he smiled expectantly at her but Arya wasn't nearly ready to pour out her sob story. She would never 'open up' to some stranger just because he had a pretty smile and hot voice. Gotta try a little harder than that, doc.

"Why would you want to listen to people's problems?" She crossed her arms and leaned back into the plush leather.

"I like to help people," he was still smiling. "Yet we are not here to talk about me. Why don't you tell me something about yourself?"

"I can tell you I think this is a waste of time," she retorted. "I don't see how telling my life story to a stranger is going to make me feel better."

"Do you have a hard time talking about yourself?" Doc H'ghar crossed his leg to rest his ankle on his knee and folded his hands on top.
"What's to talk about?" Arya's eyes flitted towards the desk, trying to find some distraction. What was she even doing here?! This was so fucking stupid...

"What makes you happy?" His question had her sneering and rolling her eyes. "Sad? Angry? Do you have a pet?" That last one made her smile and the Doc caught it.

"I kinda do," she relented. "My DnD character has a wolf companion." When she was playing DnD was probably the most relaxing part of her week, getting sucked into the story. The quicksand inside her mind froze its slow pull when she could pretend to be someone else. When that bell rang and everyone packed up, she just wanted to break down and sob until she passed out. Thankfully, she avoided that humiliation so far.

"So you like to play games?" He braced his arm on his leg and leaned forward - don't get so eager doc, she didn't intend to be an easy nut to crack. "Are you friends with the other players?"

"Yeah," she shrugged, "the people are what make it fun and my boyfriend is in the group too." As Arry Wolfborn, she could fight her way out of any problem and her friends had her back. Also, Gendry was just her comrade so she didn't have to worry so much about disappointing him more than everyone else.

"And how is the relationship?" There was no judgment, nor really even any curiosity to his questions. It was more like the doc was solving a puzzle. Was she a game to him?

"Good," Arya curled her legs up to sit cross-legged on the seat, not caring if her shoes were dirty. "He's perfect."

"Perfect," his curiosity was piqued, "how so?" Arya panicked and wondered why she even talked about Gendry - the doc was getting to her already. "If you are uncomfortable-"

"I'm not 'uncomfortable'," she snapped. "All I meant was he's attractive, but doesn't know how much, so he's not arrogant about it." Arya rubbed her fingers over her brow and stared at the doc's shoe. "He's kind and generous... you know - perfect."

"I get the sense that you feel undeserving," his neutral tone surprised her but she still fought to keep her guard up.

"I think that's just how love is," she reasoned in her most nonchalant tone. "I guess he probably sees me the same way..." But she just couldn't understand how he could see her as 'perfect' when he set the bar so high.

"Let's talk some more about the game," he backtracked and Arya felt her tense shoulders relax. "How does playing make you feel?"

"It's a good stress-reliever because I don't have to think about anything else but the game." The rest of her time was spent clawing at the walls of the endless swirling black pit she was being dragged down into. Or was she falling up - being pulled by the vacuum of space only to discover the stars had all gone out. All we can see from the Earth's surface are their ghosts, representing our future as a lost dot of light. It's all so fucking pointless!

"What stresses you out?" The doc might as well request 'list everything that's ever happened to you in your entire life'.

"School," she answered without thinking, "and my parents... I miss the rest of my family." Arya wanted to call Bran and Robb more but every time she picked up the phone, her mind went blank. They'd ask how she was doing and she'd have to lie to Bran and say she's doing great. To Robb she
wouldn't even be able to say anything about Gendry - he'd never keep his mouth shut. Lies on top of dishonesty on top of deceit... All because nobody can handle the truth about anything, they all prefer to pretend the world is the way they want it to be.

"Are you parents separated?" When he asked the question, her gut reaction was to say 'no'. But then Arya realized technically the answer was 'yes' but she never thought about it that way before. It must be really hard for her parents to spend so much time apart - she knew they loved each other.

"For his business my dad had to move down here so my sister and I came with him," she clarified. "I didn't have a choice but she did." Arya didn't bother to hide her old anger at her parents for sending her south - it was a parental cop-out.

"Your parents forced you to move?" Again, the doc maintained a completely unbiased expression. How did he do that? It would be really useful for her to learn that poker-face skill. "That must have been difficult for you to accept."

"It was so brutal and a completely overreaction," she huffed in annoyance but a voice in her head screamed 'LIAR'. "Maybe not... I guess what I did was a bit extreme. Either way I was mad about it but now I'm grateful because I met Gendry - my boyfriend." Why did she keep bringing him up? She came to the appointment fully intending to not mention anything about him but she couldn't shut up.

"Are you close with your father?" There seemed to be rhyme or reason to his questions and it was throwing her off his objective. What was he getting out of this? Nobody was so selfless they wanted to devote their time to listening to teenagers whine about their lives.

"I was, before we moved here." Arya nodded her head as she answered and picked at a loose thread on her boot. "We've been butting heads for a while now."

"What about?" He couldn't ask a more complicated question - either he really sucked at his job or she hadn't wised up to his method of manipulation.

"The things we agree on would be a shorter list," she grumbled with obvious exasperation. "Getting perfect grades like Sansa is moronic and pointless. If I want to go to college, my parents can afford it so I don't have to rely on my grades." And that was bullshit because Gendry wasn't the smartest person but he made a real effort to maintain decent grades. His mom worked so hard but she could never afford to pay for her son to attend college. She won the lottery just being born in the right family.

"Sansa is your sister?" Dr. Jaqen H'ghar did not write anything down, he seemed to be memorizing the information Arya gave.

"That's right - she's another perfect person," she sniffed and frowned at the ground. "Or at least my parents think so."

"But you don't?" He was talented at that, asking those little questions like they were innocent and knocking down her guard. But... who did it hurt if she was just honest? This was probably the one place in the world she wouldn't be penalized for telling the whole truth and nothing but.

"She's pretty much perfect," she admitted - just being honest. Sansa was incredible and Arya couldn't even hate her for it. Her sister lucked out to get the pretty face and perfect body and she was smart and diligent too, the perfect daughter. Why did her parents bother to have another? "We get along well enough, she's kinda the reason I'm here." Her sister was the only person she could trust, even if the girl could be frustrating as all hells sometimes.
"Why don't you ask your parents to pay for therapy?" His question caught her off-guard because at first she wondered how he knew her family had money... Oh right, she just admitted that.

"First," she huffed a laugh, "they would freak out and insist on watching me twenty-four-seven. I'd also be afraid the shrink would break my confidence and get me into more trouble. I didn't fill out my contact info or last name so you can't rat me out even if you wanted."

"Clever girl," he looked impressed. "Clearly, you could get perfect grades if you applied yourself. Then why are you jealous of your sister's 'perfection'?"

"You cut straight to the heart," Arya narrowed her brows and gave the doc a pointed look. "I'm not jealous - I'm too smart to compete with someone outside my weight class. She's tall, beautiful, and dutiful. Even if I killed myself and got better grades than her, I still couldn't measure up - literally and figuratively. Honestly, I used to resent her a little but I think we've both changed since we moved here."

"Only good changes or are there some bad changes?" To answer him with a simple 'both' seemed like a cop-out but anything else felt like a lie.

"Depends on who you ask," she shrugged and dropped her hands in her lap. Her parents would call her 'impossible' and say she was 'going through a phase'. Her sister had changed way more but she still held the most naive worldview. Just when Arya thought they could really relate to each other, her dear sister stuck her smiling head back in the sand! Maybe Sansa was so used to her life being perfect that she couldn't see the world any other way.

"I'm asking you," he pressed.

"Sometimes I hear my parents' voice in my head," she tilted her head back to study at the ceiling texture. "They're telling me something I'm doing is wrong." Arya let her head drop and tossed her hands up in a helpless gesture. "But I don't even agree so why do I feel guilty?" Alright doc, do some fucking doctoring already!

"About what?" This Hagar character was a raging disappointment.

"Breaking their rules," she clarified in a frustrated tone.

"Which rules?" It was weird - the shorter the questions he asked the longer the answers formed in her head. And her mind immediately went to Gendry. The sweet, perfect, loving boyfriend she didn't deserve and was forced to hide. Any father should want that kind of relationship for their daughter but hers refused to even consider it.

"One is a little harder to keep hidden," it was physically uncomfortable to keep talking but her mouth just spewed out the words. "The boyfriend I told you about earlier is a big no-no in my family."

"They don't like the boy?" That was the understatement of the century. The way dad looked at Gendry, that day of 'the pool incident' was downright murderous. Mom... she didn't even want to know that Arya had a boyfriend - 'father knows best'. Way to have some backbone, mom.

"Not just that - no dating allowed at all until I turn sixteen," she scoffed. "Sansa broke that rule too but as expected she got away with it."

"But they don't like your boyfriend in particular, this... Gendry?" The way the doc said Gendry's awkward name was kinda funny with the accent.

"Yeah my dad only met him once but I could tell how much he hated him..." Arya raked a hand
through her hair. "Because he's older than me."

"How old?" The doc smiled reassuringly when her eyes snapped up. "We can stop if you're uncomfortable."

"He's eighteen - it's no big deal," she waved a hand to emphasize how little of a deal it really was.

"Does it heighten your guilt," he probed further into her head, "that your father disapproves so strongly?" Oh, gods Y-E-S - it's horrible and awful and she hated every second of every day!

"I guess," she forced her voice to hold only indifference, "no doubt it stresses me out more. I constantly worry about what would happen if dad found out."

"What do you think would happen?" His calm tone carried none of the weight of her true answer - her world would end and her life would lose its only reason for being.

"Dad would probably send me to live with my mom," that seemed the most likely scenario - her parents were prone to panic. They already tried to 'solve' her 'problem' by sending her across the continent and they'd probably do it again. "I'd lose Gendry and my new life here," she couldn't say it above a whisper. It hung over her every day when she was grounded in Winterfell - terrified that she wouldn't be allowed to go back down south. Ironically, all she'd done since coming back was try and push him away. Why did she do that?

"It sounds to me as if you have been under a great deal of stress," he commiserated - actually allowing an inflection of emotion... Careful doc, don't think you've won her over yet.

"I'm not taking anything - so don't even start," Arya stared hard at the doc to show she was serious. "This 'talking' bullshit is already hard enough to swallow so pills are out of the question." The medical industry's standards for clinical trials were sexist and ageist. Meanwhile, Big Pharma made billions off people addicted to their 'medication'. And she was supposed to trust a factory in some third-world country to get her meds right - fuck that shit!

"That is fine," he smiled even wider, "because I cannot prescribe anything to you."

"Explain," she narrowed her eyes at him.

"I am a psychologist with a doctorate in philosophy, not a medical doctor." So, this H'ghar wasn't really a 'doc' after all. "In our sessions I will teach you techniques to cope with your physical symptoms and help abate your depression." At least he didn't try to bullshit her about how she'd be better soon - false hope was something she could live without.

"Right on," Arya was surprised by his revelation but it also put her at ease that she wouldn't have to argue about medication. "So, how are you gonna help me if you don't plan to put me on some happy pills?"

"I will explain in a moment, first I have to ask... Do you feel suicidal or have the urge to hurt yourself?" He didn't ask if she wanted to hurt someone else so at least she didn't have to lie. No way was she telling someone she just met that she had murder fantasies.

"No..." Wanting to live a different life than her own wasn't the same as wanting to die. Arya just wished she could pack up anything important and go check out what the rest of the world had to offer. But Gendry would never come with her and she didn't want to leave him... dumbass.

"You came here because you are having a physical response to your emotional state," he stated his understanding of her condition. "Your menstrual cycle stopped and you suffer chronic nausea and
insomnia. Correct?" It seemed his voice was quieter, a stronger hint of sympathy hiding behind his professional veneer. Maybe this guy wasn't as 'cool' as he seemed.

"That's my life in a nutshell." Also, she forgot what it was like to be happy and the more she tried to be happy the bigger the void inside her grew. It was like living in a nightmare and all Arya wanted was to fight but she had no weapons and couldn't even see her enemy. Was she ever really happy or did she just used to be better at lying to herself? "I can barely eat anything and I don't have a whole lot of weight to spare."

"How have you been dealing with that up to this point?" H'ghar had this smooth way of talking that lulled her into a sense of safety.

"Weed." What the hell else was she supposed to do when Gendry was having a fucking panic attack about her weight? Feel grateful that he cared? Well... it just sucks.

"Before you sit down to eat later today I want you to find a quiet spot," he punctured his instructions with a short hand gesture. "Sit comfortably, and immerse yourself in your happiest memory relating to food. If bad imagery pops into your head just shove them out and start over. Remember the smells, sounds, and tastes that made that experience memorable. You won't be instantly hungry but it should curb your nausea long enough so you can eat."

"What if I start to feel sick in the middle of eating?" That happened almost every time she even looked at food, like her body was confusing nourishment with poison.

"Excuse yourself," he suggested firmly. "Then try the meditation again until you feel well enough to continue."

"People would question if I keep getting up to just sit quiet somewhere." Arya raised her brow, wondering if this guy really knew what he was doing.

"If anyone questions what you are doing be honest," he gave her a knowing look. "Tell them you are meditating because you feel unwell and don't let yourself fall back into your defensive anger." She had to admit he was right about that so she nodded her head in agreement. The doc checked his watch and gave her another relaxed smile. "That's it for our session today but I already have a spot saved for you for the same time next week."

"I can do that," she agreed.

"Goodbye Arya," he stood up to open the door for her. "I look forward to speaking with you again." Arya couldn't detect any dishonesty in his words so she gave him the briefest of tiny smiles.

"Thanks doc," she slung her bag over her shoulder and marched out of the office without a look back. As she left the building, the sun was shining but she felt cold all the time lately. Arya ambled to the bus stop, wondering if she felt any better. A little, she admitted to herself, it actually did help to have someone just listen for once. Who knew if his 'meditation' technique would really work but it couldn't hurt. She hadn't decided to make this a weekly habit but she would go next time and see if it helped a little more.

Chapter End Notes

Ya'll have no clue how anxious I am about this plotline but daaamm... Jaqen is so
godsdarn hot. A man needs to shut up and get naked. :) I'm so glad I could include him. You know you love it and I'm the best fanfic writer who ever LIVED! You hate it don't you? I've disappointed you and everyone and I should never write again! Whaaahhh! Sometimes (always) I disgust myself. IGNORE ME!

Next up will be my boy Gendry: "Every Rose Has Its Thorn"

Today's Song: "O Fortuna"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXFSK0ogeg4
Somehow, the day came to take Margaery to the forge and he still hadn't found a way to explain it to Arya. He worried she might misunderstand since she reacted badly when she saw them talking outside the empty room. Today he planned to just tell Arry outright but he couldn't find her anywhere and assumed she must've taken the day off. She didn't reply to his texts and he was already well past worried. How could he get so bloody happy when she ate a doughnut the other day?

His lady was still a long way from her old self and while she seemed calmer in the past few days, she was unnervingly quiet. Gendry met Margaery in front of the Weirwood tree and they walked together to his car. The ride to the park was a little uncomfortable so he played an old cassette tape that was already in the deck to fill the silence. Once they arrived it seemed to take forever for her to walk through the woods, she kept tripping over everything. At one point, he almost offered to carry her but immediately realized that was a horrible idea.

"Here we are," he announced when they made it to the clearing and she clapped her hands when she caught sight of the forge.

"This is amazing!" She pulled on his arm to quicken their pace to the forge and he gently shrugged her off to set down his bag. Gendry still wasn't used to other girls touching him except Arya but he still felt proud at how well he was handling it. "I feel like I've fallen into a fairytale - complete with a handsome prince." Margaery beamed at him and he turned away embarrassed: okay, maybe he wasn't brimming with confidence.

"Just a blacksmith," he mumbled and he started cleaning up the forge to show her how it worked.

"You look more like a prince," she teased as he tugged off his shirt and fished out his leather apron to put it on.

"So," he cleared his throat and gestured towards the forge. "The main part of the forge is the hearth which is basically an open stove." As he described how the forge worked, he continued setting up. "You gotta fill the firepot with coal in here and get the fire hot enough: you need a lot of heat to melt metal. The bellows are there to pump air into the heat source and really get it going." Margaery nodded along as she followed his explanation. "The anvil is used for hammering and shaping the metal, which is damn hard work. Then I use various tools to do finishing touches."

"I have never been more impressed in my life," she gushed. "You are just full of surprises..." Then Gendry turned his head to point something out and he felt warm softness pressed against his lips. What...? Was she... kissing him?! He stumbled back and stared at Margaery in utter shock, she was still standing there with lips purse and eyes closed. Did he imagine it? Why would she kiss him?!

"Why... would you do that?" The pitch of his voice was insanely high but he was too freaked out to even care. Cheerleaders don't kiss blacksmiths! Nothing made sense anymore: the world had gone mad!
"I thought..." Margaery's eyes popped open, looking almost as surprised as he was and she blinked a few times before continuing. "You're so nice to me." She waved her hand as if erasing the entire event. "It was just something I did on impulse - we can just forget it happened."

"I'll take you home." He pulled off his apron and closed up the forge as she moved closer to stand beside him.

"Gendry, you're overreacting." Margaery touched his shoulder but Gendry stepped back away from her. "It was just a little innocent peck," she protested.

"Arya and I tell each other everything," he slammed down the hammer he was putting away. "She'll probably act like it doesn't bother her when I tell her this but I know it'll hurt her!" Just thinking about it was really starting to piss him off! "For what?" He glared angrily at her and rightly so. "One second of your 'impulse' and now I have to hurt the person I love: not cool, Margaery."

"I wasn't thinking at all - you know how it is when you like someone." The kiss itself shocked the seven hells out of him but it was an even bigger surprise when she admitted that she 'liked him'. The most popular girl in school isn't even supposed to know his name, let alone 'like' a nerdy weirdo like him! "I'm an idiot," she bowed her head as she apologized, "I'm so sorry."

"I'll be in the doghouse because of you," he complained, admittedly sounding like a little kid. Gods, he prayed silently, turn back time just a few minutes so he can dodge it! Nope... nothing happened.

"Not that you deserve to be punished for something that isn't your fault." She didn't know Arya like he did. "Do something romantic, buy her some roses and she'll forgive you." Margaery REALLY didn't know Arry if she thought flowers would do anything to earn forgiveness. Gendry would get beaten with the bouquet.

"Arry's not like that," he groaned. Bloody hells, he was so totally fucked! But it's not like he could hide it: that would make it even worse!

"Does she even like you?!!" All of a sudden, she was angry on his behalf but that made him even more annoyed with her. Who is she to pass judgment on his relationship?

"You don't know anything about us." His voice was quiet but it had a dangerous edge that he did not bother to hide.

"I see the way she treats you!" Margaery crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes, when she did that she actually looked a lot like Arya. It only made him feel even more guilty, horrible, and scared out of his wits. With the way Arry had been acting lately she might just break it off over this!

"I think that's my problem," he gritted through his teeth, clenching his hands into fists by his side.

"I already confessed that I like you so I of course I have to wonder." All of her annoyance disappeared and left in its place was sadness. Gendry had never broken anyone's heart before and this scenario was the last thing he could've imagined. The head cheerleader liked him and he didn't even see her.

"There isn't a single doubt in my mind that Arya loves me," he said it as gently as he could.

"People are very good at believing what they want." She didn't have that wrong. "Maybe I don't have the right to say these things but I worry about you. You're sweet and kind - it would be easy for someone to take you for granted."

"I want her to take me for granted," he chuckled without humor as he faced her and thumped his
open palm over his heart. "She can take me any way she wants me and I don't care that it hurts: love without pain is friendship. And I don't want Arya as my friend: I want to be hers and need her to be mine." Gendry stared hard at Margaery, willing her to see his devotion. "Any questions?"

"I know what that feels like," she insisted quietly. "You can do anything for that person and you'll let them hurt you and use you but you think you can take it. Crazy love is like a drug - it feels amazing until it kills you." Maybe Margaery was right but even still, it wouldn't change a thing for him.

"Let it kill me then, I'll want her even when I'm dead." They stared at each other down for a long moment before she shrugged in defeat.

"I wish you all the luck in the world - you'll need it." Margaery whirled around on her heel and strutted off towards the park entrance like she was on a catwalk. "I'll call a taxi," she threw a calm wave over her shoulder. Damn, that girl... woman had some fucking nerve and a hell of an ego: he respected her for it. Easy for her to walk away with shedding a single sweat drop for her troubles. Meanwhile he was just sentenced to death with a kiss. No way, Arry forgives him for this: she'd insist he should've fought Marge off or something. Godsfuckingdamnit!

"Bloody hells..." Gendry tilted his head back to peer up into the sky. "Why is it always like this? Can't I catch a break sometimes?" Nothing happened, not even a bird sang to comfort him. "This is why I don't believe in you," he muttered before turning around to clean up so he could just go home. There he could lie in his bed to brood about how to confess this mishap to his oftentimes cruel and unforgiving lady.

**SHIREEN**

She was so excited when Arya asked to sleep over - for real this time! They decided to skip the last two periods and ride the bus back to her house. Nobody was home when they arrived but that was fairly typical of their family. Her dad worked tirelessly and often slept at the office, the only person actually working to hear him talk. Mother spent most of her time seeing various doctors for real and imagined ailments. Her true sickness was boredom and disappointment with the life she chose.

"I'm surprised you wanted to come over instead of spending the weekend with Gendry." She led Arya back to her bedroom but when she opened her door Sheri noticed the pained look on Arya's face. "Oh, I'm happy of course just surprised!" Her friend shrugged off her bag, dropping it inside the room and headed for the bed.

"Things haven't been great between us..." Arya shook her head sadly as she pulled off her boots and then scooted back to lie down. "He's trying but... I don't know."

"If you want to talk about it my ears are open." It would be an honor for a tough girl like Arya to trust her enough to share her feelings. Sheri pulled off her coat to hang it up and then gathered some pajamas from her dresser.

"I don't want to bore you with my problems." Despite Arya's protest, it seemed that her friend actually did want to talk. Sheri quickly changed into her comfy sleepwear and moved to sit down on the edge of the bed.

"Arya," she coaxed gently, "maybe this will sound a little cheesy but you saved me." Sheri grinned when Arya sat up and raised a questioning eyebrow. "What I mean is, before you came up to talk to me that day I wasn't really alive, I was just going through the motions. I did not have a single friend and now I have a lot! And I met Bran... I owe everything to you."

"You really like Bran, don't you?" Arya still looked sad but pleased that Sheri liked her brother and
that encouraged her to be honest.

"I think... I'm in love with him," it was the first time she said it out loud to anyone! Sheri felt a fierce blush turning her cheeks red but she was too happy to feel embarrassed. "We connect in this amazing unbelievable way."

"I used to feel that way about Gendry," Arya sulked, pulling her knees up to hug around them and shuddered like she was cold. She still wore her sweatshirt though the temperature in the house actually felt a little too warm.

"Not anymore?" Sheri noticed that Arya and Gendry were having a hard time but it surprised her that the problem persisted so long. They seemed inseparable before Winterfest - attached at the hip.

"Maybe it's messed up to say this," she shrugged her shoulders, "but you and Bran have something I can never have with Gendry." Arya scrunched up her face like she ate something sour and then hung her head between her arms. "Never mind - it sounds even more fucked up in my head."

"I know what you are thinking and you're right," Sheri conceded without embarrassment. "Bran being in a wheelchair is the reason I feel confident around him. My face probably makes him feel the same way." She felt grateful that she found a kindred spirit in Bran as they bonded over their differences.

"That first day we talked and I pointed out Gendry." One corner of Arya's mouth lifted for just an instant before the half-smile vanished. "You couldn't believe a guy like that would go for a girl like me, right?"

"Well..." Sheri didn't want to hurt her friend's feelings but she also thought it wrong to be dishonest so she proceeded carefully. "Now that I know him better I think you two are perfect for each other and he's clearly head-over-heels for you." It was painful to see Gendry watching Arya with that forlorn expression.

"See, that's what I thought," Arya scoffed a laugh. "He sees me as beautiful and I thought that was enough. But the way he sees me doesn't change the way the world sees me. I'm scruffy, skinny, and on top of that - I have a bad personality. If I was a guy none of those things would be a problem but I'm a fucking girl," she sneered.

"I bet Gendry is happy you're a girl," Sheri teased.

"We don't have sex anymore," Arya blurted out. "It's my fault and I don't know how to fix it... I went to see a shrink but I couldn't even talk about that with a stranger." She shoved her hands in her hair and raked her thick hair back with a heavy sigh. "Now I'm dumping it all on you. What a great friend I am," she muttered with scornful bitterness.

"I'm glad you see me as someone you can trust," Sheri reached out to take ahold of her friend's hand. "I will never break your confidence - you're the best friend I've ever had. Did talking to someone help?"

"Yeah," Arya nodded slowly and exhaled a sigh, "I think it did."

"Good, then you should keep going." She squeezed Arya's hand for encouragement before Sheri decided to confess her darkest secret. "I went to a therapist for a year after I tried to kill myself." Arya looked up, her eyes wide with shock. "You see? All of us have our moments when we lose our minds."

"When...?" Arya whispered the word and that day came rushing back to Sheri like it was yesterday.
"Almost two years ago," she took a deep calming breath to fortify herself, "Joffrey-"

"That fucking fuck-ass-shit!" Arya squeezed her eyes shut, inhaling deeply, and holding the breath for a moment before slowly letting it go. "Sorry, I got it, go ahead."

"He said some cruel things," it was still painful to recall. "Nothing I hadn't already heard a hundred times but I'll always remember the glee he seemed to take in my pain." That unkind leer on Joffrey's face would haunt her until the day she died. "I complained to both my mother and father but they didn't care at all... I just wanted someone to care about me." In truth her spiteful cousin had little to do with her suicide attempt, it was the utter loneliness that forced her into a corner.

"Sheri..." Arya's voice was thick with emotion and Sheri was touched her friend felt so concerned, it felt good to be cared about.

"It became fairly clear that nobody gave two shits if I was alive," Sheri smiled though the pain. "Mother is on every kind of anti-depressant and sleeping pill so I took them all." To this day Sheri couldn't look at any pills without feeling sick to her stomach. "I don't really remember what happened but apparently one of our maids heard me screaming and called an ambulance in time."

"I'm so sorry, Sheri." Arya grabbed Sheri into a tight hug. "I am really-really-really happy you're alive."

"Me too, after a few days I woke up and I was glad I did." Sheri held onto Arya for a moment before pulling away. "Strange as it might sound I didn't really ever want to die - what I really wanted was to have a reason live. Almost dying because I hated my life made me realize that if I had the power to choose death, I could also choose life. My parents did not all of a sudden dote on me afterward but they never again forced me to attend family functions with Joffrey."

"Great and I made you come up there with him," Arya dropped her face in her hand. "Friend of the year over here," she grumbled sarcastically.

"I'm stronger now than I was then," Sheri insisted, refusing to let Arya wallow in pointless self-pity. "My parents might not be the best but they got me the help I needed to get through that dark time. In therapy, I learned to accept my face as well as how to accept the person I am because of my scars. Even if everyone else rejects me, I can't reject myself. I might be ugly on the outside but Joffrey is more pitiful than me. At least I can love Bran and my friends... I don't think he even understands what love is."

"I love you, Sheri," Arya sniffed and quickly wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I mean it, you've helped me so much more than you know."

"I love you too, Arya." Sheri gave her friend a genuine smile, overjoyed to finally be valuable to someone. "You deserve to be happy."

"Enough of this gloomy shit," Arya grinned and stood up, "let's rip up some Tekken!" She marched to the beanbag chairs in front of the TV and plopped down before turning on the Xbox. Sheri quickly joined her friend and made a conscious decision to help Arya have some fun tonight. It still wasn't clear what exactly was wrong but a reliable friend was always the best medicine for low spirits.

Chapter End Notes
Go easy on Marge, huh? Gendry is 'glorious hot' - we all know it - the girl can't help but want a piece of that blacksmith goodness. Gods know I'd take a shot!

I like how I worked in my 'love without pain is friendship' quip, it feels right that Gendry would say it - he’s such a martyr for his love.

I plan to work harder than ever now that I'm feeling a lot better (operating at 87% functionality) and I can feel the muse is still with me. There is no try! Allons-y Alonzo! I AM THE ONE WHO KNOCKS!
SANSA

She was dying, or at least she wished she were dead... Her whole body ached and throbbed, hurting everywhere, as she felt too hot and cold at once. Sansa wanted to lie in her bed and whimper in self-pity but she could not breathe when she cried because her nose was too stuffed up. It was almost enough to have her praying to the gods to take her to the seven heavens already; this cold was an eighth hell! On the TV, 'The Little Mermaid' was playing for the third time when there was a knock at the door.

"I'll get it lemoncake," daddy walked out of his office to answer the door, "you rest." She whimpered something like 'thank you daddy' and blew her nose for the millionth time.

"Uh, Mr. Stark," that was Sandor's gravelly voice! Sansa whipped her head towards the door with horror brimming in her heart. "I brought some soup for Sansa.

"Come in," daddy invited him in... Noooooooooo, he could not see her in this horrible state! Sansa jumped up from her seat, her eyes searching desperately for a scrunchie. "That was very thoughtful of you." That is how daddy and Sandor found her, wide-eyed and wild-haired, standing in the middle of the living room. Oh just fricking lovely!

"I brought soup from your favorite place," he held up a takeout bag. "I didn't know what you like so I just brought every kind." Sandor was so sweet and caring! Too bad, he would probably never want to have sex with her again after seeing her monstrous appearance.

"I'll be in my office if you need me, sweetheart." Daddy left without ever realizing that he just ruined her entire life forever. Sansa was very nearly about to heave herself onto the ground and throw a proper tantrum. Instead, she maturely walked up to Sandor to take the bag from him and led the way into the kitchen. He hung up his coat by the door before following to stand behind her.

"You didn't have to do this," she croaked as she set the bag down on the countertop. "I don't want you to see me like this." Sansa tried to smooth down her hair with her hands but gave up and let them hang limp by her side. "My nose is redder than my hair," she sulked and stared down at the bag of soup.

"Poor little bird," he curled his fingers around her wrist and gently tugged her to face him. "You always look beautiful to me."

"Liar," she accused in a dry wheeze, "I know I look terrible right now." Sansa tilted her head forward to rest against his chest. "And I feel even worse," she whimpered. Sandor wrapped his arms around her in a light hug as she clutched the front of his shirt. His strong arms warmed her aching body and she wrapped her arms around his waist, already feeling a bit better. "I think a bowl of minestrone would truly be wonderful."

"Sit - I'll get it," he let her go and gestured a hand towards the table.
"I can get it," she argued weakly... in truth, just standing up made her feel rather dizzy. "You don't where the bowls are."

"All kitchens are the same," he gave her a gentle nudge towards the table. "I can find the bowls - go sit, I got this." Sansa nodded warily and trudged out of the kitchen to sit down at the table. Sandor was perfectly capable of finding the bowls and dished some soup into one before setting it in front of her. "Do you want me to stay or should I go?"

"Please stay," she pouted, immediately regretting the expression. Surely, she looked like a blowfish with her gods-awful puffy red face. "Please sit down with me."

"Think I'll grab a bowl for myself," and he did just that before joining her at the table. "Eat up," he jerked his chin at her bowl, "you need your strength." Sandor dug into his soup, holding up the bowl close to his face and shoveling the food into his mouth. Sansa took small spoonfuls and carefully sipped them so she would not burn her tongue. The hot liquid and tomato base were opening up her sinuses and soothing her throat. "What do you want to do when you're done?" He set down his empty bowl and looked at her expectantly.

"I have already watched every Disney movie ever made," she chuckled but it turned into a cough. Sansa quickly covered her mouth and cleared her throat to get rid of the tickle. This was so embarrassing!

"How about Firefly?" At times Sandor really was the most brilliant person she knew.

"You are a genius, Sandor Clegane." Sansa resumed eating one spoonful at a time and the flavorful soup did wonders to improve her condition.

"That's the first time anyone put those words together." He grinned and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms and the muscles strained under his shirt.

"I am going to pay you a lot more compliments from now on." Her cold must be making her crazy if she could still feel the pangs of lust under her throbbing soreness. She finished the last of her soup and stood up, feeling strengthened and nourished. "Wait here," she held up a hand, "I have to get something for you." Sansa went back to her room to dig out her two orange knit Jayne hats and brought them both out to the kitchen.

"Oh no fu-" Just then the office door opened and Sandor's eyes snapped towards the hallway. Daddy walked into the kitchen past Sansa and headed for the coffee machine for his afternoon pick-me-up. "Uh... no way," Sandor stood up to accept the hat she held out for him. "This is awesome."

"How's it sit?" Sansa pulled on her beanie and grinned up at Sandor, no longer caring if she looked a mess. "Pretty cunning, don't you think?" She twirled the strings hanging down and smiled at Sandor, who burst out laughing at her Jayne impression. He donned his hat as well and she choked on her laughter. Daddy was on his way back to his office when she stopped him. "Do you want to come watch it with us, daddy?"

"What are we watching?" Daddy seemed to be surprised to be invited but Sansa just wanted to spend some time with her two favorite men. Hopefully they could bond a bit and Sandor could come to trust her father better.

"Firefly!" Sansa clapped her hands together.

"Oh no," daddy held up his hands, "not another fairy princess movie."

"No daddy," Sansa rolled her eyes. "It's a space western, you'll like it."
"A space... western?" Daddy squinted at her as if he wanted to take her temperature.

"Just trust us and try it," Sandor added. "It's the best one-season show of all time."

"Well then I have to see it," daddy smiled and moved to sit in his favorite chair, which he brought from Winterfell.

"Sorry I don't have a Jayne hat for you, daddy." Sansa sat down on the couch close to daddy and patted the spot beside her for Sandor to join her.

"I'll survive," daddy smiled wryly. Sansa turned the smart TV to the Netflix app and started up the first episode of Firefly. Then she set the remotes down and curled her hands around Sandor's arm, resting her head on his shoulder. It was a little embarrassing to be cuddled up with her boyfriend in front of her father but she reasoned that being sick gave her a pass. Just when the second episode was starting, Arya walked in.

"Short stuff!" Sandor lifted his free hand to wave her sister over. "Come watch with us."

"Just keep your germs to yourself," Arya scowled at Sansa but still sat down on the far end of the couch and put her feet up on the coffee table.

"Oh," the thought never occurred to her that she could get Sandor sick. "Should I keep my distance?" She peeked up at him bashfully, doubly flushed from her embarrassment and sickness. "I don't want you to get what I have."

"Think I'm weak like you, little bird?" Sandor wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "Germs are too scared of me - I never get sick." Sandor's arms would always be her happy place, the one place she felt safe, and her worries disappeared like magic.

"Kid," he turned to look Arya, "I brought some soup - it's in the kitchen."

"I'm not..." Arya started to argue and Sansa's heart sank. "I'll have some in a bit," she changed her mind, "after I do something." Her little sister got up and headed back to their bedroom where she stayed. After the second episode, ended daddy had to get back to work but seemed reluctant to leave. Yay, they made another Browncoat!

"Who is your favorite character?" Sansa cuddled up closer to Sandor and soaked up all of his warmth.

"River," Sandor answered too simply and she poked him in the ribs to encourage him to say more. "So much fucked up shit happens to her but she refuses to let it turn her into a weapon. She makes the choice to live a regular life and be part of the crew." His reasons were clearly personal because he basically just described himself. "What about you?"

"You gave such a good answer," she complained, knowing hers would lack in comparison. Sandor retaliated with some poking of his own and she gave in. "Okay, for me it is a tie between Wash and Simon. Neither of them are action heroes but both incredibly loyal and I think that's what makes a group strong." Sandor gazed down at her with an unreadable expression before he dipped his lips to softly kiss hers.

"Ew..." Arya walked past them and they broke apart. "You two are so disgusting."

"Please," Sansa whispered a prayer as she watched her little sister, "go to the kitchen..." Miracles of miracles, Arya went into the kitchen to get herself some soup. "Thank you for bringing the soup," she sighed happily, "it really made me feel better." Sandor kissed her forehead and even though she
still felt like poop, it was not so bad anymore. "Oh right," she remembered, "your belated Winterfest present arrived a few days ago but with this cold..."

"I didn't expect anything," he shrugged.

"You children still watching this nonsense?" Arya brought her soup into the living room, interrupting their conversation. "Try watching a documentary sometime - actually learn something." She sat down in daddy's chair.

"Kid," Sandor glared at Arya, "you keep playing that stupid game and tell me how grown up you are." Her little sister stuck out her tongue before digging into her soup with surprising gusto! Sansa felt energized by the happy scene and disentangled herself to get up.

"I'll be right back," she went back to her bedroom and grabbed the present, at least she was able to wrap it! The shiny golden wrapping paper gleamed as she brought it out to the living room.

"It's huge," Sandor laughed, "what is it?"

"Open it," Sansa handed over the wrapped present and sat down beside him again. Sandor ripped at the paper like a little kid and pulled off the top of the box to reveal a set of giant ice skates.

"Little bird," he snorted a laugh, "the things you'll do to go on a date." Sandor grinned up at her, closing up the box to set the skates aside. "When you're feeling better, I'll take you skating." He tugged her back to his side and put his arm around her. "Would you like that?" Sansa's throat felt tight and it had nothing to do with being sick. Then a single tear slipped down her cheek and she bowed her head to hide it. "What's with the waterworks, huh?"

"You are so good to me and I love you so much." And it physically hurt that she did not have the words to express the depth of her feelings for him. Sansa wondered if everyone in love felt the way she did or if she actually loved Sandor more than anyone ever loved another person.

SANDOR

"That's something to cry about?" He wiped the tear from her cheek with the back of his finger and then drew her head against his shoulder. She looked so pitiful and miserable - it made him wish he could take the sickness into himself.

"I'm trying to eat over here!" Arya glared at them both and he laughed at her scowling expression.

"Then eat up, wolfgirl," he scowled right back, "and stop bothering us." Arya slurped down the rest of her soup and stormed into the kitchen to drop her bowl in the sink - cranky little thing. The girl went back to her room and slammed her door shut. He smiled down at Sansa but her eyes were half-lidded. "You're tired, rest a bit." Sandor held her close, brushing a strand of red hair away from her pale face.

"Don't leave without saying goodbye," she murmured against his shoulder. Sansa sniffled and lowered her face against his chest. Sandor saw that she was falling asleep, her eyes struggling to stay open before slipping closed. She slept through the whole next episode and he had to get creative to reach the remote to turn down the volume. After a while, Mr. Stark came out of his office and took in the sight of his snoozing daughter.

"Is she asleep?" Mr. Stark kept his voice low.

"She's out like a light," Sandor confirmed quietly.
"Then she won't notice if I borrow you," Mr. Stark waved his hand for Sandor to follow and he carefully laid Sansa back on the couch. He moved slow and careful as he got up to follow the older man back to his office. "To be honest I feel a bit lost, my wife was always the one who took care of the children when they get sick. But Sansa doesn't complain much, please have a seat." They both sat down, facing each other. "I spoke with your father and it seemed he had no idea you two are dating."

"If it's not basketball or cars we don't talk much." Sandor didn't see the point in sugarcoating his relationship with his dad. They existed in the same house and shared some DNA, which was about the extent of their 'relationship'. It could be worse but it could also be a fuck-load better.

"I don't want to be presumptuous but if you ever need someone to talk to, my door is open." Mr. Stark's offer seemed genuine but Sandor's first instinct was to turn it down. Why shouldn't he get some free advice from one of the most successful Westerosi businessmen? Fuck, there were plenty of people who'd pay to be in the same situation.

"Well, there is something." Sandor though a minute about how to word his question so it didn't sound arrogant but gave up on that. "Nearly every university in the country with a basketball team are chomping at the bit to get me in their school. I don't really know how to choose." As far as he could tell, one school was just as good as the next.

"What area of study do you want to pursue?" Mr. Stark wasn't nearly the first person to ask him that but Sandor always gave the same answer - a shrug. "Well, that is a problem. What do you plan to do after graduating from the university?"

"Go pro," that was really his only plan, "I know a lot of jokers like to say that, but I'm good enough." Sandor wasn't the type of person to kid themselves into over-confidence - he really was that good.

"I don't doubt it," Mr. Stark chuckled before sobering again. "But what if you couldn't play? Or what will you do with your time when you retire from basketball? I know that seems a long time from now but you will still be a young man at that time."

"I haven't really given it much thought." Sandor was so wrapped up in going pro before he met Sansa and then afterward she took over his brain. Every second of every day, he was wondering what she was doing or wearing and if she was thinking about him. And lately when he thought about the future he could only imagine it with Sansa beside him. "Money won't be an issue if I play well enough, though I won't be getting any sponsors with this mug. Maybe I should learn how to manage money if I'm gonna earn it."

"That's practical and I applaud your foresight," Mr. Stark's praise held a 'but' and Sandor stared at him, waiting for it. "But you have to consider your passion." Well, that was unexpected. "When I was young I was fascinated by technology and wanted to pursue a career in computer programming. My brother suddenly passed away so it fell to me to inherit my family's appliance business. I followed my passion and created a division for innovating new technologies. Within a decade our processors were being used in everything from microwaves to smartphones."

"I don't have a lot of 'passion' outside of basketball," he added silently in his head 'and that doesn't even compare to Sansa'.

"First you have to discover what you love," Mr. Stark advised, "and then you have to pursue it with everything you have."

"What you're saying makes sense," Sandor acknowledged. The man made some good points - stuff
he hadn't thought about. "I'll think some more about it."

"My Sansa is the sweetest and kindest girl who ever walked the earth, as far as I am concerned." Mr. Stark had the right of it on that count. "It is not easy for a father to watch his daughter's love be taken by another," he smiled indulgently. "But I trust her judgment and she holds you in high esteem."

"I don't know that I deserve it but I'm trying," Sandor stared down at his boots as one thought banged around inside his head. "Mr. Stark... about Joffrey Baratheon." He looked up to see the older man's tense expression. "The only reason I kept from strangling that kid is she asked me to let her handle it. If he causes any more trouble I don't think I can hold back again and Sansa wouldn't like that at all."

"Trust me, I understand," Mr. Stark clenched his jaw. "I would give anything to protect my children and Sansa has always been tender-hearted. If that boy causes her to shed even one more tear, I won't tolerate it. I only ask that you convince her to come to me right away if she has any more trouble. My daughter is learning how to be strong but she needs to know that she can still count on me."

"Sansa is worried about short stuff," and Sandor was even more worried, "says the kid has been skipping meal and moping about. I didn't want to worry her more but..." That's exactly how mom was in the months leading up to her suicide. Arya, with her dark proud eyes, was so much like his baby sister would've been... "You should probably keep an eye on her."

"Arya is angry with me and she has good reason," Mr. Stark nodded sadly. "I have let both of my daughters down too many times this year. Thank you for telling me."

"I should go check on the shop," Sandor had enough bonding for one day. "Tell Sansa I'll come see her tomorrow," he got up to leave.

"I'll do that," Mr. Stark stood as well and held out his hand. "It was good to talk with you, Sandor."

"Same here sir," Sandor accepted the handshake, "thanks for the advice." He turned around to leave but stopped by the living room first, crouching down beside the couch. "Sansa," he murmured her name to wake her up, "little bird, I'm leaving."

"No," she stirred but didn't open her eyes, "stay." He pressed a quick kiss to her lips and she gave him a sleepy smile. "Love..."

"Love you too," he whispered as she was already fast asleep again - good she needed rest to get better. Sandor wished he could stay and take care of her but he had to trust her dad would do his parental duty. In a few years, she'd be his to take care of every day and he couldn't wait for that. Mr. Stark said he needed to find his passion but he already found it in his little bird. Should he just stay in Kings Landing...? That thought kept popping in his head, quickly followed by all the reasons he should go. He ignored it all and forced himself to get his coat and head on out.

Chapter End Notes

See, as a writer *adjusts empty glasses frames*, we draw inspiration from our pain. The whole time I've been sick I wished I could just drink a bunch of delicious Italian soup but there's nowhere that delivers around me. The muse works in mysterious ways. It's that secret.
PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT: If you suffer from a cold this winter, MAKE SURE to rest for a few more days after you feel 'better'. The spirit may be willing but the flesh is still weak. AND WASH YOUR HANDS WITH SOAP (you filthy animal).

I wanted to post this chapter yesterday but I just sat on my couch watching most of the season of Firefly - then I slept for twelve hours. Maybe if I watch the show enough times River and Jayne will finally realize they are in love with each other. Pure shipper's logic right there. :D

Class just let out and she was trying to heave a bunch of books into her overstuffed locker. Of course, they gave her the one that was on top so she had to reach overhead to get anything in or out. Arya banged her locker shut before anything could fall out and standing behind it was a smiling Margaery Tyrell. Just fucking great, that's exactly what she needed.

"Arya, can we talk?" The beautiful cheerleader beamed prettily, her glossy dark hair shining in the fluorescent light. Arya never felt jealousy once in her life - like about a guy - but it was as if a predator took over her body and set it to attack mode. Margaery was no longer a pretty girl but a threat to her very life.

"Sure," she sneered at the Tyrell girl. The memory of Gendry and this girl getting chummy made her want to be sick. Even a single smile of his aimed at another girl filled Arya with fear and incomprehensible rage. Those smiles were hers!

"I want you to know that I really do respect you and I know that I owe you more than I can repay."

Margaery droned on but Arya held up her hand to stop her.

"Skip the dramatics and get to the point," she stared hard at the girl and tapped her toe impatiently.

"I like Gendry," Margaery said it like she was announcing the weather but Arya's heart stopped. How could she just admit it like that?

"What's not to like?" Arya shrugged like she didn't give two fucks what this pretty cheerleader liked. "Is there a point to all of this?" If she stood there even a second longer, she might actually end up pulling this girl's hair out. Who was this twit to covet her only reason for fucking living?!

"I just wanted to apologize for the kiss - it was wrong and impulsive-"

"Whoa-whoa-whoa," Arya interrupted, "back up... kiss?"

"He didn't tell you?" Margaery's voice sounded as if echoing through a long hallway and dark spots started popping up in front of Arya's eyes. "It was all my fault - I couldn't bear the thought of him taking the blame." Her mind changed inside she became someone else - no one. And no one cared nothing about consequences because there were none for no one. "Ah!" The girl gave a startled cry when Arya slammed her against the lockers, the rattling sound drew stares from the students in the hallway.

"Listen to me and listen good," Arya hissed in a voice she barely recognized. "If you ever - ever - touch what's mine again... I will end you. Don't you remember what I have, you dumb fuck?" She relished the fear that rose in Margaery's wide pretty eyes. "Don't look so surprised, I trust we understand each other."

"Yes," she breathed, "I understand." Ah, the sweet scent of fear...
"Good," Arya released the trembling girl and turned away without a backwards glance. She marched straight to the classroom she knew Gendry should be in. He stood off in the far corner, unpacking his backpack. There was no teacher in the room yet, only a handful of students. "What's this I hear about you kissing Margaery Tyrell?" His head snapped up at her too-loud question and the other students immediately stopped their chatter.

"Arry," his eyes opened wide as he stood there, apparently in shock.

"Are you not going to follow me right now?" She scowled at him and then whirled away, knowing he would follow.

"Arya," he panted as he caught up, "I swear to the gods I was gonna tell you." She ignored his pleading and led the way to the empty room. Once they were inside, she shoved him against the door and turned the lock behind him. "What...?" There wasn't any time for his confusion! Arya dropped her bag onto the ground and attacked the button on his jeans. "Here?" His voice cracked with panic but she didn't stop until his pants were unzipped. "Now?"

"Shut up and fuck me," she ripped off her jacket and let it fall.

"I don't have a-

"I'm on the pill now," she quickly dragged her shirt over her head and tossed it behind her, not caring if he found her too skinny. No point in wearing a bra because even the sports bras didn't fit snug around her ribs.

"What?" He blinked at her, his eyes lost and perplexed - honestly he was always cutest when downright stupefied.

"You don't trust me?" Arya glared at him and his mouth just flapped open and closed without saying anything. "Don't you want me anymore?" Still he didn't seem to be able to answer, always the weak-hearted coward! "Fine, fuck you then." She bent down to pick up her shirt but he grabbed her arm and hauled her up to face him. His blue eyes burned with intensity and passion - saying so much more than his words. Maybe he wasn't such a coward after all...

"I only want you, Arya." People lie all the time but Gendry had the most honest gaze... and he was HER S! Her whole body trembled with barely contained rage and pent-up lust. Every bit of him belonged to her and she'd never let anyone take him! She'd rather die than watch him be lured away by someone else. "My heart is yours always," he vowed - that was so like him to be making declarations of devotion. That was all well and good but she was a little more concerned about whom his cock belonged to.

"No more pretty words - show me," she slipped her free hand into his boxers and grasped his cock, hot and already hard... So it seemed he was at least still attracted to her. Gendry groaned and closed his eyes as his cock pulsed, growing harder in her grasp. Cocks don't lie - if they don't want to fuck then they don't get hard, simple as that. As long as he was only getting hard for her, she didn't care much about anything else. "Why are you still wearing a shirt?"

"Sorry milady," he quickly dropped his bag and jacket before tugging off his shirt and undershirt in one motion. There were all these voices inside Arya's mind and each one of them was screaming at the top of their lungs. The blood-thirsty predator hungered to tear into Gendry's chiseled chest and feast on his heart. No one wanted to cut off all feelings for him and run away. Arry thought it best they just go to the forge and make some cool weapons.

Arya didn't want to think anymore so she chose the voice of action and her lips curled into a snarl at
her prey, baring her teeth at him before she attacked. Before he knew what hit him, she sprang into motion and sunk her nails into his shoulders as she lifted on her tiptoes to push her chest flat against his. Her mouth latched onto his neck to bite into the warm flesh and he was caught with no chance of escape.

He groaned as she nipped down his throat to leave an angry red mark at the junction of his neck and shoulder. Gendry cupped the back of her head, trying to persuade her to kiss him, and got bit harder in retaliation. His breathing turned ragged as she tangled her fingers in his thick hair. She pulled him down into a ravenous kiss, her teeth biting his soft lips as his arms wrapped around her. Arya knew she should give him what he wanted - gentleness and 'loving' - and she fought herself to hold back.

Intense urgency overwhelmed her senses - she longed to touch, taste, and claim him for so long. He must have missed her too because he seemed to enjoy her abuse and didn't try to stop her. With the last sliver of rationality she possessed, Arya tore her mouth away from his and tilted her head back to look up at him. He accepted her surrender with a lop-sided smile and then kissed her in that slow but sure and gentle the way he liked.

Her rough insistence would always lose to his tender domination but she'd never admit she loved it. In his arms she found a feeling of coming home, in from the cold, back to the place she belonged. As he kissed her with his lips curled into a stupid happy smile, his hands wrapped around her waist to maneuver her backwards. She hissed as her back pressed against the icy metal side of a forgotten filing cabinet tucked in one corner. His hand moved up over her breast and his mouth muted her encouraging moan.

Gendry's calloused fingers drove her to madness as they lightly scraped her sensitive skin while his lips caressed hers. She held her breath to suppress a loud moan so long she started to see stars when he pulled away. He dipped his head to tease one breast with his lips and tongue but he stopped when a strangled cry escaped her throat. He inhaled a deep breath as he stood up to lean his forehead against hers, his heavy-lidded eyes locking with hers.

"Shh," he panted the quiet admonishment, "we can't get caught now." Then the idiot had apparently lost his mind because he began to snigger like it funny or something. This was fucking serious - or rather, serious fucking!

"Then stop making it so damn good," she jerked on his hair and bit his neck again as punishment for his idiocy. Arya figured getting naked would be a better use of her time than arguing so she reached down to pop the button on her pants. She leaned back against the hard metal cabinet to toe off her boots and shoved down her pants. He watched as she pulled her panties off and tossed them on on top of her pile of clothes but her mind was far beyond worrying about her appearance.

He didn't hesitate as soon as the underpants hit the floor, curling his hand around her waist and pulling her against him. It felt impossibly good to be pressed against his body but all of her mind screamed to get him inside her. Gendry gasped when her hand plunged into his boxers, took ahold of his erection, and tugged the stiff length free. When she looked up there was no doubting his interest, it pulsed hard in her hand as his eyes stared even harder at her. That's the way it should be between them - isn't it - no doubts?

His rough hands slid down over her hips to curl behind her thighs as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. She lifted herself up as he cupped under her knees, hooking her legs to pull them higher around his waist. They found a position against the cabinet and being manhandled by him was frustratingly satisfying. Arya could feel his cock lying flat against her but he chastised her quietly for squirming. When he was sure of her firm hold on him - trapped between a cabinet and a hard cock - one of his hands released her to shove his pants further down.
Every fiber of her being ached with the need to have him inside her, but he clumsily slid around in the slickness around her entrance. Gendry made a strained sound from the effort as his helpless cock bumped aimlessly while she twisted and whimpered. Unable to endure any more torture she stretched a hand between her legs to grab his cock and guided the head to the right position. She lowered her hips to take just the tip in before resuming her grip on his shoulders and glancing up to meet his questioning gaze, confirming all systems were go.

He pushed inside her in one smooth motion until their bodies were as flush against each other. She had a new appreciation for science after knowing the bliss of his unsheathed cock - the birth control pill was truly awesome! Molten heat spread upwards, rising along her spine and a scream burned in her throat but she swallowed it, struggling to keep quiet. Her hands gripped tight to his shoulders as he thrust again, just enough to make the cabinet rock.

But his movements were too tortuously slow and steady that it was driving her crazy! Her whole world existed in that very spot - the universe was built of flaking paint on metal and Gendry's body. Arya tightened her legs around his waist and curled her body against him, the contrast of the hard cool surface behind her only enhanced his smooth warmth. Even if the cabinet fell over on top of them, she doubted she'd even notice. The urge to scream was building up, threatening to burst out at any minute and she finally lost her control.

"Fuck!" The shout forced out of her throat and instantly his hand came over her mouth to catch the sound, barely succeeding.

"For the love of the gods Arya," he wheezed, "we're fucked if we get caught so keep it-" He yelped and yanked away his hand when she bit it.

"Don't tell me what to do." She grabbed his face and crushed their mouths together, plunging her tongue into his mouth as she bucked her hips to take him deeper. Trying to stay quiet was like attempting to plug up a volcano and but Arya refused to scream. That need to be in control sharpened her senses to all sensations. His skin was hot and soft like warm butter and underneath every twitch of his muscles were pulsing, pulling, and pushing.

Every part of him worked like a machine as his hips moved at a measured pace, rocking in and out achingly slow at just the right angle. The cabinet swayed and creaked as he set a steady tempo. Her body trembled as she arched into his chest and dug her heels into his back, encouraging him to let go completely. His mouth surrounded hers, muffling her cries as he sped up to a faster pace. Gendry was driving into her forgetting to be gentle but that was what she wanted.

Then holding back became impossible and he smothered her scream by filling her mouth with his tongue. She could barely breathe but didn't care, writhing without rhythm from the desperate need to feel every bit of his skin. Part of her wondered in recent days if maybe she imaged how good he was - if anything it was better than ever, like he was born to fuck her. All she needed to do was hold on and when her muffled moans grew too loud he broke the kiss to cover her mouth with his hand. He pinned her tight against the cabinet as his cock kept sinking deeper into her.

With his hand secured over her mouth, she could be as loud as she wanted and it unfurled her mind from the prison of focus. Soon Arya felt herself coming undone as he drove into her over and again. Then his thrusts became uneven as he did his best to hold back. Without the condom in the way, she felt the hot rushing and swelling his cock inside her. She moved with his stuttering pace, drawing out his release in a surge of pulsing heat, which sent her over the edge.

She screamed into his hand, all of her limbs squeezing him tight until they came to a shuddering halt and his hand fell limp to his side. Gendry slumped against her, his humid panted breaths heating her sweat-cooled neck. For a while, they stayed like that, both too exhausted to move as their breathing
and heart rates evened out. When she raised her eyes to meet his, her heart stuttered for a new reason, finding him gazing adoringly at her. The familiar pinch of her conscience returned, telling her she was undeserving.

"I'll never look at anyone else," he didn't even blink, "never."

"I know," she could acknowledge the fact he was devoted to her. "But that won't stop others from looking at you." Arya sighed as she dropped her chin to her chest. "It's always gonna be like this for us, they'll take one look at me and think you're free game." That's what she got for snatchig up the best guy in the whole world - everyone knew she didn't deserve him.

"What can I do, Arry?" It was just as obvious, to anyone paying attention, that he loved her. "I'll do anything..." There didn't have to be a good reason 'why' Gendry was capable of loving a whack-job like her. Even if there wasn't, that didn't mean she intended to give him up - he was still hers no matter what anyone said. Arya tightened her hold on his shoulders and hid her face.

"Wait for me," she murmured against his neck. "Just wait and don't give up."

"You know I will," came his shaky reply. Because it had to end sometime, he pulled away with obvious reluctance. Gendry carefully lowered her so she could set her feet down on the ground. He tugged his jeans back up and plucked his undershirt from the floor before handing it to her. She used the undershirt to clean up, balled it in on itself, and handed it back to him. They dressed quietly and faced each other once done.

"I have something after school but I'll call you after," she offered.

"Call me anytime and I'll come running," he smiled. They gathered their bags and he hesitated around the door before she pulled on the strap of his backpack. He leaned forward and she pressed a quick kiss to his lips. For some reason she felt like crying but just grinned and shoved him towards the door. "See ya later," he turned and slipped outside while she waited a moment. It dawned her then that taking up sex again because of another girl might've been a bad idea. Something about it felt hollow afterward...

Instead of heading to her next class, she walked into the empty room to sit down at the table, looking around at the empty chairs. This was a place of calm and comradery and she felt safe and untouchable. Quiet filled her ears as her thoughts came into focus, running through the events of the day since the Tyrell girl interrupted it. Arya could admit she acted too rashly and Gendry was probably more confused than ever. It was a good thing she had an appointment later - something she never dreamed she would think.

She hid in the empty room until the last bell rang and then meandered invisibly between the throng of students on her way to the public bus. A short ride later Arya got off in front of the mental health center and waited impatiently for her name to be called. When she finally got back to doc Jaqen's office, she was way too keyed up with all the questions she wanted to ask.

"How are you feeling today, Arya?" The doc breezed into the room with his usual pleasant smile.

"Skip the bullshit, doc." She rushed to her chair and jumped to sit down. "Teach me some more of those mind tricks! It really worked - I can eat now if I just take the time to focus."

"I am glad to hear that." Doc Jaqen wore his usual composed smile but Arya was too hyper for his calm passivity.

"Tomorrow I will try to eat breakfast," she declared with determination. "That's the hardest because
of the insomnia. Oh yeah, teach me a mind trick to clear my thoughts - that's what keeps me awake at 
night. And then teach me how to control myself when I get crazy ideas in my head."

"One thing at a time," his voice was calm and low, "tell me something about your day."

"I almost kicked some girl's ass today," she thought that might get a reaction out of him.

"Oh?" The doc didn't twitch an eyebrow - damn that was one hell of a poker face.

"She kissed my boyfriend," she sneered, still irritated with the twit. "Today we had sex for the first 
time after he found out I missed my period but we didn't... But it was because of that stupid girl who 
kissed him." "SHUT UP" her brain screamed at her. "Never mind, I don't want to talk about that." 
That was a damn dirty lie and she knew it.

"What would you like to talk about?" He was testing her patience because she didn't want to 'talk' at 
all! What she really needed was to learn some more about how to control herself so she didn't fuck 
up her life anymore! "Arya, all you have to do is express what you think. There is no right or wrong 
answer."

"Today was a mistake," she admitted, "I didn't really want to have sex, but I did it because I was 
scared of losing him."

"How was the rest of your day?" H'ghar smiled politely as he moved the conversation forward 
without pressing her to talk about Gendry. This doc was impossible to figure out!

"Fine, I guess." Arya caught his expectant look and before she knew it, she'd recounted her entire 
week and the doc was checking his watch.

"That's all the time we have for today," he tilted his head to one side. "Same time next week?"
Whoa, it was time already?!

"But... you didn't teach me anything!" Arya stomped her booted foot on the ground and glared at her 
so-called therapist.

"Didn't I?" He raised an eyebrow, still smiling but there was a new confidence bordering on 
arrogance about him. "In this room I call the shots, Arya. I'm the professional counselor with the 
doctorate degree and you need my help."

"You can be a real asshole, doc." She leaned down to gather her bag and slung the strap over her 
shoulder.

"Do you still feel as burdened as when you came in?" His question froze her as she was moving to 
get up. Actually... damn it all to the seven hells - she did feel better! How did he do that?!

"No," she narrowed her eyes at him, "you win this time, but next time I'm not leaving until I learn 
another one of your mind tricks."

"I give you my word," he bowed his head and put a hand over his chest. "I will teach you anything 
you want to know next week."

"Alright," she grumbled reluctantly as she got up to leave, "see ya doc." Once she was out of the 
facility and heading for the bus stop, she decided to call Gendry. He answered on the first ring and 
she spoke after the call clicked over. "Hey stupid, I'm starving, let's go get something to eat. Meet me 
at the park by my house in half an hour."
"On my way, milady!" After he agreed, she hung up and stuffed her phone in her hoodie pocket. Even though it sucked, she knew what she had to do - apologize to Gendry for confusing him today. It was wrong of her to expect him to blindly follow her lead without a thought for his happiness. After that she would listen patiently and try not to scream at him while he explains why Margaery Tyrell had her lips on his. When all of that was out of the way... She should also tell him about therapy and everything that's been going on with her... someday.

Chapter End Notes

The holidays are over... *looks over both shoulders*. I've recovered from my cold, *knocks on wood*. I won't have to move again for at least four months - *casts eyes heavenward and prays fervently*. Maybe I can actually start posting again with regularity! I have to do some timeline organizing so if anyone hopes to see any tertiary characters in upcoming chapters comment now or forever hold your peace.

This is really useful, a website that unsubscribes your email from newsletters: Unroll.me (where have you been all my life?)
**Bully for Me**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**Bully for Me**

**GENDRY**

This Maiden's Day was starting out... grand. That's the way he'd describe it: everything going right and the sun shining in the sky. Gendry knew he was walking around with a silly grin on his face but didn't care at all to be embarrassed. When Arya announced she knew that Margaery Tyrell kissed him, he was sure his life was forfeit at that moment. But, even more unimaginably, it kinda made everything better. Instead of being mad, Arya... apologized: to him and not even being sarcastic at all!

Well, it was a bit less easy to hear her saying they shouldn't've had sex, which honestly left him more confused than ever. And there she was, saying how sorry she was for 'confusing' him so he thought it best to just go along with whatever she said. Story of his life. But he was a long way from unhappy: more like a ton of weight was lifted from his shoulders. Arry didn't want to talk about any more 'serious shit' after that so he took her home. She kissed him goodnight and he didn't worry when she didn't call him the next day.

That old cautious part of him told him not to get his hopes up and everything might come crashing down around him again. But if he learned anything from Arya, he should live for the here and now and let whatever's coming just come. Later he would do whatever she wanted for Maiden's Day, he was bound and determined to keep her happy. Gendry's head was too distracted with his thoughts as he walked to the cafeteria until: Sandor Clegane stepped in his path.

"Nerd," he frowned down at Gendry, "we gotta talk." That same cautious voice in Gendry's head was screaming 'run away' but he ignored it: there was no reason to fear Sandor. If all goes well, this guy might become his brother-in-law one day.

"Sure," Gendry cleared his throat to erase the unusually high pitch, "what's up man?" Sandor jerked his head, indicating he wanted to be followed, and led the way behind the nearest building.

"What's wrong with the kid?" Sandor rounded on Gendry, who only just noticed he was sorta trapped between a wall and the hound. "Sansa is worried - she says you two talked but I thought we could understand each other better." He smiled in a terrifying way that had Gendry's neck prickling something fierce. "You know, man-to-man," he braced his massive hand next to Gendry's shoulder. "You do something to piss the girl off?"

"She's just been having a tough time lately," he gulped, seeing the unsatisfied look on Sandor's face. "Ever since she thought she might be pregnant... but she isn't though!"

"Oh is that so?" Sandor bowed his head and chuckled darkly when his eyes suddenly snapped up. "You know if you knock up that little girl I'ma kill you, right?"

"Get in line," Gendry bucked up his chin, acting braver than he felt. Between Jon, Mr. Stark, and Sandor at least Arya had plenty people looking out for her: must be nice. And none of them cared about her even a tenth as much as he did so they could all go to the seven hells.
"You're a tough nerd," Sandor snorted a laugh, "looking me in the eye."

"I have to be tough for Arya," he held the hound's gaze steady. "And you don't scare me nearly as much as she does."

"Alright, calm down." Sandor pulled back and shrugged his massive shoulders as he scratched under his jaw. "This intimidation thing is kinda my one move, gotta use it when I can."

"It works," Gendry heaved a relieved sigh, "nearly pissed myself." He took another deep calming breath to ease the tension locking up his body. "I think Arya is pulling through whatever is wrong, we just have to wait it out. I'm keeping a close eye on her and Sansa is the first person I'll call if it looks like trouble."

"Smart," Sandor nodded his approval, "I knew there was a reason I liked you."

"So glad you're not gonna kill me," Gendry laughed.

"Not today anyway," Sandor grinned at him, no less gruesome but it seemed friendlier somehow. "Glad we had this talk," he smirked before turning away with his hand raised in a half-hearted wave, "see ya." Meanwhile Gendry was still in the middle of a heart attack! People needed to stop scaring the shit out of him or he would keel over dead one of these days! He hurried to the lunchroom and managed to get some grub and sit down but before he could take his first bite: Torgo.

"Gendry, can I..." His twitchy friend dropped into the seat next to Gendry. "We uh... talk, you know?" Everyone was so chatty today but nothing could kill his good mood.

"Sure thing buddy," he reluctantly set down his sandwich and turned to face his friend. "What's up?"

"Well," Torgo cleared his throat and his eyes swam around uncomfortably. "I hoped you could give me some advice... about sex. To be more precise, the first time."

"Good thinking," Gendry didn't really know that he was the right person to come to but he'd give the best advice he could. "First of all don't go in blind: girls are really complicated down there. And go to real medical websites, porn is less realistic then DnD. Honestly, in my 'vast' experience I learned to just do whatever the girl wants."

"How will I know what she wants?" Torgo looked like he was facing his executioner rather than his devirginig.

"Everyone does it eventually and we all manage well enough." Gendry understood Torgo's anxiety, if it wasn't for Arya taking control all the time he'd be completely lost. "The best advice I can give you is to relax and let it happen, don't rush it but don't be scared of it." He caught a flash of platinum hair approaching from behind Torgo and lifted a hand to wave her over. "You should ask Dany." It was surprising that Dany came to sit with him but lately she didn't seem to care what others thought.

"About what?" Dany sat down at the lunch table with all of the grace of a queen with Drogo as her ever-silent shadow.

"No-no-no!" There was panic written all over Torgo's face but Gendry knew it was better to be embarrassed than ignorant.

"He needs advice for his first time," Gendry clarified. Torgo whimpered another garbled protest but it fell on deaf ears.

"Oh my," Dany grinned and lightly shoved Torgo, who was whipping his head back and forth.
frantically. "Don't worry, Missa said she had to study for a test next period." Torgo slumped forward and stared down at his hands. "The first thing you have to do is tell the other person exactly how you feel about them. That way you can both be comfortable and avoid awkwardness afterward."

"Yeah that's a good one," Gendry backed her up before taking a huge bite out of his sandwich. "I should be taking notes." Mmm... sandwiches are the food of the gods.

"Obviously protection against pregnancy is essential." She tapped her cheek and looked upwards with a thoughtful expression.

"And always have extra," Gendry interjected, his mouth full of turkey club: so good, it just melted in his mouth.

"Darling do you have any advice?" Dany turned a coy smile on Drogo who was observing Torgo with a blank expression.

"Please your woman before yourself," Drogo rumbled seriously.

"That's the number one tip right there." Gendry was having too much fun and tried to appear more somber when Torgo glanced around the table anxiously.

"I don't know if I'm more or less nervous now." He took off his glasses to wipe them on the front of his shirt and then replaced them on his face.

"I think pretty much nobody gets it perfect the first time," Gendry assured his friend with a pat on the back. "We only know this stuff because we've learned it the hard way."

"That's right," Dany agreed cheerfully. "Think of sex as an exercise - you get better at it the more you do it." She clasped her hands together and beamed at Torgo. "I don't know why I'm so excited! You and Missa are so cute!" Torgo curled into himself like a frightened turtle and tugged on his collar.

"Don't make him even more embarrassed," Gendry scolded her, trying to hide his own amusement.

"I don't think that's possible," she stifled a giggle behind her hand and soon they were both laughing at poor Torgo's expense. But damn it felt good just to laugh out loud with his friends without worrying when the next Arya bomb would drop. She was doing better and that's the most important thing.

SHIREEN

At her locker in the hallway, she carefully put her books away in an organized fashion. All the while, she daydreamed about Bran magically showing up for Maiden's Day. A sharp snigger interrupted her thought and her ears tuned in to overheard two boys whispering loudly. They were talking about her face and making gagging sounds, not at all trying to hide it. Why did they have to be so immature and make a fuss like children?! Her face was not that bad, just a little discoloration and scarring... It is not as if she wanted to look like a goblin.

Sheri fought the urge to snap her head in their direction and hurried to get what she needed so she could leave. Her cheeks burned, causing her scars stand out even worse. The embarrassment was more from disappointment in herself for reacting to their pettiness. Even more humiliating, tears began filling up her eyes. All of a sudden, the two boys went silent and she could not resist looking up to see Sandor Clegane towering behind them. The bullies both shuffled backward until their backs hit the lockers but the hound advanced on them.
"You talking to me?" His smile looked so frightening and the boys were obviously terrified! Sheri was captivated by the scene and could not look away.

"No," the louder bully stuttered, "of course not! We were talking about..." The boy looked up at Sheri to notice her watching him - then it was his turn to blush. Thank the gods - at least the jerk knew how to feel some shame. It worried her sometimes that these 'mean kids' never actually grew out of their narrow-minded ways. After all, she met her share of cruel adults who stared and made rude comments. The worst was when they assumed she was not just ugly but mentally challenged so she made an effort to speak intelligently.

"Then you're talking about my friend here?" Sandor cocked his head in Sheri's direction and the bullies' eyes went wide as saucers. "I feel bad for you, you must be blind," he waved a hand her. "That girl is very pretty - and my eyes are twenty-twenty." He moved closer so the boy had to crane his neck to see Sandor's face and he must have been at least a little brave to do so. "You disagree with me?"

"No," the louder of the two bullies started to back up in her direction while his friend stayed just behind. "We we-were... u-uh... just leaving." However, Sandor reached out one massive hand to drag the boy in front close to him.

"Don't look so afraid," his horrible smile widened, "I just wanna tell you something." Sandor yoked his massive arm around the bully's neck, lifting him slightly so he had to stand on his tiptoes. Still smiling his horrible smile, he whispered something unintelligible in the boy's ear. "I think we understand each other now."

"Yes," the boy whimpered and nodded his head, turning white as a sheet before Sandor released him. Sheri almost felt bad for him but also secretly wished her ugliness could be used to intimidate people. At best - or at worst, depending on how one looks at it - people were afraid she was contagious.

"Get the fuck outta here," Sandor growled and the two boys took off running down the hall past her.

"Thank you," she called out as he turned to leave.

"No big deal," he tossed a wave over his shoulder, "see ya around." She watched him lumbering down the hallway with his hands stuffed in his pockets. What an odd thing to happen and she already felt 'odd' around Sandor. It was like looking into a fun-house mirror of herself, how her life might have been like if she had been born the boy her parents wanted. Would she have been big and strong like Baratheon men are known to be? Sheri walked around in a daze after that, her mood of swinging between sad that she was made fun of and happy that she was defended.

Outside of her mind of the world moved at its regular pace and soon the school day was over. Her parents sent a car, which was typical, and on ride home she stared out the window. Sheri could not help but notice all of the couples celebrating Maiden's Day and envied all of them. After arriving home, she hurried to her room so she could call Bran. Sometimes - every day - their daily calls were the only thing she lived for. She pulled her phone out of her bag and set it down on her desk, dialing her first contact as she pulled off her coat, hat, and scarf.

"Happy Maiden's Day," he answered her call cheerfully, "my fair maiden." Lately they had been watching medieval themed movies together - over the phone. A few weeks earlier, they were watching westerns, greeting each other with 'howdy partner'.

"Hi," she collapsed onto her soft mattress, kicking off her shoes before moving to the center of the bed. Sheri did not feel much like talking and wished she could just sprout wings and fly to
Winterfell. She was starting to forget how it felt to be looked at like she was beautiful...

"I already know something is wrong," he claimed in a light-hearted tone, "so you might as well just let it out." There was no point in hiding anything from Bran because he always knew everything.

"Today was a little bit horrible..." Sheri fluffed the pillow behind her head and sank back down with a sigh. "But I'm already over it."

"What happened?" His voice sounded worried so she hurried to reassure him that it no great tragedy occurred - just the everyday life of an ugly girl.

"I was made fun of by some guys at school today," she forced her voice to sound nonchalant. "They were just being annoying - really they couldn't hurt my feelings if they tried." Did she sound convincing?

"Assholes," he seethed - when Bran was angry his voice lowered in a very appealing way.

"But your sister's boyfriend defended me," she revealed the still slightly confusing happy ending.

"Which one?" The anger in Bran's voice was covered by curiosity. "The blacksmith or the jock?"

"I would have expected Gendry to stick up for me if he saw me being bullied," she thought out loud. "But I was surprised that Sandor actually cared... I'm a little shocked he even remembered me."

"Sansa always was into those knights-in-shining-armor types." Bran's assessment did not exactly describe Sandor in Sheri's mind but neither did it seem wrong. "All Starks have excellent taste," he flirted shamelessly.

"Flatterer," she accused, "I shan't give you the satisfaction of making me blush."

"Then I am not trying nearly hard enough, my sweet damsels." There was a smugness to his flirting but it never came off as arrogant only appealingly self-assured. "Should I tell you the first thing I thought when I saw you? It's a bit coarse and might risk coloring those fair cheeks."

"I highly doubt it," even though she was already flushed and he likely knew it. "You are a known rouge and braggart - I won't fall for your flattery."

"I thought: gods," he paused for dramatic effect. "I have to taste this girl once before I die."

"What a thought!" Sheri covered her mouth to muffle her laughter.

"It was a prayer, really," he continued to seriously. "I prayed fervently to the gods for them to let me savor... just once, your lips." Sheri swallowed her amusement with great difficulty. "Have I succeeded in coloring your cheeks, my peerless paramour?"

"You are succeeding only in causing my eyes to roll at your terms of endearment, my lord." She bit her lip to keep from laughing.

"My only regret in life is that I won't be there to watch," he heaved exaggerated sigh. "You: becoming more beautiful until we see each other again. Ah, but then I'm sure I'll be just as astounded as the first time."

"Tell me who taught you to be such a philandering flirt," she demanded before smiling, "so I can thank them from the bottom of my heart."

"Robb," he replied bluntly and Sheri laughed even harder, pressing her face into a pillow. "Then it's
working, you're blushing. Don't try to deny it."

"Then I won't," She would neither deny nor admit her blushing because it amused her to keep him guessing. "You are just the tiniest bit devastating, Bran Stark. Are you still maintaining you don't actually miss me?"

"Not even a little, we'll be together again soon." Bran's charm was ability to be both, at the same time, the wisest and most childish person she knew. "Honestly, it's probably a good thing I'm a continent away from you but I shouldn't say why, you'll only blush more if I tell you."

"I can take it," a fluttery tightness tingled in her stomach as his silence built up her anticipation.

"No," he denied her apologetically, "I think it has to be said in person. It wouldn't take much convincing to talk my mother into talking my father into another visit. Winterfest was such a disaster that mom still hasn't recovered from it. Maybe you can come up north with my sisters and I can tell you then."

"I'll try," she promised, "maybe I can get Arya to help. She is the grandmaster of schemes..."

"Your faith in my sister is well-placed," he seemed pleased by her closeness with Arya. "I shall await you with baited breath, maiden of my heart."

"We have to start a new genre," she giggled.

"No, you're totally right: it's getting ridiculous," he chuckled. "I think we said we'd do ninja movies next."

"Bran-san, please honor me by choosing the next movie," Sheri did her best ninja dub-actor impression. "Arigato!"

"Hai, Sheri-san!" He selected one of her favorites and they counted down to sync pressing play at the exact same time. It might not be everyone's idea of a perfect Maiden's Day but it was the best one of her whole life.

Chapter End Notes

I love having Sandor roam the halls dishing out his own brand of *hound justice*. When really, he should be studying for his college entrance exams! Sansa will have something to say about that soon enough. Poor Torgo, his friends are bullying him! Being the odd virgin out is always a difficult position. Sheri and Bran... <3

Timeline organizing is finished for the next twenty chapters! You all thought I was kidding when I said this fic would go on forever and surely by now everyone's like, "Jeeze, wrap it up!" To which I reply: "NEVER!"
A Holiday for Love

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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A Holiday for Love

MARGAERY

What was the point of getting out of bed? It seemed the outside world was not made for her, and her bed was so damn comfortable. The fact that she had been first humiliated by Joff, then rejected by Gendry, and finally threatened by Arya did not bother her. Really, what burned her heart was the simple truth that she had never been loved by anyone romantically. Here she was, often told she was a beauty, and love was far beyond her reach. Happy fucking Maiden's Day!

"Get up!" Dany breezed into the bedroom to throw back the curtains to let the light shine in and Marge covered her head with a pillow. "Your hair looks atrocious!" That did it - Marge rose from her bed with every bit of grace she could muster, pulled on a silk robe, and sat down at her vanity. Her hair did look completely ridiculous. "What happened?"

"There was a guy I liked... still like." Marge heaved a sigh as started to pull a brush through her frazzled tresses. "You know what they say, 'if you want to get over someone - get under someone else'," The brush snagged on a knot and she slowed her brushing to tend it. "But he has a girlfriend."

"And why did you go and do a stupid thing like falling for someone who isn't single?" Dany sat down on the corner of the vanity and crossed her arms, giving Margaery a pointed stared. She was dressed up to go out - Margaery tortured herself by wondering what horse-farmer Jogo had planned. The creepily silent guy did not seem like a romantic... Gendry on the other hand would probably- No, not playing that game.

"Why can't I?" Marge slammed the brush down and twisted her body to see Dany's purple eyes widening from surprise. "Why can't I like someone who is nice, sweet, and good? Why can't I meet anyone like that?!" Her eyes burned but she refused to cry, wiping her eyes angrily with the back of her hands. "What's so wrong with me that I attract assholes and repel nice guys?"

"Marge..." Dany's tone gentled but it did nothing to dull the pounding ache in Margaery's chest.

"I really loved Joff," she laughed mockingly at herself. "I pretended he didn't mean that much but deep down I always thought..." Marge looked up at her reflection, hating the foolish red-eyed girl looking back. "I imagined someday he would come to see nobody would love him like I do... did." She gave up trying to make her hair presentable and stood up to stumble back to bed, collapsing on it and burrowing under her covers. "Why would he do that to me," she wailed, "when all I did was love him?"

"Okay, it's alright..." Dany moved to sit on the edge of the bed beside Marge and started to rub her back soothingly. "It isn't wrong to love someone, honey. I'm your best friend, I hated that shit-eating pig, and I still had no idea he was capable of something so heartless."

"The stupidest part is, if he asked to make porn of us together I would've said yes," Marge spit out the truth because it tasted bitter. "I would've thought it was hot he wanted to jerk off to us." Did that make her the most pathetic person who ever lived? "But to hide it - and use it to threaten other people - that's so sick... How did I not know he was like that? How could I love someone like that?"
"You are extremely lucky, I know it doesn't seem like it but you are." Dany stretched out on the bed next to her, propped up on her side so they faced each other. "At least he never got the chance to post it online, that would really be a disaster. No one who meets that fate is stupid nor do they deserve it: sometimes we don't really know the people we love."

"This guy I like is perfect for me, the kind of guy I should have." Marge hugged a pillow against her chest. "He's sweet and loyal and gentle... Why is he with her?"

"Who?" Dany was obviously trying to tamp down her curiosity but not doing a very good job of it.

"Arya Stark," she groaned. To think even that odd, violent little girl had someone to desperately love her was the straw that broke Marge's pride.

"The guy you like is GENDRY?!!" Dany's purple eyes flew open wide in disbelief before she thwacked Marge's shoulder. "Well, that was stupid! He's totally devoted to Arya: it would almost scary if it wasn't so damned cute."

"She threatened me," she moped wretchedly. Well, nobody could say she did not deserve it but it was still completely mortifying. Those videos will always be held over her head - all because she dated the wrong guy. Life was so completely unfair!

"Why?" Dany eyed her with suspicion, knowing full well that Marge never did anything halfway.

"I told her that I kissed Gendry," in hindsight, it might have been a horrible idea - both the kiss and confession. Marge simply could not stand the idea of poor sweet Gendry taking all the blame when it was her fault. She dared not show her face at school for the last few days, afraid to run into either half of the couple. "It was nothing but both of them reacted like I dropped the atom bomb."

"You're lucky she didn't kill you," Dany admonished. "That girl is fiercely possessive of Gendry: again, scary and cute." An evil smile curled on her full lips. "I would have given anything to see the look on his face when you kissed him."

"It was devastatingly adorable - he's like a lost little puppy... but in a sexy way." Marge stared up at the ceiling and sighed. "Actually, when Arya threatened me, it made me feel better. I thought she did not care about him, but at least now, I can respect their relationship. I did not sway him even a little bit, not for a second... Why can't someone love me all hopelessly devoted like that?"

"Someday you will find someone perfect for you," Dany beamed her beautiful smile at Marge. "In the meantime, I love you." It was good to see her friend's genuine smile so often because she finally found someone to love. Loras walked around with that same expression on his face - the very one Gendry wore when he spoke of Arya. Everyone had found their pair except for her, but she could still feel happy for her friend.

"It hurts," Marge forced a tight smile, "because I'm alone on Maiden's Day and I feel so very pathetic."

"You're not alone, I'm here." Dany laid down next to her and wrapped an arm around Marge's waist. "Want to watch classic romance movies?"

"In a bit, just hold me a while." Even if she was doomed to be unlucky in love, at least she was lucky in friendship. And the real shame was she did like Gendry first as a person and then as a man but somehow she ruined that friendship before it could even start. That might be the most depressing part of this day celebrating romance. What if all one has is friendship-love? Can it be celebrated instead of pitied?
The drive back to the ranch was filled with quiet melancholy as Dany felt bad for her friend and even worse for abandoning her. All Margaery wanted was to mope around and she would do just that until she decided to stop: that is just the kind of girl Marge was. When she pulled up in front of the ranch, she headed around to the barn, hoping to find Drogo and succeeding. He was brushing down his stallion and then turned around to pick up his saddle to sling it over the horse's back.

"Here you are Drogo," she announced her presence as she walked up behind him. "I can never let you go," she wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged his back, "being single is terrifying." He turned in her hold and returned her embrace, burying his face against her hair. "Did you know it's a holiday?" Dany looked up to see his black eyes: indifferent and unaware. "I know, I know: Dothraki don't really 'do' holidays."

"Go change - we ride," he released her and gently pushed her towards the barn entrance.

"This is not suitable for riding?" She turned to face him again and waved to hand over her outfit. She dressed up hoping that he would offer to take her out but no such proposal had come yet. Again, there was no reply from him and she did not expect it. Dany rolled her eyes before whirling around and dashing out of the barn to the house. "I'll be back in flash." In his room, she kept some comfortable riding clothes and changed before returning out to the barn. "Where are we going?"

Yet again, he remained mute as he helped her mount her horse and then swung effortlessly up into his saddle. Usually his quietness did not concern her but it he seemed to be hiding something and Dany wondered if she somehow upset him. She tried to relax as they rode alongside each other in silence, calmed by the gentle stride of her horse. They rode for a time into the wood behind the ranch. It seemed they were riding aimlessly but before long, they came to a simple camp set up.

"What...?" She turned to see him dismounting and he strode over help her get down. Dany caught the smallest hint of a smile pulling on his lips as she slid down his body until her feet touched the ground. "Drogo, you did know it was Maiden's Day!" He ignored her accusation as he took ahold of her hand and led her towards the small leather-covered hut. Dany quickly kicked her boots off to duck inside, lowering to crawl to the back and sat down on a bed of furs. "It is so adorable," she grinned at him as he sat beside her, "I just want to live here forever!"

"Anha allayafi asshilak jin azh allayafat shafka, zhey jalan attirari anni." Drogo's Maiden's Day gift did indeed 'please' Dany very much. The small hut was cozy and it felt like they were the only two people in the world.

"Shekh ma shieraki anni, yer chomoe anna." As she thanked him, Dany crawled closer to kneel in front of Drogo and splayed her palm against chest. It was no wonder she could not make any decisions about the future, she thought about him night and day. Through the fabric of his shirt, she felt his solid warmth and the strong heart beating within. She slid her hand upward, curling it around his neck. As she rose up onto her knees, he bowed his head and their lips met, spreading powerful yearning through her body.

The soft kiss turned hungry when he parted his lips and their tongues melded, pulling a throaty moan from her. Driven by the heat of the kiss she grasped the front of his sweater and pulled it down from his shoulders. He tugged her jacket off to toss it aside and they broke apart only to get his shirt then hers out of the way. Both naked from the waist up, Drogo murmured Dothraki sweet nothings while kissing down her neck. His hot breath panted over her skin as he pressed tender kisses to the base of her throat.

The air outside was chilled but inside the hut was quite warm with the flap closed and their bodies...
pressed together. Shameless lust flooded her body as she dipped her head to follow the line of his jaw with her lips. Their hands and mouths explored each other, grasping and sucking every bit of exposed skin. Her fingers trailed down to the front of his pants and failed in their attempting to unfasten them. The stubborn button remained secure, causing her to whine with frustration.

Drogo released his hold on her waist and jerked open his pants as the zipper cracked in protest. He dragged her to him and seized her lips again, covering her mouth with his. She arched against his chest, humming with contentment at the contact of his body against hers. Dany wrapped her fingers around the pulsing length of his erection, causing him groan into their kiss. Filled with impatient desire, she lay back onto the soft furs hooked her thumbs into the waist of her pants and panties to tug them off.

After helping her remove the rest of her clothes he finished undressing and positioned his body over hers. Heavy passionate longing enveloped her, building the heated tension between her thighs. She spread her legs to accommodate him as he settled down on top of her, tucking an arm underneath her arched back. Drogo curled her body against his as his hardness pressed against her thigh. Dany slid a hand around his back as she other reached between their bodies to guide his cock to her entrance.

He groaned as he pushed his hips forward until he filled her completely but it would never be enough. This carnal act was only just as close as they could come to her true desire: to know his thoughts and feel his love for her. Drogo seemed to know her need to be close to him, pressing their bodies close as he tightened his hold around her waist. They moved in a slow rhythm, swaying and rocking lazily, neither of them in a hurry.

He pushed his face into her neck, panting strained Dothraki endearments into her skin. Drogo's breath blew over her shoulder as his hand delved into her hair as his other arm wrapped tighter around her waist. Dany whimpered into Drogo's neck as he pressed her knee down into the soft fur and stroked his palm over the inside of her thigh. Her hip trembled as intense pleasure neared total bliss mounting to a pinpoint, a focused aching need.

The building ache was only eased when his fingers caressed the slick sensitive flesh between her legs. Dany squeezed her thighs around him and tried to keep pace with his rhythm as he moved his fingers in time with his thrusts. She reached ecstasy first, crying out and clinging to him as pulsating fulfillment flowed through her. He groaned a relieved sound as he let go, thrusting his rushing release deep inside her.

They collapsed into a boneless heaving pile among the tussled furs until she could not catch her breath. Sensing her discomfort, he rolled onto his back, pulling her to his side. Dany cuddled close against his upper body and pressed light kisses to his chest. The chill outside sneaked its way across her sweat-covered skin, raising goosebumps on her arms. He tugged one of the lose furs over their bodies and turned on his side to gather her into his embrace. Neither of them spoke a word but there was a calm peace found in their stillness, which gave her the courage to break it.

"I don't know what to do," her fingers wandered over his smooth chest until she found the raised scar over his heart. "About the future I mean: I wish I could stay at the ranch forever but I think... I'm hiding here."

"I hide here also," his fingers stroked gently through her hair. "Ven aresak," Drogo's voice held a shocking bitter tone.

"You are never a coward," she protested, propping up on one elbow to look down at him.

"You don't know - you don't ask," his eyes turned down to the raised scar her fingers were tracing.
"About the scar on your chest?" Dany could only look at him in confusion. "I thought we agreed to keep our pasts in the past." He said nothing, only watched her with an unreadable expression. "Hash nith?" It was a stupid question that she immediately regretted: obviously, it had been very painful.

"Anha navvirzethay," he looked away. Drogo appeared to still feel the 'humiliation' he felt back when he received the scar. "I fought, I lost." It squeezed her heart to imagine him in pain and she quickly wiped away the moisture that filled her eyes. "My parents cried for me then," he noticed her sudden emotion. "So I came here - to hide."

"Why were you fighting?" Dany sat up, blinking to fight back the stinging in her eyes.

"Dothraki have no home," his face never showed so much pain before, "our way of life is dead." Dany could not watch that tortured expression, lowering her eyes to hide her brimming tears. "Anha okeo thirat mra athostar," he explained that at the time his friends were always angry. "Kisha zalat venat lajak vosma disse imesh zireyeselat." It seemed Drogo and his friends thought of themselves as 'warriors' but only made trouble.

"Then your parents were right to send you away," she cupped the side of his cheek and gazed down at him. "We would not have met otherwise."

"Shafka avvos shoven haji az - anha zin tihat yeri athnithar." He was right of course: her own 'scars' might not be raised above her skin but they were easily seen by anyone who cared to look.

"Every time in my life that I have ever been happy, it gets taken away." Dany pulled back her hand and bowed her head so that a thin veil of her hair covered her face. "I keep thinking my heart can't be broken again but it always happens." The fear of confessing her love for him out loud stemmed mostly from her wish to keep things simple. Then she would never have to tell him her darkest secrets or worst fears. "With you I forget my past and it gives me peace."

"I will not ask," he accepted her unvoiced request without hesitation. "You will tell me one day." Drogo's confidence was not arrogant: more that he trusted his own patience. He intended to stay by her side and wait for her to open up without any pressure. It was more than she ever hoped to receive from anyone: unconditional love and trust.

"There is someone you should meet," Dany's stomach tightened but she kept her voice steady. "My aunt... is staying in a mental clinic nearby. She is important to me and I want to show her that I am happy."

"I will go with you," he agreed directly and it did not surprise her, "anywhere."

"With us, I can't." Dany stopped herself, unsure what to say besides... "I'm afraid."

"Rokhat laz annithilat kishi zhor azhat haj," he advised her but she fumbled with his meaning. Dany recognized he said the words 'fear' and 'heart' but did not catch the rest.

"I don't understand," she confessed, her mind was just a little too tired to translate.

"Fear can give strength," he interpreted.

"It sounds better in Dothraki," she smiled and a renewed energy buzzed within her.

"Me nem nesa," he answered 'it is known' somberly, drawing a chuckle from Dany.

"Drogo anni mra zhor," she told him he was in heart before professing her love, "anha zhilak yera." Dany pronounced each syllable carefully, expressing more than words with her growing Dothraki
"Me nem nesa," he repeated in a softer voice, his dark eyes gazing up at her with devotion. "I love you, Dany." His hands lightly grasped her upper arms to pull her down to lie beside him again. "Yer zhorre haj atthasat athrokhar." Was she that strong? Could she 'defeat her fears' as Drogo said? Dany felt unsure of so many things, especially the impeding decision she had to make about her future.

"How do Dothraki decide between two paths?" She turned her face up to look at him, her cheek resting against his warm skin.

"Dothraki say - eqorasalat javrath." He looked so serious but she thought 'let go of the reins' sounded like a terrible idea. "Don't fight for control, let go."

"Let go..." Dany mused over the Dothraki idiom as she curled her hand around his waist. The phrase did not mean 'do nothing'; it meant she should make the 'choice' to see where life takes her. All of her life she 'knew' the path laid out for her and never intended to deviate from it. She did not even know if she was capable of living her life without a following a strict plan. "Maybe I will take a year off from school to think about it. If you could go anywhere, where would you go?"

"I would bring you to meet my parents," his words surprised her. Before she could recover from the shock, she already had an answer...

"I will go with you," she echoed his earlier promise, "anywhere."

Chapter End Notes

The New Year holiday spurred most of my family and handful of friends to come calling in the past few days. My socializing quota has been met for the year and it's only four days in! How does one politely inform others that they have important fanfic to write so step the fuck off?

OMFGodsOldAndNew, peoples! http://halfprincesshalfgoddess.tumblr.com/tagged/jaqen%20h%27ghar
^ This woman is a genius. Who needs fanfic?! I've been doing this wrong this whole time... my gods.

I haven't met a Lannister I didn't want to torture and kill.
And I haven't met a department store mirror I didn't check myself out in. We all have a weakness, don't worry 'bout it.
Lemon Cake for my Lover

SANSA

In the kitchen, she was reaching for a big mixing bowl high up on the top shelf of the cupboard when daddy's hand reached over hers. When Sansa turned around, she saw her father step back. Daddy held the bowl with two hands and glancing around apprehensively. He had been standoffish with her ever since Winterfest, even though she thought they made amends. Still, nothing can go back to the way used to be so she had to make more of an effort to make their relationship better than ever. She smiled brightly at him and held out her hand to receive the bowl.

"Feeling better, sweetheart?" He handed her the bowl almost apologetically. It seemed that he blamed himself for her coming down with a cold or worse, that he felt guilt over Joffrey's nasty stunt. At least they were interacting with each other, which was more than she could say for her sister. It seemed Arya and daddy could not spend more than a few minutes in a room together without one of them making a quick getaway. Even after her personal anger and humiliation faded, Joffrey still hurt her family members.

"Yes, daddy," she smiled as brightly as she could. Even though the front of her face was still chapped from blowing her nose a zillion times. "Thanks so-so much for allowing Sandor to come over while I've been sick." He came over every day after school, except on the days he had practice. "It has made all the difference, I would have been miserable without him." Sansa never knew she could be so happy being taken care of; he brought her books from school and everything.

"I think it might be alright to admit that I like him," daddy was always handsomest when he smiled but those were rare lately. Sansa noticed the tiredness lingering around his eyes and prickles of guilt poked her. She knew why he was worried, always Arya. What caused the rift between herself and her sister remained a mystery. The only reason she knew anything about what was going on was because of Gendry's daily updates.

"Good," she nodded for emphasis and set the bowl down behind her, "what you think is very important to me." Sansa moved towards him to wrap her arms around his waist and leaned her face against his shoulder. How long had it been since they even hugged each other like this? Daddy stroked her damp hair as she nuzzled her face against his sweater. The warmth of simply being held by her father was something she forgot made her feel safe and loved. It was so much more than a hug between them, they were finding their way back to each other again.

"I'm glad that is still true," he squeezed her lightly before kissing the top of her head. Sansa heard the pain in his voice and it worsened her guilty conscience. From her perspective, Arya was just being Arya, rebelling and acting older than her age. But daddy seemed to expect his daughter to stay twelve forever, breaking bones and making mischief. Sansa believed her little sister loved Gendry and nobody should stand in the way of love. So she held her tongue and kept her father in the dark; growing up was such hard work.

"Of course it is," she insisted, pulling back to look up at him. "No matter what happens I know you will always be there for me." He would always be her Daddy, the one she looked up to and counted on to keep her safe. It was a shock to learn he was not a hero but just an ordinary man but after a
time she realized that only make him more heroic. Because he tried to be the best father he could be, and that was all she could ask for. "I love you, daddy."

"You know how much I love you, lemon cake." The tension around his eyes relaxed but then they dropped again as he released his light hold on her. "I am afraid your sister's affection is not so easily recovered." It was heartbreaking to watch Arya and their father's closeness dwindle away to nothing over the past year. It seemed they were playing a tug of war, each pulling in the opposite direction harder and harder. Eventually, they would stretch as far apart as they could and the link between them could break.

"Arya is..." Sansa knew that Arya was struggling but according to Gendry, her sister was starting to do better and eating again. She made the decision the first time she met him that she would support their relationship and give him the benefit of the doubt. Still, for the mental well-being of her household she pressed her father. "You should talk to her; I think she needs to be dragged into making up with you. She wants it, but you know how stubborn she is."

"I am not blind to her recent attitude towards me." His frustration was obvious but the pain haunting behind it was exactly the same as Arya's. The two of them were so alike and that was what made them butt heads this way. Daddy moved to the coffee machine to brew himself an afternoon cup. "She needs some more time before she comes around again." That used to be true of Arya but things were different now, Sansa felt it in her gut.

"It's more than that, daddy." Sansa continued as carefully as she could without betraying her sister or hurting her father. "She's... having a hard time." And no wonder, after everything they went through this year. Things would only get better when daddy recognized Arya needed understanding more than discipline.

"Don't worry," he smiled reassuringly, "I'll patch things up with Arya somehow." He turned away to fix his cup of coffee but Sansa suspected he wanted to hide his anxiety. "Her grudges never last forever." Daddy misunderstood Arya's unusual moods, understandable because nobody told him anything. It should be between them to fix their relationship but neither of them was willing to make the first move.

"I need to get ready for Maiden's Day with Sandor," she ran a self-conscious hand through her damp-curled hair. Sansa slept in later than she wanted and accidentally drifted off in her head while showering. Sandor promised to come over right after school so she was running behind schedule to get ready for their stay-inside date.

"Have fun, I'll be working in my office." He turned to leave with his cup of coffee in hand and headed out of the kitchen.

"Have a date with mom over the phone," she called after him. "I know she misses you." He paused to look back at her with a more cheerful expression.

"I just might do that," he turned the corner down the hall and she rushed to get everything in the kitchen ready. Then she hurried to the bathroom to blow-dry her hair and fashioned a loose braid that hung down her back. She changed out of her loungewear into a comfortable sweater dress and some tights. With her dry skin, makeup was out of the question but she washed her face and put on soothing moisturizer. Sansa looked up at her reflection and saw her cheeks still pink from a mild fever and her nose redder still.

But those flaws did not make her insecure anymore, it was silly to worry that Sandor would judge her appearance. Sometimes she worried that he loved her because he thought she was beautiful but being sick disproved that concern. He truly loved her for her whole self and she would never doubt
him again. The doorbell rang and a smile was instantly on her face before her mind even registered who was at the door. A familiar fluttery tingle settled in her stomach as she skipped to the door and paused a moment before opening it.

Sansa smoothed a hand over her hair and down her braid before straightening the collar on her dress. She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly before reaching out to turn the handle, swinging the door wide open. He loomed outside the doorway, slouched to one side with hands hidden in his bright hoodie. A little smirk tugged at the side of his mouth as he took in her appearance with obvious approval. As usual, a thrill ran up her spine under his dark gaze and she felt her face flushing hotter.

"Happy Maiden's Day, little bird," he removed his closed fist from his hoodie and held it out her. Sansa cupped both of her hands under his and he dropped a small item into them. "I thought of you when I saw it." She inspected the present and found it was a small hair clip with a tiny red bird nestled against a blue rose. Without hesitation, she secured the loose front of her hair with the barrette and smiled up at him. "Looks good on you," he stated matter-of-factly with a smile tugging on his lips.

"It's so pretty, thank you lover," she reached out to take his hand still extended towards her. "Please, come in." They stayed linked together while walking into the apartment then reluctantly breaking apart. He tugged his sweatshirt over his head to hang it over a peg on the wall behind him. Oh gods, he went sleeveless, kindness and cruelty and one action. Being sick had been torturous because they spent every day together but nothing happened between them.

"What's the plan, little bird?" Sandor turned around to catch her ogling and he grinned even wider. "We could get out of here, if you want." That offer was almost too tempting so she turned to lead the way into the kitchen. Sansa wished she could give Sandor a Maiden's Day he would never forget but she did still have a cold. It would mortify her to death if she had to blow her nose while making love.

"You said you wanted a cake for Maiden's Day... ta-da!" Sansa waved a hand over the carefully organized materials to make a cake, grinning widely at him. "We are going to make it together!" His face scrunched up into the very image of a little kid asked to perform a simple chore. "Don't frown like I've just asked you to blind yourself with a dull spoon." She gathered up her Maiden's Day present and held it out to him. "Here's your apron..."

"No apron," he crossed his arms and did not even look down at it. "Not gonna happen in this lifetime."

"But... it's Star Trek." Sansa turned it around and held up the front side to him, showing him the black and gold Operations design. She pulled the apron close to her chest and looked crestfallen down at the floor. "I ordered it especially so we could bake together..." There was no way he could resist her sad eyes when she turned them up on him. "I bought a matching one for myself," she pouted.

"Fine," he yanked the apron out of her hands and looped the top over his head. "Happy now?" Even his childish sulking could not dampen her rising spirits because he was so adorable! Now they could boldly bake like no one has baked before!

"So hap-py!" She pranced be around him and grabbed the side ties to make a very pretty and symmetrical bow behind his back. "Yay," she sang, "all done!" Sandor grumbled something under his breath but she knew his grousing only meant he liked it too. Somehow his typical grumpiness make the apron look even more cute, reminding her of Lieutenant Worf.

"What kind of cake are we making?" He leaned against the counter with his arms crossed, trying his
best to look totally cool and aloof; failing miserably. He just looked so loveable in that apron; it kind of made her want to do her victory point dance. But this one victory she could just have an internal celebration, too much gloating would make her a bad sport.

"Lemon cake," she answered, "the best cake in the whole wide universe." She clapped her hands together and marched in front of the ingredients to look down at their beautiful potential.

"Of course." He rolled his eyes and step closer but she knew one thing about him it was he loved sweet things. Her plan was for today was set; the moment for the execution had come. This Maiden's Day would go down in her personal history as one of the greatest triumphs of her life. Today... she would bake Sandor a cake that would blow his mind. By preparing him the most delicious cake ever cooked in the history of baked goods, he would not be able to help falling more in love with her.

In years to come, he would request this cake over and again for his birthday and their anniversary, it had to be a cake to remember. Sandor would long to taste her lemon cake when went away to college, wherever he ended up. When they were old and grey, they would reminisce about the first time they cooked something together. This was a very special day and nothing would bring her down from her seventh heaven. Sansa rolled up her sleeves, donned her own Sciences blue apron, and fixed a determined stare at the cake ingredients.

"Let's begin," she grabbed the large mixing bowl and set in in front of her, holding out her hand to Sandor, "big whisk please."

"What's a whisk?" Sandor looked helplessly around the countertop as Sansa gaped at him in disbelief. "Ah, wait - it's the wiry one, right?" He grabbed the whisk and held it out to her proudly and she bit her lip in distress.

"Sandor," she fought to keep any emotion out of her voice, "have you ever cooked anything before?"

"Microwaves do the cooking," he shrugged and her heart sank into her stomach. She should have realized he never did anything like this and once again, their lives seemed so different. Almost all of her happy memories growing up were making things with her mother. Sandor's mother passed away when he was little and that was all she knew about it. He went through so much hurt and disappointment in his life she could not help wanting to replace that pain with happiness.

"Alright," she clapped her hands together and felt a renewed sense of dedication, "the first step is to learn how to read a recipe. That is all you have to know really, from there it's all about practicing the techniques. This cake is great not only because it tastes good but it will be easy to make on your own."

"I doubt I'll ever be baking cakes without you," he chuckled as if the very idea was impossible.

"You never know," she arched a brow at him, "maybe you will make me a cake someday... hint-hint." Sandor snorted a laugh and shook his head but she ignored his pessimism. "First you look at the ingredients; there will be details about how they should be prepared. Like, the butter needs to be melted in the microwave." She dropped the room-temperature sticks of butter into a glass dish and handed it to him. "Go ahead; you're already an expert in that area."

"Oh yeah," he grinned as he stuck the bowl into the microwave, "I'm real good at this. Watch a master show you how it's done." Sandor closed the door and pressed the cooking time with a flourish of his big hands. "And... start."

"Well done," she teased, "I'm so impressed."
"I'm pretty impressive," he quirked his brows at her. "What's next?"

"We preheat the oven," she explained as she turned the knob, "so when we put our cake in it will bake for just the right amount of time." When she looked up Sandor was gazing at her with an odd expression. "What?"

"You know how much I love you, right?" He looked so serious that she would give anything to know what was going on inside his head.

"I know," she ducked her head away from his intense gaze, "I love you too." His fingers came under her chin to gently tilt her face up to look at him. Sandor looked like he wanted to kiss her and for a moment she wanted it too until she remembered daddy was just in the other room. It would not do at all to give daddy any reason to dislike Sandor. "So... anyway," she turned to face the countertop. "If you follow the recipe you can see we need to measure out our sugar, just pour to this line." She indicated to the measuring cup and watched as he poured.

For the first time in her life, she actually felt grateful that she got sick. Otherwise, she would have tried to do something over the top romantic. In truth, baking with someone is a very intimate act usually reserved for close friends and family. These ordinary activities would become the memories she would cherish her whole life.

Chapter End Notes

I have actually been writing a lot lately, just skipped ahead a bit! I am the most curious what the ending of this fic will be, so I'm wrote ahead to puzzle out a satisfying conclusion for all of my ships. I got about thirty chapters outlined for 'next year' and got nowhere near an ending so... yeah. Let's just see where it goes! I'm on this ride with everyone else, just hanging on thinking: what the fuck have I gotten myself into?! At least I still have Veridissima and HeyYouWithTheFace to keep me company. :D

Thanks my peeps.

Sandor POV is up next: "Sweet and Lemony"
The microwave signaled its annoying beep and the little bird lost her dreamy smile - suddenly all business. She ordered him to retrieve the butter and set it on the counter to cool. As Sandor followed her instructions, she watched him through narrowed eyes. It was fucking seriously sexy as hells, that little furrow of determined concentration. Sansa directed him to add the melted butter into the sugar in the bowl as she whisked the yellow liquid into the sugar.

Her little pink tongue flicked out to wet her lips so they shined a little, tempting him to taste them. Sandor didn't even realize he was moving in to steal a kiss until the sound of a doorknob turning over snapped him back into reality. He casually leaned back as the door swung open and that's when Sansa turned at the noise, her eyes growing wide.

"Daddy," she blinked in confusion a few times, as her father stepped inside, "I thought... you were in your office? I never would have invited Sandor inside if I knew that you left."

"It's perfectly alright," Mr. Stark smiled warmly at his daughter. "I knew he was here, I just had to step out to make a call." He nodded in Sandor's direction. "Sandor, how are you?" Not so great, having only just found out his girl's father could walk silently as a ninja.

"Fine, uh..." He waved awkwardly at his apron. "We're making cake, sir." Good thing he pointed out the obvious - he didn't look nearly ridiculous enough. Why did he always have to come off like an ass in front of her father? The man had all the power in their relationship and would hold it until Sansa turned eighteen.

"I can see that," Mr. Stark looked amused by Sandor's awkwardness. "Well, carry on," he started to walk away before breaking his stride to smile at Sansa once more. "Happy Maiden's Day, sweetheart, your mother and brothers send their love."

"Thanks, I love you daddy," she called after her father as he disappeared down the hallway. "Whew!" Sansa put a hand over her heart. "Good thing we weren't doing anything... that would be too embarrassing." But Sandor could swear he heard just a note of disappointment in her relief. Sansa set back to work, continuing to give him instructions. "Beat these two eggs," she handed him a small bowl carrying two eggs and a whisk.

"Doesn't make sense," he grumbled as he took the bowl to follow her orders, "I get this tiny bowl and whisk." Sandor pinched the metal handle of the whisk to emphasize its tininess.

"You don't know baking," she gloated happily, "it is skill and experience that gets you the big whisk." Sansa arched a brow as she turned her whisk around her bowl with a flourish. "Now, young apprentice, add your eggs to my bowl." As she whisked in the eggs she asked him to measure out the flour. Sandor took the opportunity to make a white smudge across her cheek, earning him a pretty scowl. "Now," she arched one brow, "if you can stop being childish we might make this cake before Maiden's Day ends."
"You like me bad," he accused and she only puffed an annoyed breath and continued working. A few wisps of her red hair came loose from her braid as she bit her lip in concentration - she never looked so beautiful. Sandor rewarded his restraint by looking at her as much as he wanted, easily done when she was distracted. Even sickly and pitiful Sansa was still unbelievable, stunning in a way that mesmerized him. She could have anyone with a set of eyeballs but she was his, something he still couldn't understand but long since accepted.

It was downright torture to be this close to her without holding and kissing her until she couldn't breathe. But with her being sick, he made an effort to give her space and keep his hands to himself. That light flush to her cheeks didn't aid his self-control but the knowledge that her father was just in the other room did. Sandor behaved himself long enough to pour the finished batter into a baking dish.

"That's it," she shoved the dish inside and closed the oven door. "Now we wait one hour, or until golden brown." Sansa clapped her hands together and wiggled a little bit with excitement.

"But I'm hungry now," and not just for food - he watched as she wiped her brow with the back of her hand. She flashed a flawless smile at him and whirled around towards the fridge.

"Don't worry," she chirped, "I made sandwiches for when the cake is baking." She pulled open the fridge, removing a tray of premade sandwiches and stepped lightly to the table to set it down. Sansa practically danced across the kitchen floor she was moving so gracefully. Of course, she would be like this on the Maiden's Day, even if she was unwell. He followed to sit down next to her and she set a sandwich on his plate. "I'm sorry our Maiden's Day is so dull."

"Baking lemon cakes has always been a dream of mine," he made a joke out of it because inside he was dying of guilt. She thought it was her fault the day was 'dull' when it was completely his fault. If he had any money and have a bit more imagination, he could've come up with something to make the day special. Next year, he vowed to himself, next year he would do something for her - something special - something she deserves.

"Very funny," she huffed, not appreciating his dry humor. "You don't have to make fun of it..."

"I'm serious," he growled, leaning over the table narrowing his eyes at her. "Calling me a liar?" Sandor expected her to giggle at his friskiness but instead she blushed and glanced away, a coy smile curling on her perfect lips.

"I miss you," she whispered, her eyes darting back to the hallway like she just said something naughty. Wouldn't want 'daddy' to hear - sweet little bird, still so easy to embarrass.

"Which part?" He reached under the table to cup the back of her calf under her knee, cursing the tights between his fingers and her silken skin.

"Sandor," she hissed, slapping his hand away, "eat your sandwich." Sansa narrowed her eyes at his plate and demurely crossing her ankles under her chair to discourage any more fondling. He finished his sandwich in two bites and by the time he was done, her dreamy smile was back in its place. "Baking is surprisingly hard work after being sick," she crossed her arms and drooped against the table. "Though I do feel much better because you've been taking care of me."

"Just brought you some soup," he shrugged - in truth, he had his own interest in seeing the little bird well again.

"That contained the secret healing ingredient... love," she tucked her arm under her head and tilted a lazy smile up at him. "The worst part about being sick is I can't even sing to cheer myself up."
"I miss your singing to," he grinned as he leaned across the table closer to her. She blushed but didn't scold him, only lifted her hand to lightly caress the soft inside of his arm. Oh, so she gets to touch him all she wants - meh, fine with him.

"I don't think I will be cheerleading next year," she mused quietly - probably just talking to fill the empty air. "I did it only to impress you anyway." Her fingers slid to the inside of his wrist and he laid his hand back so she could trace the lines of his palm. "Next year I will go back to chorus... I miss it." Then she took her hand back, balled into a fist, before tucking it against her chest. Sandor's eyes traveled up to see her staring at the table. "I'll miss you," her voice was slow and soft, "you don't know how much."

"Little bird, I-"

"No, I know..." She trailed off after interrupting him but he hesitated to long before talking and she beat him to the punch. "I know you don't like to talk about it but I just have to know if you've decided on a school yet."

"Don't worry about that when you're sick." This isn't how he planned to have this conversation he wanted to think about it some more and be one-hundred percent sure. She was just kind of like pushing it out at him when he wasn't ready! Was he ever going to be 'ready'? His heart and mind wrestled with this very problem since the day he fell for Sansa. Back and forth, it went between levelheaded reason and mindless devotion. And it frequently occurred to him - she'd be swarmed the minute he left if he wasn't around to ward off admirers.

"I'm feeling much better," she insisted with a brave smile. Why does she insist on talking about this? Wouldn't it be better if they just live today, trying to love each other and be happy? Plans are made to be ruined, at least that became his thinking over the past week.

"I have to take that test first before I can apply," he tried to deflect the conversation again.

"You have to retake the entrance exams..." She said it like she was asking a question and answering at the same time.

"Yeah," he held up one finger for emphasis, "but for the first time."

"I don't understand..." She shook her head and held out both hands, palms down. "You've never taken them?" When he nodded, her blue eyes grew so wide they were completely rimmed by white. "What are you waiting for?!"

"I hate tests," he shrugged - it was the truth. Sandor could almost see into her head by her expression. She was trying to understand the situation and then made her final decision about how she felt. Sansa wore everything she thought right there on her face and that was true honesty, the rarest thing in the world.

"I know you have to go," she forced a tight smile, "after everything that happened here, I could never ask you to stay for me." Sandor held back his mocking snort - she all but asked every day, sometimes it seemed she didn't even know she was doing it. "But you can't expect me not to worry when you don't even seem to care what school you go to. If you have to be far away, I want you to go to the best place." So she can attend there after she graduates that was left unsaid but still hanging in the air.

"I'm gonna apply to Crownlands," he blurted out, surprising even himself. It wasn't so much that he wanted to stay but she wanted it so much and he needed to make her happy. "My grades aren't good enough but maybe if I get a decent score on the exam... I can do that much at least." She stared at
him, eyes unblinking, and brows drawn together.

"What...?" Sansa went pale, like way more than usual, and her voice lowered to the quietest of whispers. "Are you offering to stay in Kings Landing... to be with me?" He wouldn't so much call it an 'offer' as a bribe, the price he paid to keep her beside him. "Oh please, Sandor, don't soften it... just answer yes or no," the last word came out only a wisp of breath. Sansa's expression was balanced on the edge of pure joy and total devastation and had to choose to push or pull her.

"I don't want to get your hopes up," he stressed. "Crownlands has some of the toughest standards and highest tuition. I only stand a small chance to get an athletic scholarship." She was barely breathing, leaning forward still waiting for his answer. "But if I get in then I'll stay here, because of you. I never had any happy memories here before, now I can't drive though the city without thinking of you." On campus his eyes were always drawn to all the places he kissed her, looking back on happy memories was a new thing for him. Sansa suddenly stood up and left.

"Where are you going?" Sandor watched her scurry away and heard her go into her bedroom, after a moment she came back.

"Do you really want to stay with me?" A heavy stack of books was held in her strained hold. "Don't tell me 'maybe' or 'we'll see'... do you?"

"I want to stay with you," he answered automatically.

"Then we are going to study our butts off," she dropped the stack of books onto the table in front of him. Gods fuck him. "I have to take the college entrance exam in a couple of years anyway. No time like the present." Sansa fell into her seat and started spreading the books out. "When are you taking the test?"

"Three weeks," he grimaced down at the thick algebra book she set in front of him. Algebra was useless bullshit, he was going to play basketball not... whatever algebra was used for.

"That's not much time; we are going to spend every day studying until then." Sansa lightly ran a finger over the top of his knuckle, drawing his gaze up. "Be a good student," she smirked, "and you will be rewarded."

"Describe it to me," he quirked his brows.

"Focus," she rapped him sharply on the knuckles - he liked it when the little bird took charge. And she did more than that, Sandor studied more in that half-hour than in his whole life. She flirted to encourage and cracked down to motivate, she turned out to be the best teacher he ever had. It was just like with basketball, if he knew he'd win at the end, he'd play his best. All he needed was a little motivation and Sansa provided more than enough. Saved by the bell, a kitchen timer finally went off. "Wow that time flew by," she wasn't even kidding, "time to make the glaze!"

In a small bowl, she mixed some lemon juice and powdered sugar until it formed a gleaming syrup. A year ago, he couldn't conceive that the best day of his life would be spent wearing an apron and making a cake with his sick girlfriend. What the fuck would be doing halfway across the country without her? Missing her, wondering who she was with and if she missed him too. That's fucking stupid and Sandor Clegane wasn't fucking stupid. He was doing the right thing by trying to stay with her - and to reward himself he stuck a finger into the glaze and popped it into his mouth.

"Mmm... I could just eat this," he went in for another dunk.

"Stop that!" She slapped his hand again and pouted up at him. "It's for the lemon cake."
"You love lemon cake more than me," he protested, staring down longingly at the sweet lemony goop.

"Hmm... Might be, could be," she teased, leaning into his sight. "No, I still like Sandor the best." Sansa dipped her finger into the glaze to taste it but he stole her finger and popped it into his mouth - it tasted even better on her finger. Her lips parted in surprise and eyes widened before glancing behind him nervously. "You're so bad," she scolded, taking back her hand and trying to fight back a smile.

"You like me this way," he accused with a smirk.

"Sandor..." Sansa licked her lips and peeked up at him but the piercing beep of the oven timer broke her focus on him. "It's done," she hurried to the oven to switch it off and put on oven mitts before removing the cake to set it on the stove. "Now, all that's left to do is drizzle some of the lemon sugar glaze over the top of while the cake is still warm." She poked a toothpick to make several holes in top of cake and poured the glaze over top. "Making a cake," she sang softly, "la-la-lemon cake."

"Little bird," he called, by the time she turned her head his hands wrapped around her waist and his lips were on hers. She tasted sweet and lemony, sending him right back to the first time he kissed her. Sandor could've stayed in that hazy memory forever but her small hand rose to his chest to gently push him away.

"Sandor," she released a shaky breath and blinked a few times before glancing behind him. "What if daddy saw?" Sansa stepped back away from him and fixed an anxious stare at the door as if expecting her father to suddenly appear.

"I had to just once," and he didn't feel the least bit sorry about it.

"Maybe," the corners of her mouth turned up as she moved in front of him again, "just once more...?" His arms were already circled around her, tugging her to fall against his chest and drawing a soft gasp from her. Sansa raised her face, gazing at him with her lips parted and desire heating her cool blue eyes. Her arms reached up, hands twisting behind his neck, and she waited for his kiss. And he didn't keep her waiting, cupping a hand behind her head before dipping his lips to hers. Sandor kept it short, nowhere near satisfying enough, pulling away before he forgot why he should let her go.

"Let's eat some of this cake already," he released her, unwilling to ruin her father's hard-won approval. Sansa set out two plates and served generous slices of lemon cake for both of them, drizzling extra glaze over his. Then she brought the plates to the table and they sat next to each other again, shoving books out of the way. She watched him dig in for his first bite, an eager expression on her face as he chewed.

"So?" Sansa leaned forward in her seat, waiting for his verdict.

"It's the best cake in the whole universe," and that was just the simple truth. It was delicious, the sweetest thing he ever ate and probably his new favorite food because it tasted just like Sansa's kiss. Sandor was captivated by the joyful smile that lit up her face.

"I will make it for you whenever you want," she promised before tasting her first bite. Her eyes fluttered shut and a look of pure pleasure settled on her face. How could he leave her? Not long ago it seemed impossible to stay in Kings Landing it now just the thought of leaving was unbearable. Since he could remember, fear motivated every decision he made including wanting to run away from this shit city. But now there was another driving force behind all of his choices - and her kisses tasted like lemon cake.
Next up: we'll check in on how Arya's Maiden's Day is going!
Gendry promised they could do whatever she wanted for Maiden's Day, but she knew she had to do something she didn't really want to do. She had to tell him today or she might never get it out, and she did promise to always be honest with him. When she thought about a good spot for her confession, she remembered a place near the bridge that Sansa told her about. Arya gave him directions to the spot and they chatted about school and other mundane topics on the way. The Lincoln did not tolerate the dirt road well but soon enough they were parked.

Arya suggested they hike in the nearby woods so they walked hand-in-hand as Gendry shared bawdy limericks he knew. Some of them made her laugh so hard it hurt her stomach but in a good way and it helped relax her nerves. The ground sloped gently down as they walked through the woods until the trees started to thin and the drop became much steeper. They stood facing the bridge, in front of where the ground dropped off, and took in the amazing view of the bridge and rushing river below.

"Wow, this is fantastic." He was right - it was the perfect spot, like being all alone in the middle of the forest but having a gods-eye view of the bridge. The sun was behind them and they were in the shade of the trees completely in their cover. They could watch dozens of people going about their lives but no one could see them. Arya spotted a fallen log and grabbed his hand to lead him over to sit down on it. They stretched out their legs and faced the bridge, watching the cars driving over.

"It's funny - I remember when Sansa told me about this place I couldn't wait to be ungrounded so we could come together." Arya felt like she aged seven years in the last seven weeks but still bore the burden of being fourteen. If she were twenty-one all of her problems would be non-existent, she would be in charge of herself. All her life people tried to do stuff for her and she always insisted on doing everything on her own. She always considered needing any help or relying on anyone to be a show of weakness.

"And now?" That little worried edge to his voice pulled her out of her depressed mood.

"That just seems like a long time ago," she tilted her head and smirked at him. "How was I more carefree when I was grounded?" Back then, it seemed her every frustration revolved around seeing Gendry, a problem to solve - a distraction.

"Maybe you're the kinda rebel who needs a cause," he picked up a small stick and snapped it between his fingers. "Like, we had to sneak around because you were grounded right? But now that we're not constantly focused on trying to see each other..." Gendry exhaled slowly as he tossed the broken twig pieces away. "Maybe it's not exciting enough for you," he grimaced down at his shoe, avoiding her eyes.

"You're wrong," she buried her hands in her pockets and watched the sinking sun, "but not completely." It was fun, all of the planning and sneaking, then succeeding in those schemes. She
eyed him sideways and kept her voice upbeat. "I won't say it wasn't fun but I wasn't doing it just for the thrill."

"We've had our share of those," he quipped, leaning forward and looking up at the sky.

"No doubt," she agreed, "thrills were had all around but..." Arya dug the heel of her boot into the ground, pushing up layers of dead leaves to reveal the rich soil underneath. "It was a distraction, always coming up with schemes to be with you. I wasn't sneaking around for the sake of doing it, I'm - you know, seriously in love with you."

"I believe you," he assured her with a playful bump of his shoulder against hers. "I'm seriously in love with you too."

"But even you have to admit..." She pulled her hands out of her pockets and braced against the tree trunk, leaning forward with her head bowed. "It's terrifying to be so in love that it blinded me to reality. After I met you, I forgot I was mad at my dad for dragging me here to Kings Landing in the first place. This year I planned to raise hell - settle the score - until I went and fell in love with a blacksmith."

"Sorry about that," he teased, "can't help being so damn lovable." He didn't even know how much she wanted him, and not just in the naked-heavy-breathing way... Okay, in that way too but it was so much more - she needed his unconditional devotion. Gendry was the one person in the world who saw all of her parts, good and bad, then loved her entirely.

"If I asked you to leave with me right now," she tilted her head towards him, "would you?"

"I'd have to ask why first," he looked downright terrified and that was answer enough - he wouldn't go with her. Arya let her head drop again, completely defeated by the knowledge that his devotion only went so far.

"Freedom," she sighed, "do I need a better reason?"

"I'd miss my mom and our friends, even Jon," he tried to make a joke out of it but she still couldn't look up at him. "I think you'd feel the same after a while."

"You don't understand," she shook her head. "When it's just you and me I forget everything bad about my life but then I have to go back to it. I forget my mom will never take my side about anything - ever. And before Joffrey shoved it in my face, I forgot what a fucked up world we live in. Right about then I stopped getting my period, which... you know the rest. That's when I realized, being with you is like living in our own little world that doesn't really exist." And she really wanted to live in that world, just the two of them, where no one could touch them.

"It exists," he insisted quietly. "Our world does exist." Gendry took her hand off the tree trunk held it up against the scratchy fabric of his jacket, over his heart. "It's here, no matter where we are."

"I've been seeing a therapist," she outed herself - no take-backs. Arya didn't say anything for a long time, waiting for him to respond but when he didn't she looked up. He had that cute, staring-completely-dumbfounded expression on his face.

"Wow," he breathed - Arya really bagged herself a genuine poet. Gendry dropped her hand and stared at her for a long time before he squeezed his eyes shut. "So," he slowly opened his eyes as if afraid to look at her, "you're not actually, like... dying of anything?"

"Nope," she tapped the side of her head, "a few issues, but nothing serious. Apparently, all the stuff wrong with me is caused by stress. I'm trying to learn how to deal, the doc I'm seeing is a little weird,
but he knows his shit."

"Oh thank the fucking gods," a grin spread over his face. "When you were saying you wanted to run away, I thought..." Gendry shook his head. "Sorry, I'm just so happy you are gonna get better instead of worse, I was really scared there for a while."

"See," she laughed at herself, "this is how I know I'm crazy - I knew you would react this way, but I was scared to tell you anyway. Am I cracked or what?" Arya raked a hand through her hair. "I'm so sorry for the shit I've put you through."

"Hey," he took a hold of her hand and stared intently into her eyes. "I don't need any apology, all I need is you." Gendry raised his other hand and stoked his calloused fingertips down the side of her face. "You're the most amazing person I've ever met and I'm proud of you, Arry, you're doing a really brave thing."

"You can only be brave when you're scared," the words poured from her mouth before she even thought about it. "At least that's what dad says."

"Smart man," he grinned wryly, "which is why when we run away together he'd catch us in less than a week. But I'd still follow you anywhere, can't let you have all the adventure to yourself. I would be breaking about ten laws but if you promise to come visit me in prison when we get caught..." Gendry trailed off probably noticing that Arya was staring at him with her mouth hanging open. It wasn't a shock, but it's still kinda was a huge massive mind-blow.

"You really would come if I asked," she murmured in awe, "wouldn't you?"

"First," he gave her his signature lopsided smile, "I'd have to try talking you out of it: that's just who I am. But you know I wouldn't stay put if you left, there's nowhere I'd rather be than by your side."

"You couldn't think of anything to say, for once in her life she was speechless. "So, the therapy is helping?"

"Yeah," she nodded, regaining her voice. "I think you're helping me more." Her throat tightened and it sounded like she might start crying but Arya kept talking anyway. "You stayed by my side - even when I thought for sure you'd give up. You're nowhere near as weak as I thought you were."

"Thank you, milady." Gendry grinned and winked at her. "You always know how to complement a fellow." Arya was mid-eye-roll at his stupidity when she felt a cold splash on the tip of her nose. "Here comes the rain," he stood and pulled her up with him, "we should get-"

"Shut up and kiss me," she yanked hard on his arm so he stumbled towards, his hands coming around her waist for balance. Arya curled her arms around his neck and stepped into his path, bracing her hand against chest to steady him. His head angled to the side before their lips came together and she curled her arms around his neck. As their mouths moved together, a tugging urgency spread through her. She released him only out of impatience, stepping back to shrug off her flannel shirt and let it fall to the ground.

"Are you sure?" His face screwed up in confusion over her disrobing. "I don't want you to worry about 'confusing' me or whatever." Arya rolled her eyes as she peeled off another layer, Gendry was born confused - good thing he had her to lead him around.

**GENDRY**

Her dark eyes focused on him again and a smile curled the corners of her mouth as she dropped her gauzy black top to the ground. A few more sprinkles of rain fell through the canopy above but
neither of them noticed. Arya stepped closer to wrap her arms around his waist, tilting her face back to look up at him.

"This time is for me and for you - for us," her heavy-lidded eyes gazed up at him with such softness he fleetingly though to check her for a fever. "I'm not thinking about anyone but you right now," her eyes lowered almost demurely. "I love you, Gendry... make love to me." Then she peeked up and he saw what she was trying to hide: the heat, the hunger that she tried to hold back... for his sake. Arry was pretending to be sweet and actually succeeding in her own way.

The drops started coming down in an irregular rhythm as he slowly leaned towards her and touched his lips to hers. Gendry's hands found her waist to pull her even closer, one arm going behind her. Her hands link around his neck, her arms pulled herself up so her body fitted against his. The storm broke then, announced by a threatening boom of thunder but neither of them paid it any attention. Rain showered down over them as she covered his mouth with hers, making every muscle in his body tense with longing.

Their hungry lips crushed together as raw desperation ripped through him. She tasted like the rain or maybe it tasted like her. Their clothes melted away with the rain, their hands pulling soaked fabric to the ground into soggy piles at either side. When they finally came together again, he pulled her into his arms and drew her flush against him. His breath caught in his chest when she lifted a hand to lightly caress his face, surprised at her gentleness. Then she grasped his hair and demanded his lips on hers once more.

The rain fell cold and light as an early spring shower as it rained down over his skin but her body felt hot. She leaned towards him, licking the water from his throat and he could feel his pulse threatening to burst under her tongue. The canopy of trees above provided their fallen leaves to serve as a bed and he laid her down, moving over her as she pulled him to her. Gendry gathered her close to him, slipping an arm between her waist and the ground. He held himself over her as she slipped a hand between them to guide his cock.

Cold pellets of water splashed over him as he pushed all the way inside and her tight heat contrasted sharply with the icy rain. Arya released a breathless cry and curved her warm body against him as he withdrew and drove into her again. She arched against the ground to angle her hips up to meet his thrusts, her knees locking like a vice around his ribs. As much as she tried to cling to him, their slick bodies slid against each other. Her growing cries turned to screams that threatened to drown out the storm.

All of a sudden, Arya pushed his shoulder back and hooked her leg around his, turning them both over so that she landed on top. As she rose over him, dried leaves stuck to her porcelain skin as rivets of rain cut through the dirt smudged over her. Her dark eyes focused on him, unblinking as she rocked her hips forward before swaying back again. The world around him started to spin so he focused on her, watching as her hair flattened against her pale neck. Fat droplets of water beading on her skin mesmerized him, rolling down and cleaning her.

Her hands raked up over his chest, trying to find something to hold onto as she moved faster against him. His hand gripped her thighs, giving her something to work against as his fingers kneaded her soft flesh. A loud broken moan tore from her throat as her leg muscles tensed under his hands. She lifted her hips, grasping in vain at his shoulders as she trembled. Her rocking grew more erratic and she wailed in frustration. He could feel how close she was, fluttering and squeezing around his cock, but it was making him too close.

"Wait!" Arya slowed to almost motionless, barely tilting her hips back and forth, as she dropped her head to lock eyes with him. Gendry shook with the barely restrained need to release, drowning under
the weight of his own need. "Just..." Waves aching tremors vibrated under his skin, throbbing pleasure threatened to spill over. Tension ripped through his tense body as he waited for her signal. "Now," she commanded and he obeyed, rushing pleasure flowed through his body and into hers. His breathless gasp was drowned out by her howling scream as she came.

His heart pounded inside his chest as she slumped against him, panting and still moaning softly. She moved her hands to take a light hold of his shoulders and he curled his arms around her. That's when the rain stopped and Gendry almost believed in the gods in that moment.

"That," she wheezed, "was awesome."

"Yeah," he panted a laugh as his hand flopped down beside him, landing against his drenched jacket. "Our clothes are totally soaked." She huffed like she couldn't care less and nuzzled her face against his chest. "I wish I could keep you like this forever," he hugged her close, "naked in the freshly rained woods."

"Me too," she purred with satisfaction, "it just feels right." After a moment of quiet Arya lifted her head and looked down at him, her lips opening and then closing as if she couldn't find the words. But just by the look she gave him, he knew what she couldn't to say.

"I know," he swiped away a dark strand of hair sticking to her cheek. "I'll love you until you're sick of me and if I ever lose you then I'll just win you back. You might think that I'm yours but really, you're mine. We're forever and always, we probably loved each other in a past life if they exist. To sum it up: you can't get rid of me."

"I believe you," she set her head back down, "and I know 'our world' is real, it's the only place I belong."

"I think," he knew it was stupid but decided to say it anyway, "what we have is the closest thing to magic that exists. Nobody can go back to 'normal' life after they've lived with magic." Gendry at worst expected her to laugh at his childishness but she stayed very still and quiet. "I know that sounds stupid but if you could just know what I feel-

"I do," her head popped back up, "I do." Arya's eyes focused on his, serious and unblinking. "Even when I can't feel anything else, I still feel your love. And it's too real to be called 'magic' - it's a force of nature like gravity."

"Arya," he didn't really know how to say it or if begging would help... "Stay with me this time, don't go away inside your head, and don't hide from me." Gendry raised his hands to cup the sides of her face. "Hide in me, get lost in our world with me: don't leave me behind. Let me follow you, always."

"Gendry," she smirked, one brow rising higher, "keep up slowpoke - don't let me go anywhere away from you."

"I won't," he promised, "wherever you go, that's where I'm going."

"Even if I try to stop you," her eyes lowered, covered with her thick dark lashes. "Just follow me anyway, because I will want you with me no matter what I say."

"As you command my lady," he kept his tone lighthearted but Gendry meant the vow with all of his heart and soul.

"I'm pretty sure there's some dry clothes in the Lincoln," she moved to get up but he stopped her.

"I'll go," he offered.
"I'm faster," she smirked and stood up, grabbing and wringing out his soaked black T-shirt before putting it on. The dark fabric clung to her like a second skin and only just reached her thighs, already making his cock stiffen again. Gendry rose up on his elbows and watched her tug on her boots sprint off towards the car until she disappeared into the trees. Then he rested his head back against the ground to stare up at the canopy above.

There were plenty of things he could've been thinking of, like the fact up Arya was in therapy, and she seemed to want to become runaways. But none of that seemed important because she was laughing again, she was smiling again, and she was his again. He would be grateful and hold onto her tighter this time: he couldn't let her slip away again. Because who knew how long she would be gone next time if he let her go. No, that wouldn't happen: he wasn't ever going to let her disappear back into her head where he couldn't reach her.

Chapter End Notes

So rainy... :D
More Maiden's Day romance coming up next!
They stepped between the museum doors just in time to beat the unexpected downpour. Torgo dug the money out from his pocket and ran forward to pay the entrance fee. He experienced a brief victory when the attendant handed over two tickets. That's when he realized he was still holding Missa's hand. At least she only laughed at him and led the way inside... She had a remarkable tolerance for his excruciating clumsiness.

"I don't know that this is a 'proper' date for Maiden's Day..." Her voice echoed in the corridor leading into the interior of the museum. "But this is my favorite place in the city." When he stepped into the main entrance, Torgo first noticed the quiet atmosphere. A small group nearby spoke in hushed echoing murmurs. They followed the soft tone of a tour guide's well-rehearsed speech about the building. The floors gleamed like polished marble and the ceiling rose to a dome overhead. The entire structure appeared designed to overwhelm and awe the visitors.

"It's amazing," he spoke just above a whisper. "I've never been anywhere like this before." Then his eyes came back to Missa and he was awestruck with by the change that came over her. That she loved this place was obvious, like this was her natural habitat.

"I think we should do a self-tour," she beamed at him in her dazzling way. "I've already taken the official tour over twenty times."

"Lead the way," he lightly squeezed her hand. They first walked through a historical reproduction of a throne room. The real Iron Throne sat behind glass and Torgo could imagine kneeling in front of it. Some monarch would decide to spare his life or sentence him to a gruesome death. The walls were lined with displays of antique jewelry, metal trinkets, and preserved tapestries. Missa didn't even glance at the descriptions above the displays when explaining the artifacts.

In an astonishing show of knowledge, she seemed to know everything about each item. Torgo tried to focus on the fascinating details but Missa was so distractingly brilliant. They moved onto the next circular room, a gallery of weaponry, armor, and shields. The swords were on exhibition in the center of the room, wrapped around a pillar separated by glass. She explained the various legends of the weapons as they walked around.

Then they came into his all-time-favorite room in the entire museum, the dragon room. These beasts were massive... it must have been terrifying to see one in the flesh but Torgo still wished he could. It was a pity that all that remained of these creatures were just bones. He gazed in awe at the center skull, a behemoth that stretched from floor to ceiling. Beside the skulls were books, and other early writings about dragons, on display.

"This dragon was named Sheepstealer," she smiled up at the skull. "I'm not even joking."

"How amazing would it be to ride one of these?" When dragons roamed the earth, they must have been the best mode of transportation. Way faster than horseback and considerably more badass with the whole fire-breathing thing.
"I would be fascinated to see these animals alive but I would never want to ride one." Missa answered his question so seriously and he had to hide a chuckle with a forced cough. "Unless there was a good reason to do so," she amended. The dragon room was the final area on the tour so afterward they sat down to rest. Torgo was shocked to discover it was well past dinnertime! "Sorry, I have a tendency to get a little carried away," she noticed him looking at his watch.

"I'm having a great time," he hurried to assure her. "We can walk through the whole place again if you want." Missa only smiled in answer and scooted closer to him on the bench. She looped her arm around his to rest her head on his shoulder. It was now or never... He had to say it now or he might never be brave enough, the time for cowardice was over...? No, there was no question about it! "Missa!" Torgo struggled to lower his voice to a normal level. "Maybe it's cliche because it's Maiden's Day... I don't even care if it is... I love you."

"Then you must have finally realized." She lifted her head to look up at him, a knowing smile on her lovely face.

"What?" Torgo gulped nervously, too anxious to even pray for her to say it back.

"That I love you," she said it so relaxed like she'd been waiting to say it. Oh wait, she just said she loved him... that's nice. But he probably should not pass out at the moment so he ignored the blurry spots in his eyesight.

"I hoped so," he huffed relieved laugh and grinned at her, "it feels good." It actually felt like floating in space but not scary because he wasn't alone.

"It does," she agreed and set her head back down to rest against his shoulder. "I think this might be the best I've ever felt."

"Me too," he was giddy, almost lightheaded. It took a surprising amount of effort to hold back from bursting out laughing. "It's amazing how much a few little words can mean."

"Words are important," she sighed in contentment. "I hope I taught you that much at least." She hugged his arm, her hands holding him tight. "I love you, Torgo." Missa couldn't see him so he grinned as much as he felt like, smiling so wide his face hurt in a good way.

"I'll never get tired of hearing that," he babbled happily. Torgo sighed in contentment, only looking over when she lifted her head again. Her thin dark brow arched slightly in expectation... "Oh, right! I love you, Missa." She smiled with satisfaction before resuming her resting place on his shoulder. This day had gone impossibly right and even though he got used to things going alright. But he wasn't scared of happiness anymore, even knowing how fleeting it can be. Happy moments are the rarest treasures, even more than priceless artifacts.

JON

He didn't know what to think when she promised 'a proper Maiden's Day'. The further they drove from the city the more nervous he got. Couldn't they just go for a nice walk and maybe catch a romantic comedy at the theater? But then, Ygritte never was going to be that type of girl and he'd never want to change her. But, every once in a while, she would look over at him and cackle under her breath. Whatever she had planned would probably be painful.

"Keep your eyes on the road," he huffed and she laughed at his irritation. "You don't have to hide wherever we're going, I won't refuse." Jon frowned as she just continued to chuckle at him. "At least give me a hint!"
"We're going to the place where I belong," she eyed him sideways with a arrogant smirk. Ygritte liked to think she knew everything and he knew nothing... Well, at the moment that was mostly true. Before too long, they pulled into a gravel driveway. It led to something that looked like a military compound. In the center stood an oversized metal shed-like structure.

There were a few cars parked out front but Jon still couldn't make heads or tails of this place. Ygritte didn't say anything, smiling as she parked the car and got out. Jon followed her when she opened the trunk everything was clear: paintballing! Jon helped her gather the gear and followed her inside the compound. Inside, a stringy-haired guy stood by a countertop in the corner of the 'building'.

"Hey Orell!" Ygritte greeted the skinny man who, for some reason, glared at Jon. The place was filled with obstacle-course equipment like rope walls and various construction materials.

"Well-well, Ygritte," Orell looked a little too closely at Ygritte. "We haven't seen your fine ass around here lately." Jon's hand tightened around the handle of the bag he carried.

"Because I've been too busy fucking my new boyfriend," she jerked a thumb at Jon. Of course, he blushed because the situation wasn't nearly embarrassing enough. "You should see his ass."

"I had you all wrong," Orell smirked at Ygritte before he turned to leer at Jon. "Thought you liked real men but it seems you like pretty boys."

"All his man parts are real enough for me." She walked up to a countertop and jerked her head at the rental equipment behind it. "We don't need your fucking commentary, just get us some gear."

"How about a little test?" Orell eyed Jon like a little fly he wanted to pluck and watch suffer.

"Zombies?" Ygritte faced Orell with an intrigued expression that most definitely spelled trouble. What in the seven hells did 'zombies' mean?!

"Zombies," the wiry man sneered at Jon. Oh, this was definitely not good.

"You're going down," she grinned at Orell, dropping her bag on the countertop. Ygritte removed only two paintball guns, and moved next to Jon to hand one to him.

"What are you getting us into?" Jon whispered to Ygritte as he watched Orell disappear behind the counter top.

"Nothing to worry about," she reassured him. Somehow that made him even more edgy. "This is gonna be fun..." Orell return to them, carrying two skull masks in each hand.

"Zombies don't get body armor," Orell tossed over one skull mask to Jon.

"Isn't that dangerous?" Jon stared down at the mask with apprehension.

"This one's a real winner," Orell snorted a laugh.

"Don't be so obviously jealous, it's fucking annoying." Ygritte pulled on her mask so Jon did the same. "And don't short us on our head-start," she held up her wrist to fiddle with her watch. "Let's sync up, three... two... one... go!" Then she was often a flash, sprinting out of the building. It took a second for his feet to start following her. "Keep up Jon," she called over her shoulder, "there's no way he doesn't cheat." They ran into the thick woods behind the compound until the building was out of sight.

"Come here," she knelt and pulled him down low to the ground, keeping her voice to a whisper.
"Zombies can take as many hits as they can stand, the only way they can beat us is to run us out of ammo." Ygritte's eyes flashed with excitement under the mask as she explained the game. "The catch is - hunters can only take one hit and they have to run us down in under an hour. If we last the hour, we win."

"It's not as easy as it sounds," Orell appeared like a ghost, dressed all in camo armor. Ygritte pulled up her weapon but another hunter came from behind a tree and shot her in the back. Jon picked up his gun and popped off a few rounds into the one who shot Ygritte. But a few more hunters just took his place and they were seriously out-gunned.

"So much for playing fair!" She raised her gun and took down two more hunters before turning on Orell. But the skinny man was fast, ducking behind a tree as more reinforcements arrived. "RUN!" And they did, tearing through the forest without direction. They sprinted in an attempt to get away from the paintballs hitting them in the back. Fuck: that really fucking hurt!

No matter how many hunters they took down more came out of nowhere, keeping them on the run. Jon hit at least four hunters and Ygritte took down twice as many but it was no use. They were outnumbered and running low on ammo faster than they could get away. She found them a good enough hiding place amongst some thick bushes. The band of hunters passed by with Orell bringing up the rear. Both of them held their breaths until the hunters were out of sight and she let out hers with a curse.

"That cheating fuck," her muffled voice was still clearly mad as all seven hells. "He must've called everyone he knows! It makes sense - lots of people have lost this game because of me." Ygritte shoved up her mask and locked eyes with him. "We're not gonna win this one, but we can take that asshole down with us."

"Let's do it." He loaded the last of his paintballs into his gun and nodded his mask down to signal he was ready. They charged out screaming as they chased after the hunters. Jon and Ygritte unloaded their entire clip directly at Orell. Before any of the startled hunters could react, they dove behind the trunk of a large tree. Miraculously neither of them had been hit but that was the least of their problems.

"I'm out," he panted, holding up his gun.

"Me too," she huffed a laugh. "Then there's only one thing to do," she extended her hand to him and he accepted their fate. They walked out to face their waiting rivals standing in a semi-circle. A very colorful and pissed Orell stood in the middle glaring at them. The hunters all aimed their weapons at Jon and Ygritte. "GO ON THEN!" She suddenly jumped in front of him, shielding him from the spray of paintballs. He wrapped his arms around her and twisted their bodies to reverse their positions.

"All right," she shouted, "you win - we give!" The popping of paintballs ceased and Jon eased his hold on Ygritte.

"Good game Ygritte," Orell taunted, "better luck next time." And the hunters left them alone, soaked in various colors of paint.

"Had enough fun for one day?" Jon grinned down at Ygritte as he pulled off his mask.

"Not quite," she removed her skull mask, also grinning ear-to-ear, and grabbed his hand. "Come on, there's one more place I have to show you."

YGRITTE
She led him to a cement block fort located in the middle of the grounds. It was the most private place in the world with the drawbridge up and Jon followed her inside. Her helmet fell to the ground with a clatter when she tossed it aside to close the place up. Then she walked across the small room to unroll the bedroll tucked in the corner. Just when she was about to turn around, she felt his hands curl around her waist.

"I'm sorry we didn't win," his voice was low and husky in her ear as he pulled her back against his body. They were both about to be winning as fuck in a moment - all that shooting got her hot. Jon handled himself well and looked like a sexy action hero out there.

"We lost well," her voice hitching when his fingers slipped under her top. She helped him pull it up over her head, the fabric heavy and wet with paint. The shirt fell to the ground with a loud splat as his smooth palm slid around the front of her stomach. He brushed her hair aside to slide his stubbled cheek against her neck. Jon pressed his hot mouth onto her cooled skin, sending shivers down her spine. Under his hand, her stomach tightened with growing need. But she stood patient and still - enjoying the pleasurable torment.

He brushed his lips down her back as he knelt behind her, sliding her pants down over her hips. Ygritte reached back to brace a hand on his shoulder for balance as he pulled off her boots one at a time. Before he rose up, he hooked his fingers around her panties, pulling them off as well. When he stood she turned around, grabbing his shoulders and kissing him hard.

A panted moan escaped his mouth and he crushed her against him, his shirt slick with paint. She broke the kiss to peel his shirt over his head, revealing his chiseled chest. Ygritte never thought much of the gods, especially the Maiden. It was all just bullshit to keep teens from having sex. But Jon's body almost convinced her of a higher power. Only a god would be capable of sculpting such beauty and strength in one person.

Pastel splotches tinted his skin where the paint bled through, highlighting his defined muscles. The way he looked at her with restraint like he was fighting something yet to be unleashed. His gaze made her more aware of each part of her body, causing her skin to ache for his touch. So far, she enjoyed Jon's tame lovemaking more than anything she'd ever experienced. But she still couldn't help wondering what he held back.

Ygritte smoothed her palms up over his shoulders, her fingers smudged the lingering paint. Her hands slid down over his arms, pressing her fingers into his firm muscles. They came down to hold his hips and she trembled from an overwhelming need to have him. His hands cupped the sides of her face and his serious eyes gazed into hers for a moment. Though tired from running her muscles tensed with anticipation.

When he kissed her a frantic urgency tore through her and he couldn't be naked fast enough. Her fingers fumbled with his zipper before she shoved his pants and shorts down. He stepped out of his shoes, kicked off his pants as he walked her back to lay down with her on the bedroll. Jon's skin was cool as moved over her and embraced her close and kissed her again. But she twisted her face away with a gasp.

"Gods Jon," she had enough foreplay, the throbbing between her legs was near painful. Jon understood her whimpered plea, rising up so she could reach between them. She locked her legs behind his knees and lifted her hips to draw the tip of him inside her. She released a ragged breathy cry as he pushed all the way in. Her focus was on the relief that spread through her body as it morphed into the impulse to move.

She arched herself towards him as he withdrew and then plunged deep into her again. She was crying out her relief and demanding more with one sound. But they were both tired from running and
their bodies could only manage a slow rhythm. The cold seeped up through the bedroll but his skin warmed her entire body. His palm flattened against her back to urge her hips to tilt so he could pump his thrusts deeper.

"I won't last," he muttered in a strained voice. His pulsing cock growing even harder within her backed up his words.

"Don't hold back," she begged, wanting to feel him come inside her. It took much convincing that the pill was reliable, but the reward was sweet. Jon groaned as he continued to hold back. He propped up on his elbow to run his hand up her ribs to cup her breast. "Gods yes," she released a ragged whine in reaction - he already knew her so well. As he rolled his fingers over the hardened tip, pleasure rippled over her skin.

The heightened sensation spread from her chest to between her legs. Jon let out a breathless cry as she clenched around his cock. The intense feeling flowed through her entire body, growing and building. But slipped away from her as his motions became shaky she moaned in frustrated.

"Just fuck me," she pleaded, "I'm almost there..." Ygritte gasped as his hand plunged into her hair and his lips crushed against hers. The she had to struggle just to keep up with his pace as he drove into her relentlessly. He let out a ragged whimper against her mouth, kissing her with fierce passion. His release rushed from his body into hers, slamming her into her own orgasm. It rushed like an electrical current and she cried out from the intensity.

They came crashing down from the high, chests heaving and hearts racing. She collapsed against the bedroll as her limbs unlocked from around his body. Ygritte came back to reality, the air chilling her damp skin and paint drying in her hair.

"I have never wanted to take a shower so much in my life," she chuckled breathlessly. Jon groaned a laugh before rolling over onto his side. Ygritte turned her body to face him, slipping her leg between his for warmth. "Did I show you a good time? Or would you rather give me sweets and take me out to some fancy restaurant?"

"It was all worth it," he grinned at her, curling his arm around her waist. "Let's do this again next year, after I train a bit we can totally take them on." Jon might've been too serious for his own good but lately he was learning to let go. Ygritte liked to think she played a big part in the removal of the stick from his ass.

"Fuck yeah we will," she agreed enthusiastically. "It will take me at least a year for me to forget how those paintballs sting - still worth it." Ygritte tilted her head up to smile at him. "I love you Jon."

"I love you Ygritte," he brushed her hair away from her face. "Happy Maiden's Day." And who fucking could've guessed... it was a 'proper' happy Maiden's Day after all. In the time that she'd been with Jon, Ygritte started changing her mind about a lot of things. Maybe she really was the kind of girl who liked romantic holidays and making love. Or at least maybe that persona didn't clash with who she thought she was before. Whatever the case, she was happy and in love - can't ask for more than that.

Chapter End Notes

BOW DOWN BEFORE GREATNESS - I HAVE DONE THE IMPOSSIBLE - AND BRIDGED THE TIMELINES! And it only took... oh shit, has it been six days?!
Okay, maybe this is not so much a 'victory' as something that really needed to be done and I just procrastinated my ass off. But YAY - it's done! :D This chapter just took FOREVER to write, probably because I know fuck-all about museums and paintball. You know the drill - if I got anything wrong, feel free to leave me a comment so I can make adjustments.
Communication

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SHIREEN

She sat in front of her computer, surprisingly anxious for her upcoming Skype date. It was not a 'real' date, this would be the first time she 'saw' Bran since Winterfest. It made no sense for her to be uneasy - they spoke to each other every day... Before she had time to reflect on her nervousness, his call came in. She clicked the call to answer it and his smiling face appeared on her screen.

"Hello beautiful," he leaned forward, elbows propped on the desk. Close to the webcam, he held his face in his hands and pursed his lips for an air-kiss. Bran's hair had grown a little longer, a few errant wavy locks falling into his eyes.

"Can you hear me alright?" Sheri kept her expression serious and ignored his silly smile. This was not a time to be flirting - they had serious work to do!

"I can," he continued to flirt, "and your voice is the sweetest sound I've ever heard."

"Be serious," she admonished. "We have plans to make." Since they first thought of her going north, again not much happened to make it a reality. That was probably part of what made her so anxious. No... it was something else - she was just in a bad mood today!

"You're right as ever, dearest." Bran sat up straight, adjusted his shirt, and folded his hands on his desk. "First order of business: north or south." She had to bite her lip not to laugh at his sudden seriousness. Leave it to a Stark to bring up her dour disposition.

"Did your mother shoot down the idea of your sisters coming for a visit?" Sheri knew it was a longshot anyway but could not help feeling disappointed.

"Actually she suggested we go south for a visit," he smirked as he revealed the good news. "I think she misses dad but doesn't want to relive Winterfest."

"Even better," she blew out a relieved sigh. "I doubt I could convince my father to send me north again." He never spoke of it with her but Sheri assumed he knew most of what went down during Winterfest.

"Then it's settled: I'm coming to you." A wolfish grin curled on Bran's lips and she felt heat coloring her cheeks.

"You must have missed me terribly," she accused with a coy smile.

"How could I? We talk every day," he folded his arms across his chest in a show of calm indifference. She opened her mouth to argue but he spoke first. "It seems we will be together soon, just as I said." He looked a little too smug and it stung a bit that he refused to admit he missed her.

"For me, 'soon' still isn't soon enough," she grumbled.

"Concentrate, we still have a lot of planning to do." Bran's seriousness cracked as the corner of his
mouth lifted and Sheri smiled back. "I think the best time to come down would be during spring break."

"Perfect," she agreed, "then school won't interfere with our time together." Her mind went through the steps she should take in order to ensure he could visit. "I will get Arya to work on your father but I don't think it will take much convincing." It was all starting to seem very possible they could be together very soon! She twisted a strand of hair around her finger. "When you come we should go somewhere together - just the two of us."

"Like a date?" He sounded eager, leaning his cheek against his fist to smile into the webcam at her.

"Less a 'date' and more..." Sheri blushed and could not quite look into the screen at him. "Just us two alone somewhere in isolation." She flicked her eyes up to see his reaction and was not disappointed.

"Sounds mysterious," he grinned, "count me in."

"Alright," she changed the subject, "we both have our tasks to carry out. Now onto more important matters..." Sheri pulled out her deck of cards already split in half. "Are you ready?" They both talked a big game about being a great poker player, driving them to Skype to settle it. Each had one half of a deck of card and would be their own dealer.

"Ready," he held up his own deck of cards and narrowed his eyes in challenge. "I'm watching you, Sheri." Bran's face tilted up and he eyeballed her cards with suspicion. "I know you'll cheat."

"I have never cheated in my entire life," she protested his slander - too vehemently.

"You've never been caught," he accused knowingly. "With that innocent face, you could rob a bank in broad daylight."

"Shut up and deal," she started dealing herself a hand and he did the same. Sheri held up her cards in front of her face - three queens, ace high. So maybe she cheated a little, but only because Bran was totally telepathic.

SANDOR

He was holding Sansa, her smooth skin and floral scent overwhelming his senses. Her hair was everywhere, the red silky strands tickling his skin. She floated away from his hold, her soft warmth slipping out of his reach. Sandor strained to hold her tighter and tried to say her name but he couldn't speak.

"Sandor," she called, but her voice sounded far away, "wake up." His eyes blinked open to see soft orange light peeking through the stiff curtains. A very naked Sansa lay tucked in his arms and they were in a motel room bed. "You were dreaming," she giggled softly. He realized his cock was nestled up against her backside, wide-awake before him. It was all coming back - they had been studying but ended up in bed and fell asleep after.

"This is better," he slid his hand up to cup her breast and she gasped. "I must still be asleep." Sandor buried his face into her sweet-smelling hair as he caressed her soft flesh.

"We're you dreaming about me?" Sansa's voice was breathless and low, making him grow even harder.

"Always," he groaned as she arched back against him. "Gods, Sansa, you feel too good." Sandor lowered his hand to grasp her hips, pulling her back flush against him. "Is it alright like this?" His body tensed, waiting for her go-ahead.
"Yes, please..." Sansa was the sweetest thing - and all his. She gasped when he ripped the sheets away to reveal her flawless body. Plenty of mornings he woke up frustrated after dreaming about Sansa. This - waking up to her - was a literal dream come true. Sandor tucked one arm under her pillow and slipped his leg between hers. It was a bit of a fumble finding the right position until she tilted her hips back. "Right there," she panted when he slid the tip of his cock into her entrance.

He was throbbing with the need to thrust deep into her but he pressed into her tight heat slowly. Gods, he always wanted her and it was never enough no matter how many times he had her. It was still unbelievable how she responded, like she couldn't get enough either. Sansa moaned as she arched back against him to take his cock deeper. He tucked a hand around her waist, flattening his palm against her stomach.

Her body molded to his and she pushed herself towards him as he thrust into her. Sansa gasped an eager whine and rocked her hips her waist to meet his slow driving into her. She was most beautiful when she lost herself - gave herself to him. Because she trusted him to make her feel loved. That might sound like bullshit to someone who doesn't know what it's like to love. But he knew this was the closest to heaven that existed.

His knee braced against the bed as he held her hip and angled their position to thrust deeper. He was losing himself in her - driven straight to the brink long before he was ready for it to be over. Sandor forced himself to stop moving to let his hand explore her curves. She whined in protest, writhing her body back against him.

"You're so perfect," he murmured in her ear and she whimpered a quiet plea. "I want you more than anything."

"Gods, Sandor, please!" Sansa reached back to dig her fingers into his hip, twisting back against him. Though he enjoyed it plenty, he wasn't trying to torment her. Sandor slipped a hand between her thighs and her body froze. He grinned against her hair, knowing just how she liked to be touched. "Oh... gods."

"It's not the gods doing this," he growled and slid his fingers along her slick hot flesh.

"Sandor," she wailed his name as her trembling hips rocked in rhythm with his hand. Sansa turned her cheek towards him, panting breathless cries at the ceiling. The way she clenched around his cock made him groan and he pushed his face into her neck.

"I love your body, your skin, your hair," he rasped the praise into her ear. "I love everything about you." Sansa was sobbing under his touch, driving her fitful motions until she went rigid. Almost there... "Most of all, I love the way you sing for me." Then she gasped a soft whimper and her whole body started shaking as she cried out. He let go - his release pumping into her as he groaned against her hair.

Sandor held her until his heart rate steadied before sinking back into the mattress. Fuck, he was dog-tired lately! It's not like he worked or practiced less just because he studied a fuck-load more. And the guys kept hounding him to come hang with them but when he did, they just wanted to get fucked up. He couldn't afford to fuck up anything, especially his mental state. What he really needed was some fucking rest... Just as he was dozing off again she puffed out a long breath, a sharp sound that stabbed his brain.

"We have to stop doing this," she sighed again, "it's too expensive." They were relaxed for all of five minutes before she started in on that again. Apparently, she didn't think it was worth it - hell of a confidence boost.
"What else would we do?" Sandor tried to keep the annoyed edge out of his voice - and failed. He could feel her getting all prickly and it took all his self-control to suppress a groan. Just shut up already and sleep! Didn't she ever get tired?! Oh no, she could go home after this when he had to head over to the shop. Tonight he got the dream chore of hosing out some pens of shit and piss.

"The Skylark is free," she pointed out stubbornly.

"It's not good enough," he was always going to be more stubborn than her.

"Sandor-"

"Time is money little bird," he cut off her pointless nit picking. "I already paid for this bed, just relax." Sandor thought that was the end of it because she was quiet for a while - but she was just stewing.

"How can I relax when I should have paid this time?" Sansa just couldn't let anything go! It was the same thing over and over again until it turned out her way. "It's only fair." Really, she had no appreciation at all, for how hard he worked to make this happen for them.

"I don't think your father would like you spending his money on cheap motels." The moment the words were out of his mouth, he regretted them. But he only realized he went too far when she didn't reply. Sandor forced his eyes open and turned his head towards her. Sansa was glowering up at the ceiling.

"I can't believe you just said that," she whispered with angry disbelief. "That's..." Her hands clutched the sheets to her chest, twisting the fabric.

"It's the truth," he defended himself and immediately knew it was a mistake. For the hundred-millionth time - he should've just kept his mouth shut. Sure, she was the one causing problems but Sandor knew he was making it worse.

"My father likes to take care of me..." She wasn't yelling, he would've expected that but instead she spoke too quietly. "He gives me money to spend because he trusts my decisions." Sandor decided he should just stop talking before he dug his grave too deep. Silence turned out to be wrong too - she huffed an irritated sound and launched out of bed.

"What are you doing?" He sat up and watched Sansa snatch up her clothes off the floor to start getting dressed.

"I'm so terribly sorry for being born to a well-off family!" She clipped her bra behind her head and turned to glare at him. "But I can't apologize for it anymore!" What the fuck was her problem - why was everything a fucking tragedy with her? Poor little rich girl, he had to tiptoe about her being sensitive about money. How fucking backwards was that?!

"You're shoving it in my face, always offering to pay." Sandor threw his hand out wide before bringing it back to slap against his chest. "I have a job, I can pay!" He couldn't accept her father's money to spend time together with - fucking - her. How could he show the man honest respect if he did that? Why couldn't she understand it was the principle of the thing?

"You need to save money for school!" Sansa always knew what was best - never once trusted him to think for himself. Did she really think he was that big of an idiot?

"Always with the lectures," he flopped back on the bed. "Why don't you tell me how to live my life some more - clearly, I can't think for myself. You pick what school I go to, how much I study, when I'm allowed to pay for stuff. What's next?" She was quiet again for a while but he refused to look up
until the mattress dipped when she sat down. He rolled his head to the side and saw her, half-dressed and hunched over at the end of the bed.

"I'm sorry..." That hurt in her voice was all he needed to melt his anger - he went too far - again. "I didn't mean to push you," her voice cracked and it was like taking a knife to his gut. He really hated himself when he made her voice sound like that. "I thought you wanted to stay with me." It amazed him how she could go from being happy to angry to sad in just a few minutes. Thinking back over the last few minutes he didn't even know how they got to this point. Sandor sat up and scooted closer to her but she didn't turn around.

"Of course I want to stay with you." He tugged on her arm but she didn't respond, just sat there with her head bowed. "Shit... I'm sorry, little bird. I'm a fucking asshole, going off on you for no reason." That wasn't true, there was a reason. It was useless to point out the main reason he shouldn't stay in Kings Landing. She whirled around and threw her arms around him to hug him.

"Don't be upset," she whimpered against his shoulder - as if it was his choice. Maybe it was... but he didn't know how to turn it off. Some part of his brain devoted to constantly worrying about Greg. What was he doing, where was he, and who was going to be hurt next? It kept Sandor up most nights since he said he'd stay in Kings Landing. She whisked around and threw her arms around him to hug him.

Just being around him was dangerous for her but there was no use reminding her. They already promised to stay with each other and that's what he planned to do. But even from wherever in the seven hells Greg was - he cast a long shadow. If he only knew where that monster was, maybe this crawling paranoia would stop...

"I don't deserve to be comforted," he grumbled as she squeezed him tighter.

"I'm comforting myself," she sniffed. "We're both wound-up from too much studying..." Sansa tried to lighten her tone but it was still tight with sadness. "I know I can be overbearing but I only do it because I love you and want the best for you."

"I'm sorry, Sansa," he returned her embrace. "There's a lot going on right now and it's putting me on edge."

"I think," she inhaled a shaky breath, "the things we said shouldn't be ignored. If we don't talk about it then it will just come up again. I think... it's unfair for you to look down on me for my family's wealth." The little bird was so fucking smart - and sometimes dumb as all seven hells.

"You said it earlier," he pulled back on her shoulders to look at her. "Your father likes to take care of you. I want to do that - I want to be the one taking care of you." Sandor's head stooped under the weight of his words. "That's the only way I can convince myself that I deserve you." On some level she must enjoy this, breaking him down until he shared every feeling.

"You need to get past that, Sandor!" Her sudden strength surprised him into looking up. "Forget about deserving me because you already have me! I'm so hopelessly in love with you," she huffed a laugh, "it's probably unhealthy. And I want you all the time so offering to pay is not a show of wealth... I'm desperate for you." Sansa's eyes turned glassy with unshed tears but she didn't shy away. "Even if you decide to go to school outside of Kings Landing, nothing will change for me."

"I already decided to stay," he insisted, raising his hand to cup the side of her face. "I'm desperate for you too - I can't be away from you and I was fooling myself thinking I could." She leaned forward to hug him again and he wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight. After a while, she started pressing her lips against his neck. "Not mad anymore?" Sansa pulled back, keeping her hands linked around his neck.
"You already paid for this bed," she pointed out with a smile. "The smartest man I know says time is money." The cheerfulness was forced, he knew her too well, and she was a terrible liar.

"I'm staying," he promised again, "I won't change my mind." A worried look flashed though her eyes - she tried to hide it by glancing away. "What is it?"

"What if you can't get into Crownlands?" It sounded like her worst fear and that made him feel a bunch of conflicting emotions. He decided to bury those feelings deep inside to deal with later - or never. "You are working hard but it won't be easy..."

"There's nothing I can't do if I put my mind to it." Sandor slipped his hand under her chin to draw her eyes up to meet his. "And my mind's on you, little bird - it has been since I first saw you."

"Love me," she requested softly and he did his best to make her feel loved. Sansa fell asleep right away after but he lay awake thinking. Mr. Stark had everything - a loving family and enough money to keep them happy. The little bird was accustomed to that life of love and money, even if she didn't know how much. To keep her, he would give her everything she needed. To deserve her, even if she disagreed, he'd have to give her everything she wanted.
ARYA

Math class was shit even before Joffrey topped her 'list' - people she wanted dead. Doesn't everyone have one of those? No...? Well, people don't know what they're missing. Jaime Lannister was the most arrogant asshole she ever encountered, including his son-nephew. All he did was teach high school algebra but he put on this 'cool teacher' act that made her sick. Class let out and she waited for the students to clear out before approaching his desk.

"Miss Stark, do you need something?" His disgusting handsome face was disgusting, smiling like he thought she might be charmed. When she didn't respond, his smug smile slipped. What she had planned was nothing short of crazy but that ship sailed weeks ago. If she wasn't so desperate and angry she'd never try something like this.

"I need this period free for the rest of the year," she told him bluntly.

"You want to drop my class?" He turned in his chair and got this worried look on his nauseating face. The way he looked all 'concerned' made her want to pluck his fucking eyes out.

"No, I need you to give me an A," she spoke as if explaining to a toddler. "I'll take the final exam tomorrow if you like and then you can just say I passed your class."

"And where will you be during the period you are not taking my class?" Finally, his suspicion was up, took him long enough.

"I don't like you-"

"Miss Stark-"

"You look like your son," she finished - interrupting his interruption. His golden tanned face paled as his eyes grew wide, now she had his attention.

"I don't have a son," he denied it but Arya knew that he knew that she knew - it was over.

"They say a picture's worth a thousand words, Mr. Lannister." Arya smiled at him with mock sweetness. "And a hidden camera shoots at about twenty-nine-point-ninety-seven frames per second." Her mouth actually started to salivate when his eyes widened. He must've known why his son-nephew was sent away.

"Arya," he shook his head as if to deny her but his voice was strained - she already won. "I will have to call your father-"

"Arya," he shook his head as if to deny her but his voice was strained - she already won. "I will have to call your father-"

"I have one-thousand-three-hundred-and-nine seconds of footage," she grinned. "That's thirty-nine-million-two-hundred-thirty-thousand-seven-hundred-thirty-and-thirty words. We both know I can ace your final exam right now." Arya could see it in his eyes - he was looking for a sign she was bluffing. "You will give me a passing grade," she insisted. "You will mark me present and you won't be calling anyone's father." It's all about saying it the right way, all quiet and calm but threatening at
the same time.

"Congratulations on passing my class," he bowed his head in defeat. Oh, shit... it worked!

"Thanks," she smirked, "bye." Be cool - be cool and walk out normally - don't run. The bell rang again and she was late for class so she let herself streak through the hallway. "Sorry," she mumbled as she interrupted the class before taking her seat. But she wasn't sitting... she was floating. The rest of the day, she felt lighter than she had since she could remember! Gods that felt fucking amazing! She took that arrogant fuck and put him in his place! When school was over she took the bus to see doc H'ghar, actually looking forward to it.

Arya realized the doc was a skilled manipulator and she wanted to learn from him. He easily talked circles around her, that's was what impressed her the most. It was impossible for her to control her thoughts but she could control her body. That part scared her the most, not being in control. But H'ghar already taught her enough to convince everyone she was fine.

Once she conquered her fear, all that was left to do was clean up the aftermath. She started with making love in the rain with her blacksmith. That was well done on her part, couldn't've gone better really. Gendry completely chilled out after that. Her next goal had been to carve out some free time so she could meditate. Once that was done she almost wished she could brag about it but no one would ever appreciate it.

Once in the doc's office she couldn't sit down so Arya paced the room as she waited for the doc. What the fuck was taking so long? Answers she needed were locked inside his head and she wasn't leaving without them. They needed to skip this 'how was your day' bullshit and get to the good stuff before she... Why did she always think about killing people? She knew exactly how it could be done. Hide a stone bookend in her bag, wait until he sits, and bash him over the head with it.

Do other people know how easy it is to kill another person? Not in hand-to-hand combat between amateurs - choking someone to death takes considerable strength. But a few quick searches can pinpoint where to find major arteries in the human body. A three-inch switchblade could hit them all if sharp enough. The doc entered wearing his usual docile expression and Arya snapped back into herself.

"How are we today, Arya?" He sat down but she stayed a short distance behind her chair. It wasn't really 'her' chair, nothing in this world actually belonged to her. She stared at him, wanting to see if she could make him slip today. It was annoying to interact with someone smarter and a far better manipulator. "Last time we spoke you mentioned the cession of your menstrual cycle. You said it had an effect on the sexual aspect of your relationship with Gendry."

"We're jumping right in, are we?" Arya smirked at his unchanged features and casual tone. "Do you actually know what you're doing?" He only smiled wider and flicked his eyes to her seat. "Fine," she didn't feel like standing anyway. "When my period stopped, even though I wasn't pregnant, it changed everything." Let the game begin, she gives a little then he gives a little, round and around they go.

"How?" Doc used short questions but wanted monologues about 'feelings' she would never reveal... Those thoughts kept her awake, creeping into her brain to steal parts of herself.

"I wanted Gendry more than I ever wanted anything." Arya felt almost wistful for those days even though they weren't that long ago. Back then, her biggest problem was Jon not approving of her dating. "Nobody could tell me I shouldn't have what I want and I laughed at their worries. The idea that I could get pregnant seemed so ridiculous - and then I missed my period." When she realized her period was late, sheer terror threatened to overwhelm her. It made her realize she'd been truly
helpless all along. "Guess I'm not as smart as I like to think."

"None of us are," he assumed an expression of empathic understanding. "I think you are very brave to admit these things to me."

"When I ask you to help me you act like an arrogant ass - the stick." Arya had no problem letting him know she was onto his game. "I don't need your carrot, doc. Save your praises for someone who likes their head patted. What I want is for you to reward my good behavior with some more mind tricks." That was the only reason she came to see him, spilling her guts as if paying a price for his knowledge.

"Very well," he nodded - giving in far too easily. "I was just about to suggest a technique."

"Bring it on," she raised a brow.

"Close your eyes," he was being serious. She grumbled under her breath as she complied. "Relax... clear your mind... What do you see?"

"Darkness," she rolled her eyes behind her eyelids - this was so fucking stupid.

"Concentrate on breathing steadily in and out," he paused a moment. "Which do you prefer running or sitting?" What was with his asinine questions? She was CURRENTLY sitting!

"Fine," she slumped back in the chair, "um, running I guess." Somehow, just saying she liked to run made her start to feel a bit winded to she focused on breathing.

"Why are you running in the dark?" His tone softened and lulled her deep into the blackness behind her eyes. "Where are you going... where have you been?" Where was she...? On either side, she barely make out an inky dense forest, speeding by in a blur. Her chest ached for breath and it was so cold she could see her panted breath. "Arya," he murmured, "why are you running?" Because she was alone and needed to find someone... No, not it was because there was something behind her!

"There's someone after me..." Arya spoke aloud before even realizing it and her voice sounded scared. Why was she seeing and feeling these things?

"Who?" He whispered the single word but it resounded as if screamed inside of her head. Her pulse picked up and fear kept pricking over her shoulder. Like if she looked behind her, there would be something coming for her in the darkness.

"I don't know," she panted, her heart started to race. "I can't see anything... I have to get away!"

"You do know," he insisted quiet and calm. "Take a breath and focus... Who is it? What is following you? Where are you going?" Run - run - run as fast as you can...

"Stop!" Her eyes flew open to glare at him. "What's this stupid game you're playing?!"

"You are running in your mind, Arya." H'ghar pinned her in place with a hard stare and she squirmed uncomfortably. "If you need to run then run, but if you need to fight you must face your pursuer."

"I don't understand," she gritted her teeth together and glared at her so-called therapist.

"What weapon would you use if you turned to fight whoever is chasing you?" He was confusing the crap out of her. Was he talking about 'mental weapons' or the real thing? The doc just stared at her steadily, waiting for her answer.
"My sword," she shrugged, "but I haven't been practicing." Lately, looking at the sword reminded her of her gullibility before Winterfest. Back then, she thought she was so clever, hiding her relationship and sneaking around. The truth was her father didn't really care what she did as long as he stayed ignorant. That's how Sansa did it - the sister she claimed to be smarter than. Dad wanted them to lie to him - that was the most fucked up part.

"Why not?" He pressed her further but she couldn't puzzle out why the doc was being so vague. Before this, he was always straightforward but now he seemed amused by her confusion!

"I'm too tired lately," she sighed and started listing off all the reasons. "And Gendry looks at me all worried-"

"You're tired because you're running, stand your ground and fight." His voice hardened, sounding more like her father, which made her defensive. "If you need practice then you should be practicing."

"Do you mean, like, in real life or... am I missing something?" Arya held up her hands in a helpless gesture, but her tone was exasperated. Where in the seven hells was this going?!

"You already have the sword, learn how to use it." What he said made sense she just didn't have any clue what that had to do with anything. "Envision your enemy as you practice until you can see them clearly."

"Learn my enemy's face," she interpreted his advice, "so that I can defeat them...?" Arya tried to conjure up a face but saw only darkness so she opened her eyes and leaned forward. She braced her forearms across her knees and hung her head. "There is someone I hate but I don't think of him as my enemy." Joffrey wasn't smart enough to be her 'enemy', he was just annoying.

"Then release your hatred for him so you can focus on your true opponent." The doc's words might have sounded hokey but there was something to them. "If you don't, that hatred will cast a shadow over your inner sight." Her 'inner what' - why was he bullshitting her all of a sudden?

"I can't do that," she protested, "I don't even know how to stop hating him." Sometimes her hatred for Joff was the only thing keeping her going! When she felt completely out of herself, that hate still burned in her gut.

"Forgiveness is not necessary," he claimed. "Give up your fear of this person-"

"I'm not afraid of him!" Sudden anger boiled up inside her, the same rage she struggled to tamp down. "He can't hurt us anymore - I took care of that."

"Then why hate him?" The doc waited patiently as she sat in stunned silence. Was he right - did she fear Joffrey? She wanted to blame that ass-hat for everything but her hatred for him broke her life.

"Because of my sister..." Arya tried to explain but her words faltered. "The person I hate tried to hurt her and I was able to protect her." But then Sansa just stuck her head back in the sand to pretend the world is perfect. "I thought... for once, we might actually relate to each other but she let me down."

"And her response to your disappointment was?" He already knew what she was about to say but they had to go through the process of her admitting it.

"We haven't really talked," she sulked. Arya distracted herself by tapping her toe against the coffee table between them. The stalemate between her and Sansa was getting old but she didn't know how to fix it.

"That will be the first step to letting go of your rage." The doc spoke of her 'rage' like it was
something she chose when it was a weight dragging her down. "If this person you 'hate' is not the one chasing you, it is up to you to leave them behind." Okay so, to sum up... He gave her cryptic advice and told her to practice with her sword. Basically, he was wasting both of their time.

"You haven't taught me anything," she protested - this whole session was pointless! And fucking weird!

"You don't really think that," he tilted his head forward and gave her a knowing look. Maybe he was a little right - there was something in the darkness following her. Now that she had some free time during the day, it would give her a chance to figure it out. "Now," he smiled, "tell me about your day." Arya gave in, recounting her day and purposefully leaving out her venture into blackmailing. After leaving the doc's office, she thought more about threatening Mr. Lannister. Did he deserve that? Not really, she could admit that, but so what?

She could pass his class blindfolded with both hands behind her back - it was a waste of time. That time could be better spent practicing her meditation in the empty room. Besides, it wasn't fair that only upperclassmen have free study periods. In the end, she did what she had to do and let go of any lingering guilt. There were more important things to focus on - like following the doc's advice. When she got home, she went straight to her bedroom and found Sansa reading a book in bed. Arya closed the door behind her and approached her sister's bedside to plop down.

"I'm seeing a therapist," she announced and her sister's eyes opened wide with surprise. "He tells me that I should be honest and not hide my feelings." Or, at least that's what Arya took away from today's session.

"You can tell me anything," Sansa closed her book and set it aside.

"You let me down," once Arya started the anger just poured out of her. "Not as bad as dad but... How could you - letting Joffrey off the hook like that?!" If it had been up to her she would've put Joffrey down so low, he couldn't get back up. Sansa's way only delayed another inevitable showdown.

"I did it to protect you," her sister protested with wide-eyed innocence. "You are the one who took all the risk to get that hard-drive. How could I turn around and use that evidence against him? You would get into trouble and we would not be able to use the drive legally."

"So, it was all for me?" Arya crossed her arms and scoffed a laugh. "That's fucking bullshit and you know it - you did it for yourself!"

"No... you're right," Sansa nodded sadly. "I just wanted to put the whole thing behind me. You don't understand how weak I felt when it all happened." The tears collecting in her sister's eyes pricked at Arya's conscious. "I just wanted to crawl into a hole and die because I was so-so-so stupid! And you were so brave, I was really jealous. I'm sorry I let you down, Arya."

"I guess it's messed up for me to expect you to do things the way I'd do it," she relented. "You're not me and I'm not you." Arya hunched over and stared at the ground, feeling better and worse at the same time. "So, I guess I'm sorry too."

"I like that we're different but..." Sansa reached out to take Arya's hand. "No matter how different we are I love you and I think you're the best sister."

"Thanks for covering for me with dad," she showed her sister some much-deserved gratitude. Sansa knew all along that something was up with Arya but she never snitched.
"Please make up with him," Sansa begged. "Don't be so hard on daddy, he's had a rough time, and he is worried about you even if he doesn't say it." If dad were that 'worried' about her, he would've said something by now. He had to notice she was losing her godsdamned mind - he just didn't care.

"I know I lost my shit for a while but I've got it now," she squeezed her sister's hand. "You don't have to worry about me."

"I will always worry about you." Sansa leaned forward and wrapped her arms around Arya in a loose hug.

"Ew, gross..." Really, Arya didn't mind - she needed her sister on her side, nobody else would be. Bran's support was all well and good but it didn't carry any weight. Once she turned fifteen, she would ask Sansa to help her convince dad about Gendry. If anyone could talk him into letting them date, it'd be 'daddy's little princess'. The pieces of her life were being picked up and put together. Some parts were a little jagged and hard to fit but she was working hard on filling in the gaps. She slipped her arms around her sister and squeezed her tight. "Thanks, sis..."

Chapter End Notes

So obviously, Arya is not 'better' - nowhere near that. But even though she has everyone fooled... Jaqen is starting to intensify his bizarre pseudo-swami therapy, I love it!

My girl Gritty is up next, she's looking for a little one-on-one time with the hound...
The Green-Eyed Monster

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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YGRITTE

She was looking for Theon, the lazy bum promised her some one-on-one. He probably went off somewhere and smoked himself unconscious. Oh well, guess she had to find something else to amuse her while she waited for Jon. On her way out of the gym, she spotted a familiar hulking figure lumbering ahead.

"Hey, hound - you down?!!" Ygritte held up the basketball in her hand as he turned around to look at her.

"Now you ask," he growled, "when I'm fucking worn out!" Sandor did already have a ring of sweat around the collar of his sleeveless shirt.

"The only thing weaker than your game is your excuses," she baited him.

"Sure," he shrugged, "I guess - if you wanna be embarrassed." The hound was one predictable fucker, he couldn't resist when goaded. He had way too much to prove but that suited her needs well enough.

"Fuck that!" Ygritte dribbled the ball as she led the way into the gymnasium. "You're going down!" They walked to the center of the court and she turned to face him, dribbling from hand to hand. "Bring your A-game, big boy," she winked at him.

"You can flirt all you want, Gritty - I'm not distracted in the least." His eyes traveled the length of her body before tilting his head with indifference.

"Let's see what I can do about that..." She passed him the ball and peeled off her shirt, wearing only a sports bra underneath.

"Huh," he imitated an exaggerated yawn.

"Asshole," she flipped him off.

"You know you're right," he bounced the ball back to her, "it is kinda hot in here." Sandor evened the score by removing his own shirt and it was quite a retaliation. The hound was packing some major musculature and she was pretty damn distracted.

"You can say that again," she held the ball against her hip and fanned herself. "What have you been eating to get so big?!"

"Little redheaded girls," he licked his tongue across the front of his teeth. Ygritte loved playing with the hound and not just because he was a challenge. He had the best sense of humor - back in the day she had a little crush on him. But one afternoon Jon walked into her classroom and she'd been hot for him ever since. After Sandor started dating Sansa, she understood why he never showed any interest. It was understandable since they both preferred ridiculously gorgeous people, typical jocks.
Then you know how tasty we are?" Her eyes darted to the stance of his feet, trying to calculate which side to rush. Ygritte started dribbling and was about to move to his right...

"Taste this," he was just all of a sudden in front of her - his hand took the ball right out of hers. The hound spun around her and threw from the three-point line - nothing but net. "YEAH!" He turned around and smirked at her before retrieving the ball. "Don't get too distracted, Gritty."

"You'll pay for that," she promised as they bounced the ball back and forth to each other. As soon as it returned to her hands, she was off, speeding past him in a beeline straight for the net. She jumped, dunked, and landed with an echoing boom. "Now who's distracted?" Ygritte spun around with her hands up in a victorious pose.

"I'm just getting warmed up," he crossed his arms and sneered at her.

"I think your pretty girlfriend made you soft," she jogged to retrieve the ball.

"Nothing about me is soft," he caught the ball when she bounced it to him. As soon as she stepped up to the center line, he rushed her. But she kept on him, her eyes fixed on the ball. All of a sudden, he was just over her, launching the ball to the net.

"Fuck!" Ygritte watched the ball sail over her head only to rebound back off the board. "Off the board!" Her gloating was short-lived because he made an amazing comeback - scoring twice more. They both got serious after that and she kept up pretty well but he made it to ten baskets first.

"Next time," she panted and bent over to brace her hands on her knees, "you're going down." She only lost by two points!

"Sure, whatever you say." The hound stumbled to the nearby bleachers and sat down. "Fuck - I'm beat.

"Sansa wearing you out?" Ygritte sat down next to him, bracing her hands against the bench.

"You have no idea..." He bent forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "She's got me studying for the college entrance exams." The hound, studying? Now that was fucking funny! Sansa sure had a way with people.

"Procrastinator," she teased, "I did that months ago. Doesn't matter, I was offered a full scholarship last year. Not to the school I wanted to attend but you take what you can get." Ygritte could play on the basketball team if she really wanted and it would get her a lot more attention. But if talented females keep trying to be 'one of the boys' then only the girls' teams suffer. "Haven't you been getting a shitload of offers?"

"The scouts brave enough to actually talk to me," he snorted a laugh. "They don't give me any good reason why they're better than anywhere else." The hound sighed as his head drooped. "The Crownlands scout hasn't come anywhere near me..."

"Crownlands - aim a little higher why don't you?!" She stared at him with shock and just a hint of disappointment. "Why'd you wanna go there anyway?" He just chuckled quietly and ignored her. "Aren't you sick of these privileged pampered assholes?"

"Sansa wants me to stay in Kings Landing," he mumbled. Ygritte made a whipping sound effect and hand motion combo. "Fuck off!" The hound's bark was worse than his bite, she knew that well enough to never be afraid of him. "I don't have anything else going for me besides her."

"And being poised to be one of the best basketballers in the country..." She could just barely admit to
herself how jealous she was. "Yeah, that's boring! You're one ungrateful fucker, you know that?"

"I like you, Gritt." Sandor grinned at her - it was dammed ugly but kinda charming in his way. "You say it how it is."

"Not always, just no reason to not be direct," she grinned at him. "Thanks for coming out to support the team lately." Ygritte threw an arm around his broad sweaty shoulders. "Coach doesn't like it but the girls get a boost when the school jock shows up."

"What are you talking about?" The hound pretended to be offended. "Miss Brienne loves me," he sulked and she chuckled. "Take them all the way, Gritt - I'll be in the stands for the championship." He didn't have to tell her that, they were going to the finals and she would lead them to victory.

"I'll be the one on the court winning," she smiled wide at him.

"Ygritte!" Jon's voice echoed through the gym and she looked up to see him heading towards them.

"Hey, handsome!" She stood up and gathered her stuff as Jon walked to her side. He didn't say anything, just glanced behind her at the hound. Before leaving, she tossed a wave goodbye at the big guy. "See ya, hound!" Sandor gave her a nod and Ygritte turned to throw her arm around Jon shoulder to lead him out of the gym. "You shoulda seen it - I wiped the floor with that giant!" So she wasn't always honest... Her boyfriend stayed quiet and stared down at his sneakers. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing..." He moved away so that her arm fell from his shoulders. "You looked pretty chummy with the hound, didn't know you two were friends."

"Are you...?" Ygritte stopped dead in her tracks - nothing could shock her more! "Are you jealous?! Of fire-face?!" Jon shrugged and didn't say anything in reply. "Is there something wrong with your brain?" She poked a finger against his forehead and he slapped her hand away. "You know he's dating your supermodel cousin, right?"

"Don't remind me," he sneered.

"Well, thanks for ruining my good fucking mood," she started to walk away. "I don't need this childishness in my life. Call me when you grow up - peace!"

"Ygritte, wait!" He reached out and grabbed her hand to stop her from leaving."

"No - I don't do jealousy," she shoved his hand off. "Either you trust me or you don't!" If this were any other guy, she'd already have tossed him overboard. Ygritte never tolerated distrust because it was beneath her. But this was Jon, the most gorgeous and perfect man she'd met. And he was jealous - over her - it kinda turned her on.

"I do trust you," he insisted but then he glanced away guiltily. "I'm not jealous... alright maybe a little." Jon flicked away a curl that fell into his bowed face - too damned adorable to stay mad at.

"That's fucking ridiculous," she scolded in a softer tone. "You shouldn't even spend one second being jealous of the hound." Ygritte smirked as he looked up, seeing his sudden reassurance. "Sure, I'd fuck him if I nothing better to do." She chuckled at his instant paling and put a hand on his shoulder. "You'll always be better than everyone else - I don't want anyone but you, Jon."

"I fucked up," he mumbled, "I'm sorry."

"You'll have to make it up to me..." She grabbed his wrist and started dragging him towards the girls' shower.
"I can't go in here!" His voice raised in pitch with pure panic as she pulled him through the doorway. "Ygritte: this is the girls' shower," like she didn't know that. "Someone is bound to notice I'm not a girl!"

"We won't get caught," she was already stripping off her jacket to lay it on a bench nearby. "If anyone did walk in they'd just be grateful to see you naked." Ygritte pulled her sports bra off to drop it on her jacket. There - an appropriate reaction - the gleam in his eye was telling all the tales. Jon wanted to fuck her right here on campus - she was corrupting him to all seven hells. He kept his eyes locked with hers, unbuttoning his shirt to toss it on her clothes.

"Feeling grateful?" Jon's kept his expression mostly serious but a smile tugged at his lips. Gratitude was the only appropriate response to his flawless body.

"Only halfway." Ygritte stepped towards him, gripping his belt buckle to pull him closer. "This has to go," she jerked open his belt.

"And this too," he hooked his thumbs in the waist of her skirt to push it down over her hips.

"Fuck being grateful," she panted as raw lust ripped through her. "I want you so bad right now." Ygritte slid a hand behind his neck to grab a handful of curls and pressed her mouth against his. They hurried to strip their clothes, stumbling together to the nearest shower stall. Inside, he held pulled her close and captured her lips again. Her hand found the shower control and turned the water on, spraying out cold onto his back.

"Hey," he hissed in protest as Ygritte chuckled and reached to adjust the temperature. "You did that on purpose." Jon nuzzled against her face as the warming water showered over them.

"Would I do that?" She turned her face against his to find his lips but he avoided her.

"You're a cruel woman, Ygritte." His hand squeezed her hips and her palm splayed against his chest, squeezing the hard muscle.

"Now you're being cruel," she sulked, turning her face up. Then he finally kissed her and her mind went blank, moving on instinct. Ygritte pushed him against a wall and straddled him, hooking a leg around his. She grabbed the showerhead pipe with one hand for balance. The stall was a tiny cramped miserable space but it was randomly perfect to have sex in. She her hips shifted forward and guided his cock inside her. He groaned as he filled her, sinking back against the wall with his knee bent under her for support.

Hot steam filled the shower, intensifying her heady feeling. His arms curled around her waist, one hand gripping her ass to pull her flush against him. Ygritte braced a hand against the wall and swayed back and forth on her tiptoes. He gripped her hips as he withdrew to thrust up into her and she bucked against him. She moved her hips in a circular motion, sinking lower to take him deeper. The wet tile slid under her hand and she fell against his chest as both of them rocked together.

Jon's hands circled her waist to jerk her higher up against his body and she bent over him. His breath panted against her lips and his head angled to the side before his mouth met hers. He opened his mouth against hers, inviting her tongue inside. Her tongue slipped between his lips and he moaned against her mouth. She let out an sharp gasp as he stroked a hand up her body, causing her pulse to throb in her veins.

Ygritte knew she should keep quiet but couldn't help crying out. He cupped her breast as she arched into his touch and he broke the kiss to bow his head. His lips touched her throat, kissing down her neck and along her collarbone. She nearly passed out from the overwhelming sensations and hot
water showering over her. The air thickened with heated steam so she fumbled for the handle and turned off the water.

An electric torrent ripped through her when his mouth moved down to her breast, licking the beads of water running down. The sensation made her entire body throb as waves of heat bubbled through her. His fingertips slid between her legs to stroke her pulsing flesh, weakening her knees. Both of them moaned as she pressed her hips towards him. Her heart fluttered wildly when he buried his face into her shoulder.

He thrust into her, bringing her mounting ecstasy to a peak. Hardly breathing, she whined and trembled from the powerful release rushing through her. The orgasm seemed to go on forever, his cock growing even harder. It throbbed against her uncontrolled contracting. Jon let out a breathless whimper against her hair as he pumped his release deep inside her. His arms held her body tight against his chest until the last satisfying stroke.

They slumped into the corner of the stall, both exhausted. Her breathing normalized as his arms unwrapped from around her and he let them drop to his sides. She lifted her heavy head to meet his eyes, which fixed a dazed stare on her in return. Then they burst into breathless giggles like naughty little kids. High-pitched voices echoed into the showers and both of them froze. He gave her a panicked look but she held up a finger in front of her mouth indicating for him to stay quiet.

"Ugh," a feminine voice groaned. "How could he spill his whole fricking drink on me?!"

"Tansy, I'm sure it was an accident." Walda Frey owned the other voice - didn't sound like she believed her own words. Thankfully, neither of the girls commented on their clothes sitting out. Ygritte turned back to Jon, who rolled his eyes at the ridiculous situation. She gave him a wicked grin and moved her hips against him, feeling him harden inside her.

"Don't be an idiot... he did it on purpose," the girl wailed, "I hate Ramsay Bolton!" Put a cork in it already! Though she didn't exactly want the girls to leave - this was so wicked! Jon hissed at her to stop moving but she grinned and rocked her hips again.

"You should tell someone that he's bulling you." Walda tried to advise her friend but the girl just snorted a humorless laugh. Jon ignored the girls, returning her rocking with a retaliating thrust. Ygritte bit in the inside of her lip to keep quiet and buried her face into his shoulder.

"Grow up, that's not how the world works for them, and you know it." This Tansy girl needed to shut up and take her fucking shower already! "Besides, I'm not nearly as scared of him as Myranda..." Ygritte froze and started poking Jon to get him to stop so she could listen. He drew back to give her a questioning look but she turned her attention to the girls.

"Just avoid her," Walda advised, her voice muffled by a shower being turned on. Ygritte pulled away from her confused boyfriend to move close to the shower curtain.

"I think she came to my house," Tansy's voice quieted and Ygritte strained to hear. "I found a note in my mailbox... it was just two words really. Die whore."

"Take a shower and you'll feel better," Walda insisted. "I'll head outside to call my sister for a ride." Ygritte knew this might be their only chance to get out of this without being caught. She peeked out of the stall and saw her window of opportunity.

"I'll get our clothes, be right back," she whispered under breath to Jon. Ygritte moved fast - and naked - to get their clothes off the bench. When she rushed back into the stall, they dressed quickly. Both of them bumped into each other in the cramped space. If she weren't so fucking rushed with
adrenaline the situation would be hilarious. The coast was still clear so they made a quick getaway. They grabbed their jackets and shoes before sprinting out of the showers.

"I can't believe I let you talk into that," he stopped in front of a bench to put on his shoes. She sat down next to him and looked over at Jon - both of them broke into a fit of giggles. "How could they not notice our clothes everywhere? I thought we were caught for sure!" Ygritte joined him another round of laughter as she put on her shoes. Then she remembered the girls’ conversation and it killed her good mood.

"What's up?" He noticed she was suddenly quiet. "You okay?"

"No, it's cool," she assured him and nodded towards the parking lot. "I'll give you a ride home."

"No paintballing today?" Jon sounded disappointed and it made her smile.

"Tomorrow," she promised. "I gotta do something today." She and Jon were starting to see eye-to-eye on most things. Ygritte could tell that he knew something was up and she that didn't want to talk about it. And he got it - that she knew all of that and appreciated it. Love is kinda fucking awesome, like being telepathic. Except when you're not, then one of you is really wrong. But this was one of those times when neither of them had to say anything.

"I can catch a ride," he kissed her, "go do what you gotta do."

"Thanks babe," she grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him in for a longer kiss. "I love you."

"Love you," he smiled all handsome and she almost wanted to change her mind. No, she couldn't let any serious bullying go on under her nose. Because, like today, that shit always manages to fuck everything up. Ygritte watched Jon get up and walk away before heading to her car. She knew one of the Frey girls, who could probably get her Walda's number. That girl would spill the whole story, it seemed like she was dying to tell someone. Nobody on the team - especially Myranda - was above her judgment.

Chapter End Notes

Happy 100 chapters - this is actually my first full Ygritte chapter! Yay! Thanks to everyone for sticking with me this long.

Last weekend was spent learning how to faux paint wall textures with glaze - it was exhausting! Mostly because the first day's work had to be completely redone, except for one room which turned out perfect. Sometimes the mistakes can turn out better than originally planned: I find that is true of life in general. It's a counterbalance to Murphy's Law - some of the shit that goes wrong actually ends up alright. The metaphor doesn't stop there, because painting mistakes can be fixed with a willingness to work and a few hard-learned lessons. Yep, life mistakes are much the same: start over, wipe the slate clean, and try again.
Torgo impressed her every day, growing more confident with her and others. It was a privilege to watch him coming out of his shell and she felt honored to have played a small part. Today he was especially wonderful, talking to everyone without once getting nervous or flustered.

"That was fun," Torgo hurried to take ahold of her hand as they were walking out of the food bank.

"You don't have to say that," she assured him with a smile. "But volunteering will look very good on our college transcripts." Torgo needed to take every advantage because affording college will be difficult for him.

"Come on, don't pretend that's why you do it," he beamed at her. When he looked at her like that it sent a burst of happiness through her body. "You were really good in there with the people, they liked you." Torgo was also getting stronger about at making his opinions known to her. Perhaps it was strange to get these rushes of pride for him but she could not help it. His newfound confidence enhanced his best qualities, being thoughtful and sweet.

"I can be accused of many things," she countered playfully. "But being 'good with people' is not one of them."

"You really don't know how likable you are," he overestimated her likability. Missa learned long ago that some people found her off-putting. Mostly because she was too serious, studious, and she rejected all stereotypes. People like the abstract idea of 'being oneself' but most actually prefer the expected. "But... I more than 'like' you." Torgo looked down, wearing an embarrassed smile and pulling his hand out of hers. They walked around her car to their respective sides.

"Oh?" She tilted her head towards him, holding the keys, but waiting to unlock the car doors.

"I love you," he grinned happily at her over the car roof.

"I love you too," she returned his smile and clicked the doors open. Ever since he first confessed his love, she had been so grateful. Probably that was not the most appropriate reaction. However, he had come such a long way and she secretly wanted him to say it first. Because that meant he trusted her and was no longer afraid of her rejection. They sat down inside and she quickly assessed the position of the mirrors.

"So, as two people in love, what should we do?" Torgo was distracted as he pulled on his seatbelt. "I'm cool with whatever you want."

"I wondered if you might... want to... um." Missa stalled as she buckled her seatbelt and adjusted the strap over her chest. It was a very simple suggestion, best said with the utmost clarity. "We could have sex today if you wanted." She peeked sideways to see him staring perplexed at her. "Oh... I, um, guess it might be better to be spontaneous but I wanted to be clear... Oh dear." He was completely petrified again. "Torgo," she waved a hand in front of his unblinking eyes, "are you alright?"
"We could, you know..." His eyes floated around dizzily behind his glasses. "We could do that..." Torgo's voice kept getting quieter until she could barely hear him. "You and I, together..."

"I think I broke you," she gave him a worried look.

"I'll be alright," he straightened up and adjusted his glasses. "I really love you, Missa..." Torgo flipped a finger back and forth between them a few too many times. "And I want to be with you."

"I love you, my sweet Torgo." She gave him her most reassuring smile. "It doesn't have to be today, I am only proposing the possibility."

"Today... is fine," he nodded slowly but then his eyes locked on hers. "Uh, I meant 'good'. No-no-no, I mean perfect; it's perfect." Torgo was so brave, clearly nervous but willing to face his fears. How could she not be proud of him?

"Alright then," she pulled the car out of the parking lot and got on the road. "If you are ready we can go back to my house."

"Your mother isn't home?" He was likely surprised because they did not discuss family all that much. Whenever she described her family life to him, it seemed incompatible with his life. However, that was typical for her, already the standard with her drama-magnet friends.

"Today there is party for the families of deployed local military members." Missa turned onto the main road, heading towards her house. "Mother is on the committee that oversees the event so she should be out of the house all day. We are very honest with each other and I mentioned my hope that you would come home with me today."

"What did she say?" He only worried because he did not know her mother.

"The standard lectures on safety and self-respect." Missa knew she was lucky to have such a supportive mother. Just another advantage of being overly ordinary. She despised herself for feeling bitter about occasionally. Although lately her life felt anything but grudgingly conventional, all because of Torgo. Love has a way of making the most mundane moments into magical ones. "Then she made plans to stay over at a friend's house. We would have complete privacy."

"Wow, your mom is amazing," he might have been overstating it just a tad.

"My mother is a very practical woman and from her point-of-view I am safer at home..." Oh gods, this was really happening! Beyond rational levels, Missa was suddenly both terrified and enthusiastic. It made driving a bit difficult so she pinned her focus on the task. "She also insisted on meeting you soon," she kept her tone even.

"I'd love to," he whispered timidly, sharing her anxiousness but unable to hide it. They were quiet for the rest of the ride to her house but she assumed... She hoped he was only nervous but not so scared that he would lose his nerve. The silence endured when she pulled up in her driveway and it followed them into the house. However, she did not find the lack of conversation unnerving because she was half-responsible. They just had to get past this first time, oh gods please let it go well.

"I think I would like a shower first," she suggested. Attentive hygiene was recommended by most of the sources she researched. "Would you like to join me?" It might give them both a chance to get used to each other naked. Torgo only managed to nod, not even looking at her... Not exactly encouraging. She steered herself against her assailing doubts and led him into the guest bathroom. The walk-in shower would give them enough space to be comfortable.

In the bathroom they faced and undressed, stealing glances, but neither saying a word. Torgo's body
looked much as she expected, she certainly spent enough time imagining it. However, not even full anticipatory knowledge prepared her for the effect of sexual arousal. No medical texts explained the onslaught of symptoms her body experienced. Her heart thudded as if trying to escape her chest. Meanwhile her legs and body began to tremble; it would have been awful...

Except it was curiously the most wonderful she ever felt! It felt like her veins were flooding with adrenaline but more heady and warm. To distract herself she faced away from him to turn the shower on all the way hot. When she looked back, Torgo still stood on the other end of the bathroom watching her. She saw his obvious arousal and thankfully suppressed the odd urge to giggle.

"You look very beautiful," Missa broke the persistent silence. Not that she could hear anything over the rushing of her own pulse.

"You too," his voice was even softer.

"Don't be worried," she linked her hands in front of her and moved towards him. "Tell me what you want."

"I want whatever you want," he answered a little too quickly.

"We both should be open about what we want," she explained gently. "For instance, I would like to kiss you." Torgo slowly stepped towards her, lifting one hand to cup her cheek.

"That's what I want too," his warm lips covered hers in a delicate kiss. His other hand settled on her hip to pull her closer. She pressed both hands against his chest, feeling his hammering heart. Torgo inhaled sharply against her mouth. Missa shivered despite heat spreading over her skin as longing pulsed through her body. The tip of his erection poked her abdomen, sending pulsing shocks between her legs. Steam was filling up the room by the time they broke apart.

"Ready?" Her voice was expectedly unsteady but surprisingly strong. This was what she wanted and her only need was for him to want it too. She lifted her hand palm-up in invitation for him to come with her.

"Just a moment..." Torgo stepped back and raked his bespectacled eyes over her from head to toe. Then he pulled his glasses off to set them on the vanity top. "Ready," he confirmed, taking her hand. His gentle touch spread calm through her body before she led him into the shower. The twin rain showerhead drizzled them with steaming hot water. The warmth covering her body calmed her nerves. Missa closed her eyes and tilted her head back to let the tension be washed away. When she focused on Torgo again, he was still watching her.

Water ran down his face, poured into his collarbone, and spilled onto his chest. The drops traveling the length of his body and defined stomach mesmerized her. For a moment, she envied the hot hydrogen and oxygen atoms sliding along his skin. Then she realized this was a perfect opportunity to explore his body. Missa picked up the shower gel and squeezed some into her hand, working it into a lather.

"Can I...?" Why did everything she said have to sound so incredibly embarrassing? It pained her to let the question linger. Torgo stared curiously at the body wash for a moment before nodding his permission. He made a small sound when her soapy fingers found his skin but he did not flinch away. Instead, he leaned into her touch and closed his eyes with a sigh. After washing his chest, for longer than necessary, shyness prevented venturing further. "Turn around and I will wash your back," she was brave enough for that.

"It's been a while since someone did this," he sighed as she spread soapy suds over his back. "It feels
good." Torgo deserved these simple comforts and she wanted to be the one comforting him. Missa slipped her arms around his slick torso and hugging him from behind. He stiffened but she did not relax her hold, allowing her body to press against his.

"Is it okay if I take care of you from now on?" It did not matter if she was right or wrong to feel responsible for Torgo. That was the way she always felt about him, ever since the first day they met. Something hid underneath his timidity and painful shyness that she wanted to uncover. The undertaking to discover that 'something' provided the greatest moments of her short life. Now she knew how it felt to be admired for her whole self and she felt the same for him.

"Okay," he wheezed.

"I mean it..." Missa wished she could directly communicate what she felt instead using clumsy inadequate language. "If there is ever anything you need or want, just tell me and I will do everything I can."

"All I want and need is you," he turned around but stayed close so their bodies still touched.

"You say that now," she teased, feigning more calm than she felt. "But only because your brain is rushed with dopamine caused by arousal."

"Nope, it's been this way ever since I met you." Torgo's sudden playfulness boosted her confidence. "I spent my whole life playing it straight, never drinking or anything." His hands curled around her hips, causing her heart to stutter. "Then I end up high off you," he heaved an exaggerated exhale but looked up with a smile. "You make me dizzy, jumpy, and scatterbrained but I never want that to stop."

"What an odd and sweet thing to say," she kept her praise lighthearted. "I love you, Torgo. You can trust me, say all the odd things you want, and my affection will only grow." His arms enfolded her to pull her closer against his slick warm body. Her lips tingled as she tilted her head back, waiting for his kiss. He bowed his head to press their lips together, spreading heat through her body. When they broke apart both of them panted breathlessly, devolving into giddy chuckles.

Together they both conquered their bashfulness by helping to clean each other. The challenging part was her inexplicable ticklishness. That problem soon passed in favor of smoldering desire. After a while, she could not withstand the torment of her longing. His physical condition indicated he felt the same. She shut off the water and grabbed two dry towels off the hooks. They wrapped towels around themselves before getting out of the shower. Missa stopped at the vanity to open her conditioner and applied some to her hair.

"Oh that's what smells good," he sniffed the bottle when she set it down. "I thought it was perfume."

"Do you want to try it?" Missa held up the product still left in her hand as an offer.

"My haircare process is to cut it when it gets too poufy," he chuckled as he set down the bottle. "Don't want to mess with what works." Torgo made a show of slicking back his thick short hair.

"It is sort of nice for you to watch me do this," she continued to apply the moisturizer to her curls.

"I feel like I'm learning all your secrets," he leaned against the vanity countertop.

"There are still a few left to learn," she quirked a brow at him. "The only thing left to do is apply some body lotion." Missa pulled off her towel to hang it before turning around to face Torgo. She retrieved and held up her coconut body butter to him. "Do you want to help me?" He nodded a little too enthusiastically and she bit back a laugh.
"Never wanted anything more in my life," he accepted the container with amusing reverence. Missa's skin tingled with anticipation as she watched him scoop some cream. He was tentative at first, applying the lotion to her shoulders and arms. She closed her eyes it seemed to bolster his confidence, moving his hands to her chest. His fingers felt amazing gliding over her skin but she resisted making noise. One wrong whine and he might lose all of his nerve.

"Now it's your turn," her voice was breathless by the time she opened her eyes. Torgo started to shake his head but she snatched the container out of his hand. "Don't be shy..." Missa imitated his technique, starting with his shoulders and moving down. However, her bravery stopped at the towel around his hips. "I think we are sufficiently cleaned and moisturized," she put down the container. "Do you want to go to bed now?"

"Yes.." His voice went quiet and nervous again but she could not fault him because she felt the same. Missa left her towel in the bathroom and let him back into her bedroom. Once inside her room, she released his hand to draw the drapes closed. The curtains dimmed the room, allowing a faint glow to filter through the fabric. She returned to his side and raised her eyes to meet his before tugging his towel loose. It fell to the floor around his feet before she led him to the bed and they sat down beside each other.

Missa pulled his hand to her waist and caressed up his arm to hold his shoulder. They leaned towards each other and she pressed her lips against his. The lingering kiss was sweet but a powerful urgency pushed her to end the stalling. She pulled down the coverlet and slid in between the cool sheets. He moved to lay down beside her and she pulled the covers over their bodies. A current of electricity cascaded down her stomach as she pulled him closer to her.

"Tell me what you want," he whispered. Missa was not sure why they were whispering but for some reason it made sense. His smooth limbs slid against hers, sending tremors of excitement over her sensitive skin. The pulsing urgency intensified to an almost uncomfortable degree.

"Come over me," she urged him to move on top of her, spreading her legs to accommodate him. His erection nudged against her and the muscles of her stomach tightened in anticipation. He tucked one arm under her arched waist as she reached down. With determination she wrapped her fingers around his hardness. Torgo jumped at the contact but he followed her guidance to her entrance. "Go slowly," she advised and he nodded his answer. She thought he was going too slow but then the stretched sensation turned sharp.

"Should I stop?" He froze when she released an involuntary whimper. The pain was bearable, only annoying because it obscured the good sensations.

"It is better now I think," her hands went to his hips to encourage him all the way inside her. Once that obstacle was passed, he relaxed on top of her and tucked his face beside hers. She felt his hot breath on her neck, then the tender brush of his soft lips on her skin. Her hands slid over his shoulders and his hands wrapped around her waist. "It does not hurt anymore," not much anyway, "you can move."

"Uh," his body stiffened as he hesitated, "if I move it'll be over."

"We can stay like this..." Missa stoked a hand against his cheek, urging him to raise his head. "I love you, Torgo."

"I love you Missa," he panted and she could feel his heart racing. She could not help pressing against him and he rocked in return. They both moaned at the sudden rush of mutual pleasure. He pumped into her and she pushed herself closer to him to meet his slow thrusting. If they were two galaxies, they would be Andromeda and the Milky Way. Colliding over billions of years to create an entirely
new galaxy. Star stuff exploding all around, creating a new cosmos only they populated.

"Gods," he groaned and froze his motions. "I can't..." She stroked the back of Torgo's head to reassure him.

"Kiss me," she managed breathlessly moan. Missa gasped when he pulled her against him and covered her mouth in a passionate kiss. Her mind swirled with twinkling lights as his lips and tongue moved against hers. The familiar pinpointed pleasure compelled her to slip a hand between their bodies. He held their kiss and lifted out of the way to let her fingers find the slick flesh between her legs. She cried out from the all-consuming rush of explosive sensation from just light pressure.

Her fingers chased the peak just out of her reach, though she climbed higher than ever. Missa did not know if he was relieving her need or his when he thrust again at a slow pace. Her cries grew louder until she was undone by her fingers and his gentle thrusting. The release felt like being shot through the atmosphere, blinding heat followed by weightlessness. Torgo released a breathy cry and the rushing of his orgasm added to hers.

After a blissful eternity, the electric hum faded and she floated into her body. As her mind cleared, it seemed astounding that it went so well. Missa could hardly believe her first thought was wanting to do it all over again. It would be wasteful to take another shower, but for two people... He panted against her neck, pressing a kiss to her skin before rolling over to lay beside her. Torgo looked exhausted and she truly appreciated his magnificent effort.

Her unsteady heartrate evened and she embraced him close, kissing his lips again. Five years since she first felt the burgeoning of sexual interest. Two years since she became the only virgin in amongst her friend group. Seven months since she wanted Torgo, which blossomed into full-blown yearning in that time. Finally, she understood what it really meant to be satisfied. It was worth every minute of the wait.

"You were nervous for nothing," she smiled at him.

"It was alright for you?" Torgo's need for reassurance was almost comical after what they just experienced. Based on anecdotes she heard, this seemed an exceptionally good first time. Not that it was unusual for her performance in anything to be exceptional. A small amount of self-satisfaction is not narcissistic but healthy.

"Better than I ever imagined." Missa tilted her forehead against his shoulder to hide her wicked smile. "And I imagined it a lot."

"Me too," he chuckled, "nothing compares to really being with you." Torgo was right about that; this experience was like being reborn. A whole new world of feeling and sensations opened up to her and she could not wait to explore it all. First they should rest but her mind already rushed with all of the possibilities...

Chapter End Notes

More virginities vanquished! Well, I've gotten into the bad habit of writing ahead again but I think this never-ending plot is winding about in a fairly entertaining way. Also this chapter's smut was important to me so I took my time - wanted to get Missa and Torgo's first time right. Eh, it's unfitting to describe anything between them as smut, more like: 'Erotic Prose on Love and Human Sexuality'. I have fun with it, hope y'all did too. :D
If Wishes were Horses

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If Wishes were Horses

DAENERYS

She woke up early, dressed, and decided to make breakfast for everyone as quiet as she could. But when she went to Irri's room, the girl was nowhere to be found. And Rakharo's door was closed so she decided to let him sleep. Everyone worked hard to get the horses ready for market, where Qotho went yesterday. Thankfully at least Drogo came to breakfast and sat down at the table.

"Good morning," she greeted him with a kiss on the cheek and a fresh plate. "I made plenty but Irri already left somewhere and Rakharo seems to be sleeping." Dany sat down beside him and dished a serving spoonful of breakfast casserole. This time she made extra sure to bring her own beef. Where did they even purchase ground horsemeat?!

"Mori assilat," he dished a serving enough for two people onto his plate. He said that Irri and Rakharo were missing out but Dany still waited for his final verdict. Drogo tried a bite, chewing and swallowing before looking to her. "It is good." He went back to eating and she started in on her own food.

"I had that dream again last night," she swallowed. "We are riding through the desert, chasing after the sun. I wonder why I keep dreaming that." Dany did not truly believe in dream meanings like prophecy. There was the possibility of psychological reasons for the images conjured in her mind. "Maybe the dream means I shouldn't run from problems but should head towards adventure." Drogo raised a brow at her dramatic interpretation. "Or maybe I just shouldn't eat so many late night snacks."

"Yer she atthirarido anni nakhok aijalani," he said he dreamed of her last night. She noticed how the corner of his mouth lifted slightly. "Only you rode - there were no horses." Lately, he joked with her in this adorable immature way.

"Ajjin rek chiftik?" Dany bobbed her head around like she could hear a cricket. She was teasing him for being naughty but she really liked his new playfulness. Drogo breathed a single laugh and returned to his food. After Dany agreed to go visit Drogo's parents a change came over him. He relaxed and let himself have fun, smiling, and even laughing a bit more.

When she thought about these positive changes, it made her realize something. He must consider her agreeing to visit his parents as advancing their relationship. What surprised her more: this development did not make her nervous at all. Really and truly... she was actually fine. Sure, nobody is jumping up and down to meet their boyfriend's parents. But his happiness was infectious and mostly she was excited to go to Bravos.

Just the idea of visiting another country was downright trilling, she dreamed of traveling. With Drogo beside her, there would never be anything to fear: including loneliness. Dany had no idea what to expect from his parents but she could not let fear of the unknown hold her back. And at any rate, if they did not like her, then she would just make them like her. While she daydreamed, he finished his breakfast and stood up.
"San athchomari yeraan," he thanked her, "I will shower." Drogo went into the kitchen to drop his plate off by the sink and headed back to the bathroom. So things were not that different from how they were before. The breakfast table was not suddenly filled with conversation: that was nothing new. It would take death or a miracle to get the Targaryen family to sit down and eat a meal together. It used to be once a year on holidays but even that became too tedious.

She finished eating, got up to save the leftovers, and cleaned up most of the mess. All that was left to do was the dishes, her least favorite chore. In the middle of trying to scheme her way out of the work, Irri tiptoed out of the Rakharo's room. The dark-haired beauty froze and whirled around to face Dany.

"Oh my gods," Dany giggled, "I can't believe what I'm seeing." Irri tried to shush Dany but she could not help the chuckles bubbling up. "What happened last night?!"

"A whole lot of nothing," she hissed. Irri grabbed Dany's arm and dragged her into the hallway, away from Rakharo's room. "I swear we were just watching a movie and fell asleep... together."

"So there's nothing going on between you two?" Dany put her hands on her hips and gave Irri a doubtful look. "Come on, you can tell me," she put one hand over her heart. "Anha asqoyi she anna chomokh tat avvos astat yeri shilak." She swore on her honor never to reveal Irri's secret.

"Okay, you don't have to break out the Dothraki to show how serious you are." Irri rolled her eyes and then sighed in resignation. "I wouldn't say there's 'nothing' going on, not that much but just a little.... I kissed him last night," she confessed quietly.

"Oh my gods," Dany covered her gaping mouth. "How did he react?" It was all she could do not to start jumping with excitement. Other people's romances were certainly more interesting than washing dishes.

"He asked me to reconsider going through with our engagement." Irri groaned with obvious frustration. "Because that's what every girl wants to hear after her first kiss, a proposal."

"Oh my gods, you poor thing." Dany knew how she felt: Drogo was the exact same way. From zero to one hundred in the blink of an eye. "What is with Dothraki men?" She patted Irri's shoulder in a sympathetic gesture.

"Now you're starting to see what I'm talking about!" Irri threw her hands up with hopeless frustration. "They're impossibly crazy!" Then Drogo came out of his room, dressed and his wet hair slicked back into a ponytail. The poor man walked straight into their conversation. "I can't even stand to look at a man right now!" She stormed away, pushing past Drogo to get to her room.

"Mae ajjin jin yofi ato," he aimed her accusation of insanity back at her. Drogo watched Irri leave with his usual impassive expression. Irri slammed her door loud. Even if Rakharo were sleeping, the sound would wake him. Aw, they were so cute: time to play a little matchmaking! This was getting her all fired up and Drogo was looking particularly good.

"Chiori jif tikh," she gave him a flirty wink, "jin naqis yofi." Dany suggested that a woman should be just the littlest bit crazy.

"Haj sajak laz shim ivezh lame," he claimed a strong rider could tame the wildest mare. Drogo took a step towards her, his dark eyes traveling down the length of her body. The narrow hallway seemed to shrink even smaller as her pulse sped up.

"Anha ish tikh..." Dany casually tossed her hair over one shoulder and walked away into the kitchen.
"Ale ivezh qisi yer." She countered that she might be too wild even for him. As she moved toward the sink to clean up, his hand snaked around her waist. Drogo turned her around and lifted her up to sit on the counter.

"Anha allayafi yer ivezh," he admitted to liking her wildness. His hands braced on either side of her thighs as he tilted his head down. Perfect: he forgot their little bet last night and this was her chance...

"Drogo," she leaned closer as if to kiss him and smiled as his gaze darted to her lips. "Dothras chek!" Dany swung her legs around and jumped off the countertop to race towards the door. "Last one to the first tree has to do the dishes- Ah!" His arm locked around her waist, hauling her up and setting her down behind him. Drogo grabbed his boots and burst through the door. "That's cheating!"

"Ale vroz!" Drogo dared to taunt her: he never forgot their bet that she could beat him in a race today. She hopped outside, struggling into her boots as she followed on his heels. By the time she rushed through the barn doors he was climbing onto his saddled horse.

"No fair!" But he just ignored her, giving a loud yelp and spurring the horse galloping past her. She saddled and climbed onto her horse fast as she could. Dany's cold fingers gripped the leather reins tight and she wished she wore gloves. She gave the horse a pat on the neck and picked up the reins, trotting out of the barn. And found him waiting for her: that was his mistake. 'We can beat him this time,' Dany chanted to herself.

The horse was just as ready to race, her thick mane bounced with her quickening stride. Dany shifted her weight forward and poked her heel into the horses' right side. They picked up speed as the horse found a rhythm, tucking her head in and bounding forward. She nearly caught up to him but he maintained a solid lead. The cool winter wind breezed through her hair as they raced together to the first tree. After he won, they slowed to an amble as they headed into the forest.

"You'll never believe it," she panted to catch her breath while he seemed unfazed. "This morning I caught Irri coming out of Rakharo's room." That news at least got a tiny reaction out of him but it did not look positive. Dany assumed that he would find out sooner or later so there was no real harm in telling him. "Irri said nothing was going on between them but I think something might happen." Because she was going to turn matchmaker like a modern-day Jane Austen character.

"Don't let Qotho know," he shook his head like a worried old man.

"Ignore that hallway lurker!" She ignored his raised eyebrow, which did not help her irritation. "They should be able to do whatever they want." And what they wanted was the same thing everyone their age wants. It was a shock they lasted this long with nothing happening between them. Two young unrelated people living together: it was inevitable!

"Yer avvos tiholat," he soothed her like one of his horses, speaking low and soft. It almost worked but only until she made the comparison in her mind. "Mae ajjin vijazerat ha eyak." Drogo thought she did not understand that Qotho was responsible for Irri and Rakharo. Of course, she understood he was responsible for their safety and basic needs. But that did not give him the right to interfere if they want to see each other.

"There's no harm done if they date like to regular people," she insisted. "After all, we can't all live by 'the Dothraki way' in Westeros. That doesn't make any sense."

"Arrek finne tat kisha thirat ki kishi akka?" His tone was not angry but his words were too fast to be considered calm. "Kijinosi fin rhaeshi hash kisha seris tat tikh Dothraki?" What she could understand made it seem like the Dothraki were a lost and dying people. "Finne tat kisha thirat ma kishi shillolat, seris arrekoon jin fejat ki ifak?" Drogo bemoaned the loss of his beliefs and... discrimination from
foreigners. Did he mean her too?

Dany was speechless and not because she only got seventy-five percent of his speech. That was enough for her to realize: she knew nothing outside of Westeros! She understood even the dullest things about their judicial system. 'Every Targaryen needs to know the law of the land', her grandmother said. But she knew nothing about the state of the Dothraki people: or the apparent lack of.

"Drogo, shekh ma shieraki anni." Dany was at such a loss for words she could not think in Dothraki. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"Anha zin ojil," he apologized, "jalan atthirari anni." Drogo bowed his head forward in a shamed pose. "Tiholat anna, ziyenelat ajjin anni." He took full blame for the argument but Dany disagreed. This was an opportunity for them to stop hiding and be completely truthful.

"I just want to point out," she kept her tone light, "this happens because you don't talk to me. If you want me to know something about yourself or your people you have to tell me with your words." Why else had she learned, worked hard every day, to speak Dothraki? Drogo lifted his head to look at her and the pain in his eyes ripped through her. But Dany forced herself to smile. "As much as I love your dark brooding eyes they don't exactly tell me very much."

"You are right," he nodded slowly, "I should tell you." But apparently not right now because he stayed quiet: baby steps.

"I promise to always listen." Dany looked forward to see the trees thinning as they approached the field. "Should we race back?" Drogo surprised her by full-on grinning, he was so expressive today!

"Disse fin yer zala assilat," he taunted her for 'wanting defeat'. Instead of answering, she dug her heels in and yelped, setting her horse galloping. Dany knew he would beat her but winning was not the point. While racing, she did not care who won, captivated by the joy of riding so fast it felt like flying. The world rushed by in a kaleidoscope of colors, their worries fell aside.

**DROGO**

He slowed the horses gait as they approached the barn so as not to leave her too far behind. A warmer breeze blew in from the south and it restored the energy in everything. Westeros was said to be warm in the south but this cold had a mean sting. Drogo turned his horse around to watch Dany riding towards him. She was so beautiful that he lost his breath to the wind. Her pale skin glowed from the light with her hair flowing behind her.

Pure happiness shone through her smile and he wished to always make her this happy. She came to his side, panting from the exertion as her silvery hair fall across her face. Drogo watched the fascinating way her head bowed forward. Her hand tossed her wind-swept hair behind her long neck. His eyes trailed up to meet hers as her lips curled into a slow smile - his heart faltered.

"I never get tired of this," she sighed and tilted her face up to the sun.

"You don't say what you mean," he lightened up on the reigns to slow to a trot. Westerosi tongue was hard to learn because they use their own language wrong. Instead of speaking plain and direct, they play around with words. "Yer hash haqe," he could see that she felt tired.

"Yes, my body becomes tired from riding: vosma anna zhor ajjin seris akka thir." She meant that her heart felt free and alive but the words were wrong. "You know what I mean." Dany glanced sideways at him.
"Anha tiholat," he understood her heart even if the words were not right. "Dothralat she hrazef ajjin tawak seris, me nem nesa." Being on horseback is the ultimate freedom, it is known. "We should go back now." Drogo steered his horse towards the barn and her horse followed alongside.

"There's nothing but dishes waiting back there for me." Dany cast a dark stare in his direction, still believing he had been unfair. "Only because you cheated."

"Kijinosi tawak vilajero hazze ajjin vo ven 'qosarvenikh' - disse iffi che assilat." He explained that in battle there is no such thing as 'cheating' - only win or lose. Life is like a battle, opponents closing in from all sides. And choosing trusted allies was the greatest challenge. Many mistakes were made in his life when trusting those he thought of as family. Though Westerosi are even stranger than Bravosi, the friends he found here were true.

"Dothraki men," she threw up a hand - Westerosi gesture far too often. "Why didn't I listen to Irri? Yer hash tawak yofi." Dany repeated Irri's accusation that he was crazy. They were the ones making him crazy. Did his woman really think he did not know she wants to hold the reins with Irri and Rakharo? They should settle their own problem and kept others out. If Irri wants to sneak, she should sneak better! Now Qotho will blame 'the foreign wench' and Drogo will hear nothing else.

"Jin mahrazh jif tikh yofi," he told her that man should be crazy. Drogo dismounted in front of the barn and moved to help her down. She no longer needed help but he liked to do it, fitting her slim waist in his hands. Her hands came around his shoulders as he lowered her to the ground. "Jin chiori ish kis tat shim," she threatened to tame him as a wicked smile curled her lips. "Ishish mae ray et," he acknowledged that she already tamed him. He pulled her against his chest and she gasped when he captured her lips. Hungry for her all morning, he kissed her until she panted for breath. It might be he was not as tame as he claimed to be. By the time he raised his head she was limp in his arms. Drogo stepped back, holding her steady before letting go to tend the horses. Dany blew out a loud breath and shook her head, taking her own horse into the barn. "Where is he going?" Dany looked up from tending her horse to give him a questioning look. He did not want to worry her before about money but now it was done.

"A buyer called yesterday - he is sold." It was for the best and the time was right. Every animal that he trained taught him something new about horses. There was no more this horse could he teach him. "Why would you sell him?" Her lovely eyes went wide with concern as she approached his side. "Yer athfiezar jin hrazef," it was too much to say he 'loved' this horse but it was his favorite. "Akka jin davra hrazef ajjin zin disse jin hrazef." He assured her that even a fine horse is still just a horse. "I love you - with the money I will take you to Bravos to meet my family."

"Will your parents like me?" Her voice was wrapped in quiet fear as her gaze lowered to the ground. "Mori tikh allayafi jin annithilat yer fichat anna." He assured her that his parents would like the motivation she gave him. They were forever wailing about his lack of direction and willful defiant behavior. Now they would see the man he became because he found a woman he wanted to keep beside him. Dany's concern faded away as a smile broke over her face.
"I will make them like me," she reached out to take his hand. Drogo pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her. The anger and immature mistakes of his past were behind him and now he only looked forward. Dany was meant to be his woman for life but now was not the time to speak of marriage. Soon, but not this day, not in the barn standing on straw. After earning the approval of his father and mother, he would ask her to become his wife. She was his light and queen of his heart, deserving an unforgettable proposal.

Chapter End Notes

The universe is against me! The website I use to translate my Dothraki, dothraki.org, was down for an inordinate amount of time. I only had a half done when it just quit on me! So, in retaliation, and because I don't torture myself nearly enough: I started making a translator. Because apparently that's not a thing yet somehow! Seriously, how is it me doing this? I'm just not that person who does stuff, you know, useful stuff... See, I'm the kind of person who can call a Dothraki translator 'useful'. I write 300k+ word fanfic. This is going to end badly. At best - by the time I'm done, a much better one will come out.
Don't Wanna be Alone

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Don't Wanna be Alone

GREY WORM

It wasn't really that much of a surprise; this always happened to him. The other day was the best of his life, his bad luck had finally run out, and happiness... Real everyday happiness was just within his grasp. Was he so distracted by his sappy teenaged love that he missed something...? Torgo was starting to regret attending school. This morning it didn't seem real but reality hit him by the time the DnD group gathered.

Pod and Sheri were chatting near him, something about a movie she wanted to see. Arya and Gendry seemed back to their usual selves, flirting and fighting. Dany and Jon poured over a DnD book as Drogo looked on with silent approval. In a roomful of his friends, he never felt more alone. And he spend plenty time in his life on his own, so lonely it could kill him. Torgo didn't even realize he started to cry until he felt the cold tear on his cheek.

"Torgo," Sheri noticed, "are you alright?"

"Not really..." His throat felt tight but that was only half the reason he could barely say it out loud. "Pop passed away last night, he went to take a nap..." Torgo went to check on him for dinner and there he was, peaceful and gone. GONE! More tears spilled and he hung his head to hide them. The salty drops fell onto the inside of his glasses so he took them off.

"Oh no," Dany rushed over to squat down by his side. "Torgo, I am so sorry," she patted his shoulder. "Why didn't you stay home?" That was a good question and he could think of a lot of 'reasons'. None of them would be the truth but even he didn't know why he came to school.

"The house is full of people," he offered the weak explanation. "Mama and... pop fostered a lot of kids over the years. I just didn't want to be in the way. I'm sorry for bringing everyone down."

"Don't be stupid!" Arya was just suddenly hugging his back. The show of affection seemed unlike her but he appreciated the gesture. "We're here for you, Torgo." She squeezed him with her thin strong arms before releasing him. "I'm really sorry about your dad." A fresh flood of tears poured down his face, which he covered with his hands. At least he wasn't sobbing... he was too tired for that.

"Let's forget the game today," Sheri lightly rubbed his other shoulder. There was no reason for his friends to suffer along with him. All he accomplished was ruining the good atmosphere in the room.

"Thanks but," he scooted back to get up and tried to keep his voice from cracking. "I can just head to the nurse's to lay down-"

"This is the time when you need your friends the most," Dany insisted. "I'm here for you, we all are, and you came here today because you wanted us to comfort you." Sometimes she reminded him of mama, the kind of person that people listen to. She took charge not because people let her but because they trusted her. "That's why I came to school after my father passed away." That's right, Torgo forgot that she knew how he felt.
"I just can't believe it," he sniffed and wiped his cheek with his sleeve. "Pop was older yeah, but he had so much life! He never got sick or complained..." His voice faltered so he distracted himself by putting his glasses back on.

"It sounds like he was a strong man," Jon gave him a sympathetic smile.

"Small but full of guts," Torgo made an effort to smile. "He told me that you didn't have to be stronger than anyone if you are better prepared."

"That explains a lot about your role-playing style," Pod chimed in.

"He was the first man to teach me anything," Torgo nearly choked on another sob but held it back. When he lived in a group home, some of the adults treated him like a product on an assembly line. After moving in with pop and mama, he realized how lucky he was. Friends he made in the group home acted out by committing petty crimes and pulling dangerous stunts. They were not inevitable products of their environment but products of others' low expectations.

But pop expected nothing but the best from him, like a real father expects from a son... No one ever did anything like that for him before. Not a single person truly cared if he turned out to be a respectable man. Those buildings provide shelter and those in charge make sure everybody eats. But children aren't ants to be raised in a colony and that place wasn't a 'home'. Even in his grief, he felt lucky for being able to experience what a home really feels like.

"It sounds like he loved you a lot," Sheri sniffled. "That's all anybody can ask from their father."

"Good dads are in short supply," Gendry added. That was something Torgo knew his whole life, which is why pop was... his hero.

"Pop had a lot more love to give," Torgo voice wavered but he swallowed down his sadness. "He was a father to me out of pure love, so in a way he taught me how to love like him. I think... Maybe he meant for me to fill in for him." Pop had small feet but left big shoes to fill. "I'm gonna miss him so much."

**SHIREEN**

Arya was the first one to leave and Sheri had to scramble to follow after her. The halls were filled with students, most of whom were taller than both of them. She went the wrong way at first and then doubled back the right way. At that point, the second bell rang and she nearly panicked that she lost her!

"Arya," Sheri called out. By some miracle, Arya materialized out of the thinning crowd. "Has your father talked at all about your mom and brothers coming down for a visit?" The whole sentence was wheezed out in a single breath.

"Come on." Arya dragged Sheri into the nearest bathroom as the hallways cleared of students. "Slow down - breathe - talk like a normal person"

"Sorry," Sheri took in a deep calming breath. "I wanted to talk to you earlier but Poor Torgo." Both of them nodded sadly. Though she was terribly sorry for Torgo's loss, she could not restrain her excitement. The whole spring break she and Bran could be together every day! "Bran and I have been trying to convince your mother to bring him down here for spring break."

"Excellent idea," Arya cheered up, "you are more conniving than even I knew."

"Thank you for your generous compliment," Sheri bobbed a little curtsey. "This is a chance for Bran
and me to be a real couple for once."

"You only have to ask." Arya assumed her usual furrowed brow of determination. "I'll talk to my
dad and get it set up for you two."

"Really?" Sheri blinked in surprise at Arya's direct tactic - she expected some elaborate plot. It was
just the littlest bit disappointing. "I thought you and he were still not talking?"

"That's getting old," Arya waved a hand in a dismissive gesture.

"I'm glad to hear it," Sheri beamed at her friend who just shrugged casually. "Call me after you get
an answer! Okay, now I have to get to class!"

"I don't," Arya smirked and Sheri raised a questioning brow. "Nothing, I'm kidding - get going!"

"Bye!" Sheri waved as she pushed out of the bathroom and scuttled through the halls to her class. Oh
my gods - one week, seven whole days, and every one spent with Bran! The only thing she had left
to wish for was the power to speed up time.

GENDRY

At the end of the day, he was walking through the hall but stopped in surprise when he spotted Arya.
She was waiting for him at his locker and perked up when she noticed him. Her hand lifted in an
awkward wave before she let it fall against her thigh. Gendry continued towards her, noticing her
growing hair was pulled into a stubby ponytail. A few strands had come loose out and fell into her
eyes.

"Hey," she moved out of his way and slung her bag over her shoulder.

"Hey," he unlocked his locker to get the book he needed before closing it. "What's up?" Gendry
made sure not to be 'overprotective' like she accused. So he didn't ask why she took off before the
DnD group left.

"So," she looked down and played with her fingers. "Today I'm going back to the clinic for a check-
up. Can you drive me?"

"Yeah, I'm off today." He actually wanted to ask her to do something earlier but then she
disappeared. That was usually their few stolen moments together and she totally ditched him. Gendry
really made an effort not to take it personally but it wore on him.

"I know," she bobbed her head while her eyes flitted around him.

"And you asked instead of telling me," he teased her. "I think I might cry from gratitude."

"I love you," she looked up at him: eyes gazing at him all wide and adorable. It's a good thing she
didn't look at him like that too often. If Gendry thought he was hopelessly devoted now: gods save
him.

"Now I know you're sick," he raised a hand to her forehead.

"Dumbass," she grabbed his hand and turned around. "let's go." Arya yanked on his arm with her
super strength, dragging him in toward the parking lot.

"You had me worried there for minute," he hurried to catch up. They fell in step together and her
grip on his hand loosened so they could link fingers. "I know you'll think it's stupid but I'm glad you
"It's not stupid," she slipped her other hand around his arm and held onto his sleeve. Why was she overloading him with the cuteness all of a sudden?! "After this let's go get some breakfast - I'm fucking starved! They served that taco shit at school today and I don't trust that 'meat-substance'." Her babbling about random bullshit was the most beautiful sound he ever heard. "I could get one of everything at the diner. I'll start with a platter of bacon with a hollandaise dipping sauce."

"Damn," his mouth started to water, "that sounds really good." Of course, he'd add a side of tater tots: carbs make the meal. They let go of each other's hands to around his car and get it in. All the while, she was still prattling on about the different food she wanted to eat. "You'll eat a hole right through my wallet."

"I'm an expensive date," she chuckled. "After that we can hit the cheap movies, they're showing 'Badlands'."

"Sounds like fun," he brought the Lincoln to life and pulled out onto the road. They talked about their plans until they came to an intersection.

"Red light kisses!" Arya removed her seatbelt to crawl across the seat and dove at him. He caught her, chuckling as her mouth covered his in a quick hungry kiss. A car beeped behind them and she screeched with laughter as she fell back into her seat. "Drive - go!"

"Seatbelt," he reminded her and she clicked it right away. The car behind them was really laying on it so Gendry eased onto the gas and crawled up to the limit. He couldn't help steeling looks at her happy expression.

"What?" She widened her eyes and jerked her chin forward. "Look at the road, not me."

"I missed you," he grinned.

"Me too," she sighed and relaxed back into her seat, putting her feet up on the dash. For the rest of the ride they shared what happened that day, just like they used to. She got quiet when they pulled up in front of the clinic but smiled at him when they parked. They walked hand-in-hand to the clinic and he rushed to open the door for her. She stuck her tongue out at him as she walked inside and he grinned as he followed.

They didn't talk much in the waiting room but neither did anyone else so it only felt a bit awkward. Finally, they called Arya's name and she followed the nurse behind the door. It was so bloody boring waiting that he wanted to gouge his eyes out. Gendry amused himself by studying the weird floor texture. After a while, two boots appeared on the ground where he was staring. He looked up to see her holding out her hand to him.

"How'd it go?" He stood up to take her hand and they walked together out of the clinic.

"Good," her cheeriness was forced but no one likes going to the doctor so he didn't worry. "I gained some weight and the doc says I'm on the mend. I still plan to go see my head shrink even though last time was a little... never mind."

"Tell me," Gary turned on her hand and in encouragement. "What can I do?" There had to be some way that he could help, it made him feel so helpless that he couldn't do anything.

"Practice sword fighting with me?" She peaked up at him and he gave her a questioning look. "I'm serious, my therapist told me to. He has this whole thing about visualization and it works for the most part. But it's kinda hard for me to do it all alone."
"Alright," he nodded his head and they separated to get into his car. "Let's head to the forge this weekend: I'll make us some wooden practice swords."

"Awesome" she slammed her door closed, "we can go right after school Friday." She pulled on her seatbelt without him having to tell her.

"Why exactly did he tell you to practice sword fighting?" Gendry started up the car and pulled out of the parking lot.

"Well, he doesn't really explain the stuff that he does but it works." Arya sounded suspicious of her own doctor but then she distrusted of everyone. "So I just try to recreate the techniques he teaches me to deal with... You helped me a lot, the diner too."

"How'd I help?" As far as Gendry could tell, he'd been barely hanging on this whole time.

"When I get stressed I feel sick so it's hard for me to eat," she explained. "So the doc told me to go inside my head to my happiest memory with food. When I tried it, I immediately thought of that first time we ate at the diner. I really liked you and I wanted you to like me back so bad." Arya usually gets what she wants.

"You confessed to being an heiress," he chuckled, remembering that day.

"And you forgave that glaring flaw," she tilted her head sideways to smile at him. "You're kinda perfect like that."

"Eating with me is really your happiest food memory?" Somehow that was the nicest thing anyone ever said to him. That was his happiest food memory too: she looked pretty in her little black dress.

"You're in all of my happiest memories." Arya leaned her head back so that the crown lay flat against the headrest. "Even the saddest ones are sorta happy because we came through them together." She eyed him sideways and then snapped her head down to glare at him. "What?! Stop with all the gazing and the loving stares - it's creepy!"

"Sorry," he snickered and returned his focus to where it should be.

"Stop grinning at nothing!" She wasn't even following her own orders: snorting with barely restrained laughter.

"Sorry," he coughed in attempt to hide his chuckling.

"Stop laughing," she burst into laughter and that got him going.

"Arry, I'm trying to drive," he wiped at the happy tears collecting in his eyes.

"You're the one..." She gasped between laughing and covered her mouth with both hands. "Okay - stopping right now!" They both got ahold of themselves, panting away the giggles. "Are we too weird?"

"I hope not, else other people must be bored shitless." He reached across the middle part of the front seat to take her hand. "I wouldn't change anything about us." Arya linked her fingers between his and turned to look out her window. They pulled up in front of the diner: the best place in town and never too crowded. When they got out of the car, the sky was turning darker and the sun was sinking lower.

"Come on," she grabbed his hand, "let's go stuff our faces." Arya led the way inside and they
proceeded to eat a proper feast of breakfast foods. Both of them left with rounder stomachs than they walked in with. From there they headed to the cheap theaters that showed classic films. They sat in the back and imitated the characters on the screen. It might've been the best night of his life. As they were walking back to the Lincoln, so he could drop her off, she hugged his arm again.

"It's funny," she sighed and leaned her head on his shoulder. "Sansa used to swear she was in love with some actor or singer and then cried when they got married. I never did anything like that, so I thought she was stupid. Sometimes I thought love didn't even exist."

"Gods, you were all sweetness," he tugged his arm free to wrap it around her shoulders.

"That's me - sugar and spice," she wrapped her arms around his waist. "I didn't believe in fairy tales or 'soul mates'. But so many girls and guys do, wishing they could find that 'one perfect match'. Because I found you - I realized it's all true. We're the lucky ones who found their match... that's the only way to explain it." When she started to pull away as they approached his car, Gendry tugged her back to him.

Arya's eyes flew up and he had to kiss her so he did, pressing his lips down over hers. She hummed and wrapped her arms around his neck, standing on her toes to lean against him. They broke apart and tilted their foreheads together. She looked up at him as he gazed down at her and they only saw each other. A slow smile curled her lips before she hid her face against his chest and hugged him tight. In the back of his head, he thought about her curfew but let himself hold onto her just a little longer.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Grey Worm, my throat was tight the whole time I wrote his POV, it was a challenge. But Sheri is just a little bubble of energy; all she wants is to see Bran. And then Gendry and Arya are coming back full circle. That's the cycle of life: grief and joy woven together so tight it makes a pattern both chaotic and beautiful. Wow I really need to go to bed, night-night!
The seconds ticked by as she sat across from doc H'ghar while he waited for her to speak. But she didn't know what to say - that the two men in her life were pulling her apart. Torgo's father passed away and all she could think about was her own dad. Arya had always been the black sheep in her family but her father was her rock. She never liked dresses, dolls, or shopping - the things 'normal' girls supposedly want.

Dad used to take her side and would tell mom to take it easy on the pesterling. It wasn't true when he told her mother that she would grow out of her 'wildness'. At least when she was growing up dad was on her side and supported her. That used to be something she counted on to make life bearable. Then Arya did something 'normal' girls do, fell in love, and he was disappointed. And her mother, as usual, didn't bother to get her side of things and only listened to dad.

Maybe it disappointed dad that she hadn't 'grown out of this rebellions stage'. Neither of her parents ever actually saw or accepted her true self. They loved her on the condition that someday she'd become the person they wanted her to be. The most frustrating part was they thought it was better for her to fake it to them to be true to herself. They didn't care what made her happy - summing up her personality as a 'phase'.

Gendry liked her the way she was, he didn't expect her to change. Even if she did change - he would still love her. It scared her how much she needed just one person to accept her faults and love her quirks. So no matter how disappointed her father was, she couldn't give up love like that. On the flip side, the endless pretense of acting happy exhausted her. Any time she slipped up Gendry would look at her all worried, like she was about to disappear.

Did he have to love her quite so much? What was so great about her when she only hurt him? For the longest time she could think she didn't understand girls and women. Turns out, men are more difficult to figure out by far. How could dad quit being on her side - just like that?! Was it her fault alone that they had grown apart? Though she didn't understand it, Gendry held onto her when she was drowning. But dad just... ignored her existence.

"You seem less energetic than our last session," the doc got sick of waiting. "Is something on your mind?" There was too much on her mind. All along, she fought tooth and nail to keep Gendry and their incredible romance. That made her parents and their stupid rules the enemy and she behaved accordingly. But she forgot one thing - she could lose her father. Dad used to be her favorite person in the world and lately she spent most of her time resenting him. What if all this stress she caused gave him a heart attack?!

"I never do anything for him," she murmured out loud. Arya realized her slip and straightened up in her seat. "For Gendry, I mean." It was easier to talk about her boyfriend than her dad... Who could die at any minute and be lost to her forever. Old people are so fragile!

"What's stopping you?" His voice pulled her out of the quicksand inside her mind. And the doc's question didn't make any sense, as usual.
"Huh?" She refocused on H'ghar, who stared at her intently.

"If you really want to 'do something' for him then why haven't you?" The doc was right, though she might not be able to do something for her father. A weight lifted off her shoulders as the logic poured in - shifting focus - complete. Dad was her parent and that's important, but she was going to be with Gendry for-ev-er. That's a super long time, in the long run keeping him happy was always going to top daddy issues.

"I can't think of any good ideas," because nothing would ever being good enough. Come on, the guy makes swords for Winterfest gifts - kinda hard to top that! But it occurred to her that she gave up trying to make him happy a while ago. It just stood to reason that Gendry was so devoted he didn't need to be 'courted' anymore. Not that she did very 'courting' in the beginning. They sort of went to being friends, to banging all the time, then she freaked out and... Oh fucking gods, why and how did he put up with her?! "I really don't know."

"Yes you do," he was like a calm and serious toddler.

"Fine," she relented, "I don't think anything I do will be good enough." Arya let the words pour out, as if she wasn't even thinking. When it came to sharing, there was a hard line she refused to cross. "Maybe I don't think I deserve him so I'm trying to sabotage us to save him from me." Really, the doc was the only one she could talk to about Gendry. Might as well take advantage of the circumstances. "Is it actually supposed to help, saying this out loud?"

"You are admitting it, not just saying it." As he spoke, the doc pinched his forefinger and thumb to punctuate his words. "If we recognize our weaknesses we can eliminate them." That all sounded like a bunch of new-age feel-good nonsense.

"You're more like a Guru than a shrink," she snorted a laugh and sank back into her chair. "Only you dress too well to be either," she meant it as an insult but he didn't take it that way.

"Thank you," he smoothed a hand over the lapel of his jacket. "A man has to have style." If he weren't so good-looking, she would cut his face.

"I see through it all, you know." Arya decided to cut through the bullshit. "You pal around with me and get me to admit my innermost secrets, claiming it is for my own good. But you're getting something out of this - everyone is out for themselves."

"I don't like all of my patients but I do my best to treat them," his bluntness surprised her. "If this clinic does well, we will receive government funds and private donations. I do have a financial interest in making you well. On a personal level, I like you Arya. I see that you are in pain and I want to help you. Is that so hard to believe? Is there anyone that you trust?"

"No one," she sat back and crossed her arms. If he thought his little show of honesty was going to win her over, he didn't have her figured out at all. Good, it would stay that way.

"Why can't you trust?" He pushed her - little mind nudges - in the most gentle way. So that she didn't even notice how close to the edge she was until she was peering over. "Don't tell me you don't know." A tiny part of her wondered what it would be like... To unleash every dark thought on this man and beg for help. She repressed that weakness and went for a pity play.

"Doc, please can we just work on meditation today?" She lowered her head and peeked up at him, trying to look as pitiful as possible. "My friend at school... his dad died."

"This death of your friend's father clearly bothers you," he ignored her request.
"Yeah," she kept up her sad act. "I mean Torgo is such a sweet person - it sucks he has to go through that."

"Were you close to this man who passed away?" He kept pressing in the direction of talking about fathers.

"He was my friend's dad," she stated the obvious. Arya didn't actually have to 'pretend', she felt sympathetic toward Torgo. The tragic situation could be used to her advantage so she might as well.

"Why can you express empathy for this friend but never for any of the people closest to you?" That might've been the longest question the doc ever asked. Arya sat in stunned silence for a moment before the anger kicked in.

"What are you talking about?!" She exploded with incredulity, throwing her hands out wide. "I just told you that I want to make Gendry happy! That I want to do something for him!"

"Why?" Why would he ask such a stupid question?

"Because I love him," she huffed with over exaggerated exasperation.

"Why?" That one repeated word put the brakes on her anger.

"Because..." She struggled to think of a reasonable answer. "I don't know - love-magic or some shit. Who can explain that?" Panic started to set in because she didn't know how to control this conversation. "Doc - can't we just meditate?! Please..." As humiliating as begging is, most people can't resist it.

"When did you last meditate and how did it go?" He finally relented and she felt every muscle in her body relax.

"I haven't since I heard about Torgo's dad," she admitted. "It went the same as always, I'm in the dark alone, and I can't stop running."

"Then close your eyes," his voice lowered and she obeyed. "Go to the darkness and run if you have to..."

"I'm running," she whispered.

"From who?" He asked the question so reasonably that she almost blurted out an answer. Sudden fear gripped her as she felt a presence - gaining. She stumbled through a pitch-black forest, panting as her muscles and lungs ached. If she could stop she would've long ago, long before she ever knew she was running. And running and running she goes, and where she stops, no one knows.

SANSA

Thank the gods Sandor had to work tonight; even she needed a break sometimes! From studying... not from him. She looked up from her book to smile at nothing, blushing from a sudden wicked thought. Sansa missed him every waking moment they were apart and even in her dreams. They could spend every second of every day together and she would never get tired of him. Alright, maybe he wasn't her favorite person when he was being grouchy. But his bad moods always passed quickly enough.

At least this free time gave her a chance to catch up on recreational reading. All this studying was starting to make her forget how much she loved to read. Overall, the experience had been surprisingly successful. She was getting a head start on her future college applications. And Sandor
studied so hard for the entrance exams, she could scarcely believe it! His dedication confirmed one-
thousand percent that he truly wanted to stay with her.

"I need some help." Arya came to her out of the blue, her grey eyes averted, and a sneer on her lips. 
"I need to make Gendry feel appreciated," she spoke as if bemoaning a hated chore. Sansa rolled her 
eyes as she closed her book.

"What are thinking of doing for him?" Sansa waited for an answer but her sister only shrugged. "Oh, 
I see..." That was a real shock... not. Poor Gendry either had a heart of gold or a fondness for 
emotional pain. "Well, I know it's not a fair comparison but I can tell you what I do for Sandor." 
Arya's face scrunched up in disappointment.

"He and Gendry couldn't be less alike," she heaved an ungrateful sigh and sat down. "Alright, tell 
me what you do."

"I pay special attention to my appearance-"

"Next!" Arya crossed her arms and let her head loll back to make a snarky face at the ceiling. 

"You shouldn't dismiss my advice without listening first." Sansa knew she sounded defensive but her 
patience with Arya's attitude was wearing thin. Either she wanted help or not!

"I think I get the basics - push up the boobs and show some leg." Arya smirked, suddenly arrogant. 
"But Gendry's not into that stuff, he's a romantic."

"No-no-no, listen to me." Sansa had to set her sister right, feeling partially responsible for her 
ignorance. It was the job of the big sister to teach younger sister about dressing up and romance. But 
she shamefully assumed that Arya wasn't interested in boys or finding romance. "That kind of 
'showing off' is used for attracting a boy, what you really want... Is to surprise him."

"How?" Arya narrowed her brows in confusion. "I mean, he's already seen me naked - what's left to 
be surprised about?" Her sister could be such a child sometimes, so at odds with their topic of 
discussion. But if a person bothered to look properly, her sister had many wonderful qualities. 
Clearly, Gendry openly admired Arya's unique self but everyone needs to feel appreciated.

"Clothes and makeup are like gift wrapping," Sansa explained patiently. "By putting in more effort, 
it lets the gift receiver know they are special."

"First," Arya held up one finger, "I never wrap gifts." One of Sansa's least favorite things about her 
sister. "Second, I'm starting to feel objectified and we haven't even started." Why was everything an 'issue' with Arya?

"Does Gendry objectify you?" Sansa watched her point sink in; at least her annoying sister was 
smart.

"No," she admitted grudgingly, "but I still think an actual gift would be better."

"This is a chance to thank him for being good to you." And Sansa was also showing her appreciation 
to Gendry. He was kind and devoted, exactly the type of person she would pick for her sister. There 
was no doubt in her mind that Arya's recent improvement was due to his effort. "If you go a bit out 
of your comfort zone, he will appreciate it even more. And don't try to tell me he doesn't care if you 
dress up, I've witnessed him seeing you dressed up."

"He always looks at me like that," she grumbled. Sometimes Arya had no appreciation for other 
people. Maybe that was Sansa's true all-time least-favorite thing about her sister.
"What does he like?" Sansa made an effort to keep the ball rolling but her sister fought her every step of the way.

"I don't know," Arya huffed.

"Come on," Sansa coaxed, "of course you know what he likes. What does he compliment and admire? If you tell me Gendry doesn't compliment you I am going to start hating him."

"He goes on about my eyes and he likes to stare into them sometimes." Arya tapped her heel against the bedframe and her eyes darted around. "It's kinda nice." The adorableness of her sister's romance was making her feel pure jubilation. Sansa was nearly on the verge of happy tears! It was just so precious that her tough 'don't-need-anybody' sister had someone she loved. The unconventional girl and the goofy boy, perfect for each other!

"Aww... that's so sweet!" Sansa got ahold of her runaway romantic feelings when Arya glared at her. "Alright, what else?"

"I don't know - this is stupid." Her sister asked for her help and then refused to cooperate. There was really only one option... Sansa picked up her phone off the side table and started dialing. "Who are you calling?"

"Hello," Gendry always answered her calls right away.

"Hi Gendry," she turned a beaming smile on her sister.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Arya's expression turned murderous and she jumped up off the bed, fists clenched.

"Hey Sansa," he spoke up over the din of the restaurant kitchen. "Hold on a sec, I gotta step outside. What's up: is Arya okay?" It was so sweet that he was worried about Arya when she was about to kill Sansa.

"Sorry to bother you when you're busy..." Sansa jumped up when her sister starting advancing towards her.

"Give me that phone" Arya hissed, grabbing for the phone. "Hand it over and I promise not to break it."

"Nothing to worry about," Sansa assured Gendry as she blocked Arya with her arm. "Everything is great here! I know it's a long-shot but I want to buy Arya something to wear as a gift." She hopped up to stand on the bed as her sister stalked around her, eyes fixated on the phone.

"I don't want to kill your generosity," he chuckled, "but that might be a waste of your time." It was so adorable how well he knew Arya, who was staring daggers at her.

"I know..." Sansa laughed causally, "I definitely know but I still want to try. What color do you think looks pretty on her?" Arya jumped up to grab the phone but Sansa held it just out of her sister's reach. Being freaky tall had its advantages!

"Grey always looks good on her," he answered, "but I like purple the most." Gendry was completely unaware of the conflict underway on her end of the line. Her sister suddenly rushed forward and Sansa hopped away just in time.

"Uh huh, I think so too." She brought the phone back down to her ear. "You helped me a lot, thanks so much Gendry. Bye!" Sansa was panting when she whirled around to face her sister.
"I will cut off your hair while you sleep if you - ever - do that again." Arya growled the threat menacingly.

"I would look really cute with short hair." Sansa aimed a smug smile at her sister, tossing her loose hair over her shoulder.

"Fine," Arya gave in with a whimper, "let's go - shopping." It should not have made Sansa happy to see her sister so defeated. "You can help dress me up, but NO makeup this time!"

"You are going to look so pretty." Sansa clapped her hands together in celebration of her victory. "We have to go shopping to give you a..." She stood up and grabbed her coat dramatically to pull it on. "Makeover," she sang, "mm-mm makeover!"

"Not too much over, just a little bit!" Arya was already protesting, so the battle was won but not the war. "Anyway," she shrugged on a jacket, keeping her eyes averted. "What color did he say?"

"Purple and grey," she smiled at her sister. "You were right about how much he likes your eyes. It's so cute! So-so," she sang "cu-tu-toot." Instead of complaining about Sansa's singing, her sister came to stand by her.

"Thanks for always being on my side about Gendry." Arya was suddenly bashful, ducking her head and playing with the ends of her hair. "I didn't expect it in the beginning but it's made all the difference." Arya was cutest when she was being sincere.

"I am always on the side of love," Sansa assured her. "I bet that's something you never thought to appreciate about me."

"Sorry I gave you such a hard time about the whole Joffrey thing." Arya continued to surprise her. "None of it was your fault - I was just taking out my frustration on you."

"I think you had a harder time than me," Sansa pulled her little sister in for a tight hug. "I'm sorry I didn't help you more." Arya patted her back awkwardly until they parted. "Okay, no more saying sorry, we have to go to the mall!"

"Now I'm really-really sorry," Arya grumbled. Sansa giggled as they gathered up their stuff to leave. Daddy was still at the office so she called a cab to pick them up. When they were on their way out her phone buzzed, signaling she received a text. She pulled out her phone and her heart melted. It was from Sandor, the world's sweetest honey-sugar-sweetie sweetheart.

'Miss you love,' he wrote. Practically poetry!

"Aw," she sighed, replacing her phone in her purse to lock the front door. "Sandor misses me."

"Didn't imagine him as the needy type," Arya snorted a laugh.

"I like that he needs me," Sansa gave her sister a pointed look. "And I like it that you need me too. Admit it; I'm the best big sister ever."

"I'll admit you're bigger than me and my sister - that's all you're getting." Arya could be the most stubborn person she knew, except for Sandor of course. It was a tie between the two of them, depending on the day.

"So selfish," Sansa tsked, "here I am... going out of my way." Together they walked towards the elevator.
"Aright already," Arya groaned and wrapped her hand around Sansa's waist. "You're an awesome big sister."

"It feels good to be recognized," she tossed an arm over Arya's shoulder. Everything was settling down and coming back to its right place. Her sister was back to her usual snarky sarcastic self. Sansa could not believe how much she missed that. She hoped to help patch up things between her sister and dad soon. Then they could live out the rest of the school year in familial peace.

Chapter End Notes

Familial peace is a lofty goal but the Starks are a tenacious bunch. I'm gearing up for spring break and I will be adding two new POVs. Guess who? I hope to work in some awesome family bonding chapters to soothe the wounds of Winterfest.
Cheating Dog

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cheating Dog

SANDOR

A call came in during his last period, summoning him to pay the principal a visit. None of his classmates pulled that 'ooh' bullshit with him. In no hurry, he meandered towards the administration building to run down class time. The receptionist showed him inside the principal's office - Varys was waiting with counselor Melisandre. Sandor took a seat across from the principal's desk and waited for one of them to start.

"Sandor," Varys gave him a polite smile - he should just get on with it. "The reason we asked you here today..." The principal opened a water bottle to take a few nervous swallows. Who had the fucking time for this shit?!

"Spit it out," he growled but then remembered who he was talking to. "Uh... sir." Varys gulped his water as his pudgy hands fumbled with screwing on the cap.

"There has been a sudden increase in your grades." The principal folded his hands on his desk and he looked Sandor in the eye. At least the man could do that much, more than most of his teachers. The lady in red over there never had a problem eyeing him sideways.

"Yes, it's quite remarkable." Counselor Melisandre sat on the corner of the principle's desk and crossed her arms. That woman wasn't afraid of anyone, hells - she scared the shit out of him. "Some would say 'impossible' for a grade point average to improve so much in a short time." It almost seemed like she was suggesting that he cheated to raise his grades.

"And of course," he snorted a laugh, "you straightaway think I couldn't do it on my own." No fucking respect in this place!

"We're not accusing you of anything," Varys denied Sandor's assumption.

"Yet," Melisandre narrowed her eyes at Sandor. What was the point of this whole bogus 'summons' - did they think he'd confess? As a rule, he wouldn't rather be in class but he'd been busting his ass lately!

"We only wanted to meet with you and talk this over," The principal gave the counselor a pointed look. Oh, they don't want to upset their star player before the fucking championships. Self-serving pieces of shit, even in spite the fact that he hadn't cheated.

"I can't be doing that well?" It'd only been a couple weeks since he started trying.

"It's a significant improvement," Varys looked pretty damn serious. Wow, what was this feeling? It was like he just scored a three-point shot. Was this why Sansa liked getting good grades? Huh.

"Unbelievable in fact," Melisandre scowled at Sandor.

"You know Sansa Stark?" Sandor ignored her and directed his question at the principal.
"She is a sophomore," Varys filled the counselor in, "daughter of Ned Stark." The woman's eyes widened as she recognized the name.

"Then you probably know she's a total nerd - straight A's and everything." Sandor got out of trouble due to his athletic skills all the time. This was the first time he used personal connections - it felt good. "She's been tutoring me - call her up as ask her yourself."

"You expect us to believe that a sophomore's tutoring improve your grades this much?" Counselor Melisandre had it out for him - pure and simple. It could be that she had a good reason to hate him. Plenty of kids likely went crying to her about something he did. Of course, those fucking rats never admit what they did to deserve his 'attention'.

"Sansa is smarter than half my teachers." Sandor grinned at the principal, laying it on thick. It didn't hurt any that she's way hotter than any of them. "She told me to ask in all my classes if I could get some extra credit and all of them said yes."

"Because you intimidated them," counselor Melisandre slapped her open palm against desk.

"How's it my fault people are intimidated by me?" Sandor resisted the urge to show her how intimidating he could be. "They assigned me the work and I turned it in for credit. That's something most students do so I don't see why I'm being singled out." Both of them stared at him like, 'who the fuck do you think you're fooling'. "Listen, I know I've been a pain in your ass these past few years and I'm not proud of that. But I'm done messing around, I just want to graduate and move on."

"I think that's exactly what everyone in this room wants." A relieved smile brightened the principal's tired face. The counselor wanted to protest but Varys cut her off before she could start. "That's all for now," he waved his hand at the door. "You can go back class." Fat fucking chance of that happening. He should've felt bad about their suspicions but felt too good about his grades. Sandor laughed at himself as he strolled down the hall towards the parking lot. When did he ever give a shit about his grade point average?!

The little bird went and made a nerd out of him without breaking a sweat. After school, they had another study session planned. He couldn't wait to see her face when he told her about his trip to the principal's office. It would be naive to expect anything he did would guarantee him a spot at Crownlands. Not studying, a bump in his grades, or even a decent score on the college entrance exams. But - for the first time - he had confidence about something other than basketball.

Sandor sat by the weirwood out front, listening to music while he waited for Sansa. After the bell rang, he noticed her tiptoeing up behind him so he let her 'surprise' him. She was in a good mood, as eager for their study date as him. On the way to the pet shop, he explained the whole dramatic story to her. His uncle decided to take the wife on a vacation to save their marriage. Uncle Vlador left him in charge of the place while he was gone. That made the back office available - the perfect location because it was free.

Sansa claimed not to mind the florescent lights and futon so he decided to believe her. There was no way he'd let arguing about money drive a wedge between them. He found a good place to park and they walked together to the store. It was a perfect day, the sun shining, and birds singing. He didn't think life could get better except that it was about to. Once inside, they ignored the yipping animals and headed straight to the back office. Sandor sat down in the desk chair, spinning to face her while she set down her bag.

"Varys pulled me into his office today," he put off this story long enough.

"What for?" Her blue eyes opened wide in the surprise - the little bird was just too much fun to tease.
Sandor scratched his jaw to drag out the moment while she moved to stand in front of him.

"He thinks I'm cheating because my grades have come up so much." Sandor grinned at her shocked expression.

"Oh no..." Sansa twisted her hands together. "Do you want me to go talk with him?" His fingers curled around her wrist to pull her down into his lap.

"Yes, little bird, I need you to save my ass." As it happens, that was the truth - the Stark name shielded him. Varys knew that Sandor was dating Sansa - the spider knew everything about his school. "Don't ruffle your feathers - I talked him straight." He wrapped his arms around her waist as she pouted. "Told him how you've been persuading me to study..."

"You didn't!" Her jaw hung slack before she slapped her palm against his chest.

"No, I didn't," he chuckled at her gullible nature. "Silly little nerd - teach me some math shit." Sandor gently pushed her off his lap and Sansa got into place to stand in front of him.

"Later," she put on her serious face. "I have a practice exam you have to promise to finish tonight."

"I promise," he would promise anything right about now.

"If a question asks you to identify the factor of a number, what should you do?" Her first question was an easy one.

"A factor of a number can divide that number." He watched with full attention as she reached behind her head to pull her hair loose. Sansa stood still, apparently still waiting for his complete answer. "And... always read the question first to make sure what it's really asking for." She beamed at him and kicked off her shoes before stepping back onto the futon.

"Very good," she praised, lifting her hand to the tied belt of her coat. "Is seven a factor of four hundred sixty-two?"

"Yes...?" Sandor was still trying to calculate the numbers in his head.

"You don't sound sure," she peered at him with suspicion.

"I'm sure," he confirmed his answer.

"That is... right," she untied the jacked and pulled it off to let it fall. "At the time of the test you can check your answers on your calculator. But use your time wisely, skip the hardest problems and solve the ones you know." Sansa raised her hand to the top button of her vest. "What is a radius?"

"The measurement from the center of a circle to the edge," he quoted his textbook. Well fuck, he was getting pretty good at this! Easy to pay attention when the sweet reward was immediate. She unbuttoned the vest to reveal her lace undershirt.

"Right again," her vest joined the jacket on the floor. He saw a sparkle of delight in her eyes and amusement in the curl of her smile. She might look innocent but Sansa liked being in control. Now he finally understood why people get hung up on their teacher. Nobody's teacher was ever as hot as the little bird.

"And what is the measurement called," she pointed to one side of her lacy bra cup. "From edge-to-edge?" Her finger drew an invisible line across to the other side, slow and deliberate. She was
enjoying watching him squirm as his hands tensed around his seat. Later, he would pay her back in full.

"That would be the diameter." His mouth started to water when she unzipped her flouncy skirt to let it fall around her feet. It took every bit of his patience to sit still and not touch but this process really worked for him. Sandor was pretty sure this motivation would work for anyone. They went back and forth with progressively harder questions, which he got right. Piece by piece her clothing fell away to reveal her flawless body. Finally, she was down to just a bra and panty set.

"Okay, are you ready for a hard one?" Her smile was so innocent but she knew exactly how 'hard' he was. Her creamy skin and red hair floating around her shoulders called to his fingers. "Describe the Pythagorean theorem." Sandor struggled to recall fuck-all while distracted by her - but this one he knew.

"When three squares are put together corner to corner - they form a right triangle." Sandor couldn't remember the technical description of the theorem but he knew the principle. "The one along the hypotenuse of equals the combined area of the two on the other sides." He held his breath and waited for her verdict if his answer made the cut.

"Well done," she arched forward and moved her hands behind her back to unhook her bra. She peeled away the thin fabric, pinching straps between her fingers before dropping it. "One more question and I'm all yours."

"Just ask it already," he growled impatiently and she chuckled at him.

"Describe the order of operations," she hooked a thumb in the waist of her panties.
"First solve everything inside parentheses," he gulped and fixed his focus on the question. "Then solve all multiplications and divisions from left to right. And last, solve additions and subtractions in order."

"You win," her cheeks were pink as she pushed her panties down over her hips. "See, isn't learning fun?" He jumped up and ripped off his clothes to get naked as fast as he could. Sansa looked on with amusement, muffling her giggles behind her hand. When he turned his attention on her, she smiled and opened her arms to him. Sandor moved towards her, his gaze locked her glittering excited eyes. A restless part of him threatened to take over and rush everything. This time, he planned to take his time - he deserved it.

He slipped his fingers into her hair, cradling the back of her head to tilt her face up. Her heavy lidded eyes gazed up at him with heated expectation. Sandor tightened his hold, molding her body to his before he bowed to kiss her. She slid her hands over his shoulders to lock them together behind his neck. Her soft breasts pushed against his chest, sending his heart racing even faster. His mouth trailed down to her throat as his arms wrapped tighter around her waist. Her pulse fluttered under his lips as her breath hitched.

"We still have to study later," she purred and arched her neck. "This is just a short break." She shivered as he brushed his lips against her neck.

"It's won't be that short," he growled against her neck. She exhaled a breathy chuckle and he raised his head to capture her lips again. Sansa began to tremble as he swiped his tongue along her lips and she opened to him. His tongue caressed and pushed against hers, building his already tormenting arousal. Sandor moved to kneel on the mattress, tugging her down onto him as he lay on his back. He pulled her up by the waist so she straddled him and she started to shift backwards. But he cupped behind her knees and yanked her forward.
"Oh," she let out a startled yelp and braced her hands on either side of his head. "What are you doing?" Ah, her breathlessness voice, his second favorite sound. There was only one thing she was still timid about. "But... I'm too heavy," she whispered the protest.

"You're light as a feather," he raised his knees to give her support. "Lean back and relax." She made a concerned sound but listened to him, leaning against his legs. Sansa still trusted him even though she felt shy, that's what made it even better. He coaxed one ankle over his shoulder and she moved the other, opening to him. "You're beautiful and every part of you is perfect," he assured her. Her thighs trembled under his hand as his fingers curled around them to pull her close.

Sandor stroked the silky skin of her thighs in attempt to ease the tension in her body. Her breaths puffed out in quick short pants and he glanced up to see her blushing. He tilted his head to the side to kiss one smooth thigh and paused to let her relax. His fingers brushed through her soft curls and her heavy breathing evened. He caressed the inner crease of her legs, moving gradually toward the center. She surrendered with a low whine, tilting her hips in a tempting invitation.

His heart pounded, rushing all the blood in his body to his stiff cock. Anticipation tensed his stomach muscles as his head angled to kiss her sensitive flesh. Her hips jumped at the first light touch of his mouth and he tightened his hold on her. Irresistible hunger overrode his control and he unleashed it all. Sansa gasped as his tongue explored her, stroking and plunging inside her. She reached back to grasp his thighs and pushed closer to his mouth.

He slid his hand up her ribs to cup her breast as her chest heaved with panted moans. His thumb brushed the peak of her breast and she cried out. Her body jerked between arching into his touch and pressing against his mouth. His fingers bit into his legs as her moans grew louder and longer. Loose strands of her hair caressed his throbbing erection and near drove him crazy. Her hips twisted faster so he gripped her thighs to keep pace with her fitful rocking.

"Sandor, I need you now." She pushed towards his mouth and his heart thundered inside his ribcage. "Please love," her body seized up as she panted a ragged cry, "I'm so close..." Sandor redoubled his efforts until she was singing in relief - his favorite sound. She melted against him but he couldn't let her rest, grabbing her and hauling her up. Even though she looked wiped out, her shaky hand guided his cock to her slick entrance. He gripped her hips as she sank down, enveloping him inside her.

She braced her hands on his chest as he arched against the futon to fill her completely. He thrust himself into her as she hummed with contentment, swaying back and forth. Sandor tugged her to fall against him and cupped her face to pull her lips to his. She opened her mouth against his and he pushed his tongue against hers. Sansa moaned into his mouth and bucked against him. A swell of pleasure gushed through him, causing his cock to throb within her.

"Oh my gods..." She clung to him, rocking unsteadily so he grasped her hips to control the pace. "Oh my gods!" His heart felt close to busting but he kept thrusting upwards at a steady rhythm. "Oh-my-gods-Sandor-I... Oh," she breathed a soft moan and then her voice burst into a high-pitched note. The building pressure released, flooding him with pleasure as his pumped deep inside her. They both trembled and held each other tight until the tremors subsided.

"Godsdamn..." His heart raced as he held her close, kissing her hair and neck. Her body went limp, still trembling as she whimpered. "Okay, little bird?"

"I love you," she wheezed and turned her head to rest on his shoulder.

"Gods I love you," his pounding heart was slowing to a normal pace. "So much, you don't even know." He kissed down her neck and her steady pulse thumped under her skin. He swept her hair aside, gazing down at her as her closed lashes fluttered open. When her glazed eyes peeked up at
him, he started grinning like a fool.

"What?" Sansa rose up on her forearms to look down on him. Her lazy satisfied smile was his favorite expression. Hells, all of her expressions and sounds and gestures were his favorite. "What's so funny?" Sandor eased her down to lay by his side, wrapping his arms around her. She snuggled closer, fitting herself against his body. "Tell me," she pleaded prettily.

"I wish I could go back and tell my younger self not to worry." He curled his fingers around her neck to tilt her face up and pressed a light kiss to her lips. "That I'll have the most beautiful girl in Westeros - and she loves being had by me."

"You would tell that to a young boy?" She gave him the reproachful look but could not hold it too long before smiling again.

"I worried a lot about it - if I'd be any good." He tucked her head under his chin and tightened his arms around her. "I thought that I'd have to be good, to make up for the face."

"I thought you were trying to make up for your quick temper and foul tongue." It seemed Sansa liked teasing him as much as he liked teasing her. "And the possessiveness, rudeness, arrogance."

"Alright," he growled, "I'm a fucking mess."

"And being too sweet," she pressed her soft lips to his collarbone, "gentle, caring... Very, very skilled at making love to me. My man is the most perfect for me in the entire world. I love everything about you, especially your dedication to hard work." Sansa started to wiggle out of his hold.

"Oh no," he held her even tighter. "Please little bird, I just wanna hold you a little more."

"Bah," she huffed, but stopped trying to get away. "Don't make me laugh! I know where cuddling goes with you, mister." She squirmed closer and nuzzled her face against his chest. "I won't be tricked..." Seemed like she did want to be tricked, sometimes it was hard to tell what Sansa wanted.

"I don't try to trick you," he coaxed. "You're just so soft and warm and pretty, and you smell good..." His hands were already wandering her curves - they had a mind of their own.

"What are you doing?" Her muffled voice was a mix of annoyance and amusement.

"Cuddling," and trying to start something again. Best let his hands do the persuading, it worked better than sweet-talking.

"Sir, you are a liar." She reached up to swat his hand cupping her breast.

"I'm not lying," he moved his hand to curl around her waist and behaved himself. They lay peaceful and quiet for a moment but neither of them was falling asleep.

"I know you think it's silly..." Sansa turned her bright blue eyes up at him and he recognized the pity right away. "I'm sorry if your feelings were hurt when they accused you." Strange enough, he didn't hate her sympathy - it felt good that she trusted him. "I'll always believe in you. That's the kinda thing people wish they could mean but never do. Not the little bird - she meant it with all her heart.

"Of course you should believe your man," his fingers sneaked back along her ribs. "I'm no liar." But his hands really didn't listen to him.

"Which is why," she hummed a reluctant sigh and pulled away. "We should study now like you promised."
"I promised?" Sandor did recall something like a promise to study - godsdammit. "Ugh, then there's no choice." He sat up, stretching his arms forward in the hopes of tempting her to stay in bed. "I'll just have to get dressed and hit the books."

"We could try a twist on our study game..." Her hands slid over his shoulders as she pressed her chest along his back. "For every right answer, this time you get to remove a piece of clothing. The fun part is... I'll be naked the whole time," her lips touched his neck and he could feel them smiling.

"I think I like it better that way," he twisted to snag her waist but she slipped out of his hold.

"Let's get you dressed!" Sansa hopped out of the bed like an eager kid on Winterfest morning to gather his clothes. Sandor watched her with a probably idiotic grin on his face that but he didn't care. They might actually pull this off, her enthusiasm was infectious. Maybe - just a tiny part of him - hoped he had a real shot at getting into Crownlands. It would prove to the little bird and to everyone that he was more than a jock. She had enough faith in him for the both of them and there was no way he could let her down.

Chapter End Notes

A thousand apologies about the super long wait for this chapter! My Dothraki translator is coming along but fails spectacularly with syntax so that's a real problem at this point in its development. Who the fuck am I thinking cares about any of this?

I keep pulling up this gif of Sansan eating and I get sucked in, waiting for the plot to develop, but it never does. Seems damned familiar... just can't put my finger on it.
It was a bit of a shock when his parents invited them for dinner. Father was livid when Sam told him he would marry a pregnant teenager. Well, mom did the inviting but claimed the whole thing was dad's idea. Part of him wanted to get out of this family meal, make some excuse. Endless lectures might await them and he wanted to protect Gilly from that. In the end, he decided to give his parents the benefit of the doubt. Maybe mom talked to father and calmed him down enough to talk things out.

After all, his father wasn't the type of man to make a scene in a public place. Sam and Gilly fuss for two hours with their outfits, trying to look perfect. She was so nervous that she put on two of the wrong shoes and almost walked out the door like that. He was hardly in better shape but at least he noticed before they got to the car. The drive to the restaurant was tense but her cheerfulness always lightened the atmosphere.

They all met outside the restaurant and exchanged curt greetings. Father didn't even acknowledge Gilly but mom gave her a hug and said she looked pretty. Conversation was scarce, only kept up by mom and Gilly until they were seated. He was too nervous to say a word and didn't like the cold way father stared at him. The server came to take their drink orders, saving Sam from his father's scrutiny.

"I'm so glad we could get together tonight," mom smiled around the table. Father nodded, it was a serious nod, but an agreement nonetheless.

"Me too, mom." Sam felt a little guilty about being so anxious about this dinner. His parents just wanted to show their support and get to know Gilly. Father's coldness was nothing new... he always looked at Sam like that.

"Your mother tells me she has been sending you money," dad stared at him hard. Oh bloody hells... gods take him now.

"She has been helping us get started." Sam kept his voice even and low, showing the deference his father liked. Gilly took his hand under the table and squeezed his fingers.

"I want to offer you a position at the company, including a sign-on bonus." Father appeared reluctant to make this offer but it was one Sam never expected. "You and your... wife will move into our home. We can provide childcare if she wishes to continue her education."

"I don't know what to say-"

"If," father produced a folded paper from his inside jacket pocket. He slid it across the table then clicked a pen and set it down on the paper. "You both must sign this."

"What is it?" Sam's eyes were still fixed on the paper.
"A contract," he stated the obvious with a stiff jaw. "Stipulating you will allow your child's paternity to be tested when it is born."

"Does that mean what I think it means?" Gilly turned to him, wide-eyed and looking to him for answers. His father was humiliating them both and Sam wasn't protecting her!

"Dad, I can't..." Sam stumbled over his protest, staring down at the offending paper. "This is..."

"What should I do, Sam?" She whispered a little too loud, it was cute she had little nervous habits like that. His father scoffed, mocking her innocence and fear.

"Hold on," dad wasn't laughing anymore. "You don't know do you?" He jumped up and tore out his wallet to throw a wad of cash on the table. "You fucking idiot," he glared at Sam. "Never show yourself to me again." He turned his hostile scowl to mom. "If you ever send him money again, I will cut you off as well."

"No!" Sam found his voice and stood up. "It's me who doesn't want to see you again," he glared at the man who belittled him his whole life. "Who needs a father like you? I'd rather you not be around my child anyway." His father sneered at him and Gilly one last time, looking like he wanted to say more. Father was never one to create a scene, straightening his jacket before storming away. "Mom," he caught her arm, "you don't have to go with him."

"I love you, Sam." Mom held his face and kissed his cheek, all the while wearing her fake smile. "I am so proud of you."

"Mom," he tried to stop her but she followed dad as usual. "I'm sorry, Gilly." Sam took her hand when she came to stand beside him. They walked with their heads down out of the restaurant.

"They offered us a lot," she murmured. "I should've signed it... still could really be your baby." Sam held her hand tight and used his anger to renew his determination.

"It is my baby," he reluctantly let her go so they could walk around the car to get in. He sat in the driver seat and waited for her to get buckled up before putting in the keys. "You're my wife and I won't let anyone hurt you anymore."

"I'm not hurt," she put her hand on his arm to get his attention and smiled to reassure him. In a way, it made him feel worse because he should be the one reassuring her. But in truth it hurt, he hoped tonight to start a real relationship with his father. "I understand why your dad is like that. If you were my son, I wouldn't want someone like me for you. And he's still not half as bad as my dad."

"I'm sorry, Gilly." What else could he say? Sam pulled out of the parking spot to head home, where they should've stayed all night.

"When we get home," her cheerfulness wasn't daunted one bit. Gilly had to be the strongest person need ever known. "I'll make the cookies you like."

"And I'll rub your feet while we watch TV," the tension in his body started relax.

"And I'll feed you cookies," she proposed, "because your hands will be busy." It's amazing that he and Gilly never got the chance to date before getting married. And yet, they loved all the same things and got along really well. Anything they differed on usually ended up a good thing. Like he was book-smart, but she had life skills.

"We should've just stayed in tonight," he sighed.
"Going out isn't all that great," she agreed. "The stuff on that menu was too confusing to me anyway." Gilly laughed in her bright tingling way that always made him smile. "Why would anyone want to eat snails?"

"I'd much rather have cookies," he could already taste them melting in his mouth.

"It's funny," she patted her stomach, "little Sam wants some too."

"Takes after me," he chuckled but then his mood sobered. He put off confessing for too long about the job offer for pipeline work in the north. It would mean being gone for several months, maybe even after the baby was born. After that disastrous meeting with his parents, tonight seemed like the right time. Leaving her was the last thing in the world he wanted and might be the one thing he needed to do.

Gilly

They were watching a fun show, though the fast subtitles made it a bit hard to understand. Sam explained what was going on in the story and said her questions made it more fun to watch. Sometimes she felt stupid around Sam because he's so smart but that's all right. He says that they're both smart in different ways so they make each other stronger. Gilly loved it when he said things like that.

"Gilly..." Sam tapped her like to get her attention away from the TV.

"Another?" She shook her head in denial. "You've already had too many," she didn't want him getting a tummy ache. It was bad enough they ordered pizza for dinner but that was totally Sam's dad's fault.

"Not that," he sighed like he always did when he had something serious to say. Sam clicked off the TV and turned to face her. "If we have to pay for the birth out of pocket... it's too much. I got a job offer the other day. The pay is really good and there are benefits, like health insurance."

"This is a good thing, right?" Gilly couldn't tell because it sounded good but his tone was unhappy. At times, she wished Sam had subtitles!

"The catch is," he glanced down to their linked hands. "I have to go away." What... 'away'? NO!


"The job is in the north," he explained, "surveying pipelines." That doesn't explain anything!

"What does that mean?" Her head was spinning around, tangled up in a sheet of fear.

"That doesn't matter," he held her hands again. "The point is I would be gone for several months. I can send most of the money back to you. You can go to the doctor and get lots of checkups to make sure the baby is healthy."

"But you won't be here..." Gilly didn't know how he could even suggest such a thing! "That's not worth it," she whimpered.

"I'm telling you, Gilly." Sam used his serious voice and she knew it was already over. "It is worth it," he insisted. "This way, I can take care of you and little Sam. I don't have to go right now."

"You're going!" Gilly jumped up and pointed a finger down at him. "No matter what I say, you plan to go anyway!" When he didn't deny it, she whirled around away from him. "I don't wanna be
alone," she hugged herself and struggled not to cry. Why... was he doing this? How long did he keep this from her?! Did he really think she was so stupid that he had to make all the decisions?

"Give me a chance to convince you," he came behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. "Let's think about it at least, okay? Don't you trust me?"

"How can you take care of us if you're gone?" Gilly refused to turn around because she knew that look he'd give her. Those sad pleading eyes would drag any answer he wanted out of her. It wasn't fair! This is why fairy tales never go past the hero rescuing the damsel. Because she feels undying gratitude on top of love, more than he could ever love her back. She needed him more than he needed her and that's why he always gets his way.

"I don't want to leave," his arms wrapped around hers, "you're my only family." Sam rested his forehead against her shoulder. "I love you so much that I can be strong enough to leave. Can you understand?"

"I understand," but she didn't really. How could he leave her? Didn't matter that she hated it and didn't matter how she felt. Sam was leaving and she would be left all alone just like before they married. Who would protect her while he's gone?

MARGAERY

That had to be the shittiest date of all dates ever in the history of dates. That asshole was so nauseating and arrogant! For him, nothing on the menu was good enough. And everything the wait staff did displeased him - he was insanely rude to them. It was almost too much for her to not reach across the table and slap him across his stupid face. Before the entrees were served, she had to get out of there. Only after making her great escape did she realize something categorically awful.

The clutch that matched her outfit did not contain any money or credit cards. How does that even happen?! This was the universe's way of telling her she should not always expect the guy to pay. As a result, she could not call a cab or else she would have to have someone in her family pay for her ride. If she was going to do that she might as well call the family driver. There was no way she was calling home to reveal her failure.

She was lost without a soul to call for help. Her feet hurt from wandering down the dark street in high heels. And a creepy guy eye-fucked her when she walked past a seedy bar with black windows. The situation was starting to make her feel just the tiniest bit desperate. So she decided to do something insane - call the one person she should never talk to again. Before her mind changed, she stopped in front a busy pub to make a call.

"Margaery?" By some miracle of the gods, Gendry answered. And apparently hadn't deleted her number! That was something she intended to never think about or try to psychoanalyze.

"Thanks for answering," she hoped her breathlessness did not diminish her unending gratitude. "I know I don't have any right to ask you this but can you pick me up?" There was a slight pause on his side and Marge held her breath for his answer.

"Where are you?" He was more virtuous and kind than a person had the right to be. It still pierced her heart that she could not make Gendry hers. She looked up at the lit carved wooden sign hanging above the pub.

"Do you know where The King's Tavern is?" Marge had no idea how to give directions to where she was because she had no clue where she was.
"I'll be there soon," he granted her request, "wait for me out front." True to his word, Gendry showed up after just a short wait. Marge jogged to his car, opened the door, and flung herself inside. It was freezing outside and she was barely wearing anything at all!

"I can't thank you enough for this," she wrapped her cape tighter. "There was no one else to call. The sad truth is my grandmother set up my date and if I call for our driver, she will know I ditched him. Dany and Missa both have boyfriends and therefore lives. I shouldn't be jealous when poor Toto lost his father. I'm a horrible person - I don't even feel guilty for leaving my date..." She eyed him sideways, aware of her nervous rambling. "You realize you haven't said a single word yet."

"You haven't stopped talking," he pointed out with a sideways smile. "You wanna let me know where I should take you?" Gods, he was really-really cute and so unavailable. Marge distracted herself by texting her address to him. "Got it," he studied his phone for a moment before shoving into his pocket. Gendry put his car into drive and pulling away from the tavern. "So, why'd you ditch him?"

"He was rude and conceited - everything you're not." Marge knew she was pouting but felt entitled. This has been the worst night and she really needed a good night. Even her knight in shining armor belongs to someone else. "I hope you know you've ruined me, before I never cared if a guy was self-important. Now I can't stand it!"

"Well, it is hard for other guys to live up me." At least Gendry had a good sense of humor about it - wait... that made it worse. "I'm pretty great or so I've been told."

"You would have made a wonderful friend," she spoke her thoughts out loud. "And I messed that up." It might be one of her ultimate lifetime regrets - just under ever being with Joff.

"That's not true," he protested kindly. "I'd say we're friends: that's what you call people who come pick you up in front of pubs."

"Why are being so nice to me?" The matter how she thought about it, she couldn't understand him. Nobody is that nice! "Don't you realize that you should've left me shivering in the cold? Arya would've enjoyed that."

"She's not..." Gendry started to argue but trailed off to laugh. "Okay, you got her pinned down pretty good." He grimaced and rubbed a hand against the back of his neck. "It might be for the best if she doesn't know I did this for you."

"So I'm thinking you exaggerated about your totally honest relationship." Marge regretted the gibe the instant it passed through her lips. "Sorry for spilling about the kiss," she hurried to humble herself. "And for kissing you - sorry about that again. The way you talked at the forge I assumed you told her right away. It seemed prudent to beg for forgiveness instead of waiting for her revenge." 

"I try to be honest with Arya, but timing is important." Gendry certainly didn't have to explain anything but it seemed he needed to talk. "We've been going through some stuff lately: there was no good time for me to tell her." His expression lightened as he peeked at her. "You actually helped us: sorry if that's harsh to say."

"Not at all," she in fact felt relieved. "I hope you're not just saying that to make me feel better. That would make me feel worse."

"I'm serious," he assured her. "Arya was slipping away from me and the more I held onto her: it seemed to make it worse." His voice was strained with emotion. "So I tried to give her space but then that didn't work either." That girl was pure trouble and Gendry was a fool - as is anyone in love.
"You kinda shook things up and then everything fell back into place."

"Now you're bragging," she teased him - sounding more lighthearted than she felt. As Joff's girl, she learned well how to fake a smile. Marge sighed as the pure pitifulness of her existence seemed unavoidable. "I guess I would brag too if I found real love. Go ahead, brag away."

"I would," he chuckled, "but we're here." Marge looked up to see he was right and mourned their short time together. Gendry pulled his boat-like car into her driveway and parked in front of the gate. "Wait a minute," he pushed open his door and ran around the front to yank open her door.

"Thanks," she accepted his outstretched hand to stand up.

"You'll find someone to love," he gave her an encouraging smile as he dropped her hand. "Next year you'll go off to college and meet new people. Or forget dating and just throw your focus into your designs. Working at the forge takes everything off my mind when I'm feeling weighed down." The urge to kiss him was welling up inside her again.

"I just have to say this and you just have to listen!" Margaery clutched her clutch close to her chest to keep her hands to herself. "You're gorgeous, talented, funny, and sweet - everything I wish I could have. I know you're unshakably in love with Arya but that's beside the point. My point is..." She looked up to see him watching her intently. "Someday I hope we can look back on my silly mistake and laugh about it as real friends."

"I look forward to it," he nodded once, giving her one last kind smile. It represented everything she was missing out on. His acceptance of her request for friendship did ease the ache a bit. "Goodnight Marge."

"Goodnight Gendry," she gave him one last smile. He closed her door and walked back to the driver's side. He pulled away without watching her go inside, which strangely reminded her of Joffrey. Marge watched until the taillights of his car disappeared. "And goodbye..." Once and for all Margaery let go of her lingering feelings for Gendry. It hurt but not as much as real heartbreak - at least she could still feel any heartache at all.

Some people turn bitter and cold, thinking there was no hope for love in the world for them. But Gendry was right - she was moving on soon and somewhere out there was someone for her. They say good things come to those who wait, but she was never a patient person. The first step was to forget her evil first love and the perfect-but-taken rebound. Some artists would kill for this angst to inspire their work and she wouldn't let it go to waste.

Chapter End Notes

No specific character popped into my head for Marge's date but it leaves me the tiniest bit unsatisfied. But overall, I think this was a good one. I like to sprinkle in the Silly chapters but they always seem to stand out. Next up: Gendry gets the POV. He and Arya are practicing sword fighting! My favorite activity for them to do together.
Wooden Swords

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wooden Swords

GENDRY

They stayed at the forge Friday but nothing else happened as he planned. His first idea was to make them a pair of wooden practice swords, so it would be less dangerous. That was going all well and good, carving the wood and doing a fine job of it. She just wouldn't leave him alone! Arya hadn't been on him this much since that week both of their parentals went out of town. Every time he turned around, she was there with that wicked smirk on her face.

All Saturday they didn't leave the tent: it's shocking what the body is capable of. Thank the gods he brought some granola bars or they would've starved. He wasn't complaining any, but neither of them got anything done for two days. When he woke up Sunday morning, Gendry put his foot down. They came to the forge to follow her odd doctor's even more bizarro suggestion. By some miracle, she didn't argue so he worked on the swords while she cleared a space.

"Alright," he handed her a finished weapon, sanded to perfection. "How's this done?"

"Well," she tested the balance of the sword with her left hand. "The doc wants me to face the evil presence chasing me in my mind." His expression probably didn't hide his misgiving but he couldn't help it. "Don't try to understand it, I barely get it. So maybe, I'm supposed to practice with imaginary enemies." Arya gave him a hesitant questioning look but he just shrugged. "Okay, give me an enemy to defeat." She rocked back into a fighting stance, holding her weapon in front of her.

"Shouldn't you imagine it?" Gendry didn't see a real point to any of this, but then again he was no doctor. Arya frowned at him and did the whole pleading-with-her-eyes thing. "Cthulhu," he said the first creature that came to mind. Her sword fell down by her side as she stared at him with dumbfounded annoyance.

"Can we start with something a little easier?" Arya lifted her sword again, her face a mask of determination.

"How about a goblin?" Gendry started to get into it, kind of like playing DnD. "Armed with a rusty dirk, he really likes the look of your boots and wants them for himself." As he described the enemy, it almost appeared in front of her. "He jabs at your left side."

"I dart to the right," she narrated her movements. "And slice his throat with the pointy end of my sword." She slashed clean through the goblin's neck and then turned to him. "How'd it look?"

"Like a goblin getting killed," he grinned at her. "It's pretty hot."

"Focus," she scolded and raised her sword again. "Give me another - harder this time."

"A giant bat swoops down overhead," he pointed up, trailing his finger towards her. Arya dropped and rolled, thrusting her sword up. "Not bad, but you got guts all over you now."

"Not a problem," she grinned at him as she stood up, wiping imaginary blood on her pants.
"Behind you!" He put a dramatic edge on it, starting to have fun with it. "A lion-lizard is coming right for you." Arya whirled around with her weapon brandished in front of her, ready for anything. "The beast's hide is too thick for your little sword to piece. Its huge jaws are chomping at your face!" She darted out of the way in time, rounding on the invisible creature.

"Does it have any weaknesses?!" She ran in a circle around the beast, her eyes darting up to him.

"A soft spot," he shouted, "under the neck!" Seemed reasonable to assume since most creatures have fleshy throats. "And they can't see well when their target stands still," he remembered from biology. "It's charging again..." She moved deliberately to stand in front of the tree and swayed back-and-forth. "It's almost an arm's length away!" She quickly jumped and rolled out of the way. "And it crashed into the tree!" Her sword thrust under the invisible creature's throat. "You've pierced its brains, well done."

"I don't know," she panted as she rose to her feet, "if this game will make me better with this thing." She grinned and swung the sword in a wide arc. "But it's fun."

"Fight me so you can have a real challenge." He stepped forward, holding his sword in front of him. Arya raised a dubious eyebrow and smirked at him.

"That imaginary lizard-lion would've eaten you alive." She stepped back into her fighting stance and pointed her sword at him. "Of course, I'd save you first."

"My hero," he put up his guard and tried to copy her pose, planting his feet wide apart. Her smirk grew to a wide grin as she shook her head. He clutched the sword with both hands and ignored her judgmental snicker. Arya crooked her little finger, inviting him to attack first and flaunting her confidence. Gendry took the invitation, dashing forward to swing at her left side. Her blade twisted around his weapon and knocked it out of his grip.

She twirled towards him, still attacking, to whip his right arm. It might be wood but it still hurt like all bloody hells. He hissed in pain, stepping back to avoid her second hit, which seemed half-hearted. Gendry didn't care if she wanted to go easy on him, he ran to grab his fallen weapon from the dirt. Arya waited for him to get into place with an arrogant show of patience. When he faced her again and she swiveled her wrist to flourish her sword with a graceful ease.

This time, he attacked right and she dove under the arc of his swing. Arya skipped out of the way with effortless grace time and again. A few times, he got in some good hits and it started tripping her up. Every time he did better, it chipped at her confidence and she slipped up more. She whirled to face him, lunging headfirst to jab her sword towards him. It poked him in the ribs but he still held his sword firmly. Gendry slashed down and hit her leg above the ankle. Her weapon dropped to her side in surrender, panting and scowling with disappointment.

"I can't focus!" Arya dropped her practice sword onto the ground. It was hard to feel bad for her when she thought he'd be so easy to beat. "I'm just not getting anything out of this - except for a sore arm." She rubbed her right shoulder and stared glumly down at her discarded weapon. "Maybe I have to do this alone."

"Maybe you're trying too hard," he set his sword down by hers.

"Or not hard enough," she sulked as she walked up behind him.

"Maybe you're being too serious." Gendry turned around and pushed her into the pile leaves she cleared up earlier. "That ought to help."
"Hey!" She sat up, pulling leaves out of her hair before smiling up at him. "I think that did help," she reached for him to help her up. "Maybe you should join me!" Arya jerked on his helping hand to send him tumbling down on the ground beside her. As expected she didn't stop there, holding onto his jacket and climbing over him.

"Oomph!" Gendry winced as she knocked the wind out of him and started throwing leaves in his face. "Arry, I give!" He sputtered, struggling to keep the leaves out of his eyes and mouth. "You win!" Arya stopped her attack and sat up to smile down at him. She wiped his lips clean and bowed her head to kiss him: soft and warm. He pushed off the ground to sit up, curling his arms around her waist and kissed her again.

"What are you not telling me?" Her dark brow arched as she narrowed her eyes. "Don't bother denying it - I know you're hiding something." How did she guess?! Oh, wait: there was something else to confess.

"I won a raffle at work," he admitted. "Four tickets to the Ye Olde Theme Parke. I thought we could ask your sister and Sandor to go with. I would take Sheri but she'd end up a third wheel and Hot Pie would be up our asses."

"You've thought about this," she wore a mocking smile on her lips.

"I think about things," he defended himself. "So, waddaya thinking?"

"I'm thinking," she tilted her head forward and looked at him through her lashes. "You're so fucking hot that I want to bang your brains out."

"You seductress," he chuckled, "how could I resist?"

"You can't," she raised an arrogant eyebrow.

"You really think you could take me, don't you?" Gendry shook his head at that ridiculous notion. Arry might be a little ball of fire but she was still much littler than him. If their practice had gone on a bit longer, he would've worn her down. Maybe it was harsh but Arya sometimes thought she was invincible. If anyone had the patience to set her straight, that would be him.

"I've done it many times," she dipped her head to nip up his neck. "Have you forgotten?"

"I might need a reminder," his throat tightened as her tongue darted out to lick her bites. "I have to admit if we were forced to fight to the death, you'd win."

"Of course I would win," she leaned back to peer questioningly at him.

"But only because I would want you to win," he tapped her on the nose, causing her to blink. "So you could live."

"Hold on, back the fuck up." She crossed her arms and scowled at him, taking this way too seriously. "You would 'let' me kill you? I could've killed you nine times since we've been having this stupid conversation."

"Oh yeah?" He was up for the challenge, Arry's lesson about picking fights wasn't near over.

"Yeah," she poked his chest. "First to give in gets to choose who we bring with us to the theme park."

"You have to promise not to get mad when I win," he grinned.
"As long as you don't sulk when I win," she sneered.

"Agreed," as soon as he spoke the word she spun away, locking her fingers around his arm. Before she could pin it behind his back, he grabbed her shoulder with his free hand. They wrestled for control but neither could keep a hold on the other. Same as in practice, she was slippery as an eel, slithering out of his grasp. Gendry almost had her but she retaliated by reaching behind him to yank a handful of hair. The pain distracted him long enough for her to turn them over, kneeling on him. It seemed inevitable this was getting him hot but he stuffed it down for the sake of winning.

He stretched to grab the scruff of her jacket and tossed her off of his chest. Without letting go, he yoked his other arm around her neck. Her hands flew to his forearm, trying to break his grip but he was able to grasp both small wrists. No matter how she struggled, he trapped her in his hold and squeezed her legs between his. In that position, it was obvious that his cock was hard as a rock. It poked her backside like a white flag of surrender: no way would he give in now that he'd won.

"Gendry," she dug her fingers into his forearms and his pulse raced. "Let me go so we can fuck already."

"You're just trying to win." He grasped her wrists tighter and ignored his straining erection: too bad, she didn't.

"I want us both to win," she made a frustrated sound and rubbed back against him. He kept a tight hold on her wrists, slipping his other arm free to trap her twisting hips. "Oh gods, Gendry - what are you waiting for?"

"Tell me that I win," the words gritted through his teeth as she wriggled in his hold.

"Go to the seven hells!" Her whiny tone meant she was as affected as him. He had the upper hand: which he shoved up her shirt to cup her warm breast. The physical exertion heated Arya's skin and her chest heaved with heavy breath. She squirmed but it didn't seem like she really wanted to get away. "Oh hells, come on Gendry!"

"Tell me that you give up," he rolled the stiff peak between his finger and she trembled. "And then I'll do whatever you want." Arya struggled but he locked his arms around her before she could slip away.

"Gendry," she whimpered, "please, you have to-"

"Arry," he gasped for breath as she rubbed back against him. If he loosened his grip even a tiny bit she would be free and he'd lose. Not today, not these tickets, he won them and they were his to use for whatever he wanted! "Say I win-"

"I need you," she begged, "now!"

"Say the words: 'you win'." Bloody hells, he couldn't believe she held out this long. "You know you want to just say it."

"Never," she moaned, "even though I want you more than I want to win - I never give in." What a time for her to be standing on principle! She squirmed in his hold and his resistance faltered. May all the gods damn her unmatched stubbornness and relentless need for to win!

"Arya," he heaved a sigh as he loosened his grip, "I can't win against you: I give." Gendry released her wrists and relaxed his legs. She didn't even waste a moment to gloat before rising up onto her knees. Her hands moved at a frantic pace, ripping the zipper down as it creaked in protest. He got busy tugging fabric out of the way, removing just what was necessary.
"Hurry, hurry," she repeated the muttered word until he tugged her back to him. He dropped backwards to sit on the soles of her shoes and she followed. Arya teetered a bit, reaching behind her to get a firm grasp on his erection. His arm circled her ribs to steady her as she angled him to match her position. As the tip rubbed along her slick entrance, it throbbed with tormented arousal. It seemed their tussle got her as fired up. She sank down to envelop his hardness, causing his breath to turn ragged.

He lowered his hold to her hips and pulled her back flush against his chest. Gendry buried his face into the crook of her neck, kissing her throat as she hummed low. She laid her head on his shoulder, reaching behind him to shove her fingers into his hair. Her other hand seized his jeans bunched at his thighs, pulling herself down. He rose onto his knees, bringing her up with him and the new angle drew a loud whine from her.

Darkness seeped into his vision because this position was squeezing his cock so tight. She whined, scratched, and writhed impatiently while he got ahold of his senses. The adrenaline from their earlier struggle still lingered and her squirming revived it. When he withdrew, moisture followed and smoothed the next thrust into her impossible tightness. Arya rolled her hips to match his upward thrusting but she couldn't move much at all.

This position, with his body surrounding hers, gave him full control: a rare thing. He shoved both hands under her shirt to explore the return of her soft curves. Her moans grew louder and she tilted her hips to take him deeper, swaying to meet his thrusts. His heartbeat thundered in his chest and he urged her to match his steady driving into her. She twisted to get closer to him as he held rocking hips tighter and pumped himself into her.

Blood rushed in his veins as he drove into her, going deaf from her piercing cries. She bucked and howled an earsplitting scream as her short fingernails clawed his neck. Her whole body shook as she released, squeezing his release out of him. His limbs seized, crushing her to him as a powerful surge of pleasure racked his body. In this moment, he believed in the gods and fate without a doubt. Something like this couldn't be 'everyday' or 'ordinary': it was destiny.

Arya was his and he was hers in this heaven only they know, only lasts a moment, and never the same twice. His thundering heart slowed as they both leaned against each other for support. After a while of them panting to catch their breaths, she blew out a deep breath. On shaky knees, they pulled up their pants up before collapsing next to each other. Her hand slid over the scattered crumbling leaves to grasp his, linking their fingers.

"It's starting to freak me out," she laughed breathlessly. "You're getting abnormally good at that." About bloody time she noticed his efforts! Arya was damn hard to please, in and out of bed: and forest, and wherever else she wanted.

"I think it's a combination of natural talent and hard work," he turned his head to grin at her.

"It's working - whatever it is," she suddenly popped up and braced an arm over him. "Just so you know - if we fought to the death this is how I'd kill you, when you're worn out."

"But by then," he pushed her tussled hair out of her face, "you'd forget why you wanted to kill me."

"True," she agreed but then her expression turned serious. "I'll never hurt you, Gendry - you to know that." Her small quiet voice pierced him with guilt. He still hadn't told her about giving Marge a ride. After that pitiful call, he snuck out of the tent late last night while Arya slept.

"Milady," he pulled her down by his side and wrapped his arms around her. "You kill and revive me at least once a day since we met and I wouldn't have it any other way."
"I have to admit - you definitely won." Her messy hair tickled his face as she nuzzled her head under his chin. "Let's bring my stupid sister and her hulking beast."

"We'll have a good time," he promised: they needed more of those. This weekend had been too good to spoil by telling her something she didn't want to hear. Deep down, Arya would understand he did the right thing helping Marge. Maybe in a relationship, people can't be completely honest with each other. A few white lies might just see them through the long haul. Someday, in a few years to come, he'll admit everything and they'll share a laugh over it.

"It's so peaceful here," she turned to look up into the tree branches overhead. "I should come meditate at the forge sometime, get in touch with nature and shit."

"How does it work?" All he knew about meditation was what he'd seen in the movies and none of that was consistent.

"Do you wanna learn?" She peeked up at him and he could tell she wanted him to say yes.

"Sure," he agreed hesitantly. "But don't hypnotize me to do anything stupid."

"I'll do my best," she sat up to face him and he followed suit. "Clear your mind and let yourself listen to what the universe tells you."

"This is what you do in therapy?" It seemed too 'mystical' for Arya: under the rebellious attitude, she was a realist.

"Shut up and focus," she snapped at him before closing her eyes.

"I can't stop thinking," he sighed, "I'm always thinking about you." Her eyes popped open to glare at him and he grinned at her. "You're always running through my mind."

"What did you say?" Her calm expression morphed into a mask of panic, eyes growing wide and frightened. "What do mean by that?"

"Arya," he took hold of her hand, "what's wrong?"

"Nothing," she blinked a few times and shook her head. "I just remembered something - a bad dream." Her lips curled and her cheeks perked up but that was not her smile. "It's nothing, I promise."

"I'm no good at this meditating," he tugged her closer to collect her in his embrace. "Let me just hold you instead." Arya molded herself into his hold without resistance or argument. "Ah, this makes me feel right at ease: no need for fancy doctors and their weird ideas." Either this doctor confused Arry or he really wanted her swordfight invisible monsters. Whatever helps her get her mind settled was fine by him. Still weird as all the seven hells though.

"I don't want to go back tonight," she grumbled against his chest.

"School tomorrow," he reminded her.

"I hate that place too," she continued to sulk.

"I'll be there," he assured her, "and there's a game on. Hopefully nothing tragic happens between now and then."

"Tragedy is always happening somewhere," she sighed, "we just don't think about it."
"My little Arry has such big thoughts," he teased, trying to keep things lighthearted. "There's nothing tragic going on right here, right now."

"These moments never last long enough," she snuggled closer to him. "I wish this weekend would never end."

"There'll be a weekend after this one, and one after that," Gendry was never this optimistic before he met Arya but then he changed a lot since then. "I plan to spend every one of them with you until you're sick of me."

"I'm lying whenever I act sick of you," she whispered. "That really means I'm sick of me." Gendry hated her wispy weak voice, like she was admitting something dark and secret.

"I know," he chuckled in spite of her frail tone. "Don't even know how it's possible that you don't like you sometimes." Gendry pulled her back by her shoulders to look at her face. "Have you met you? You're awesome! Sometimes I just want to shake you until you see reason and love you as much as I do. But I realized that won't make a difference, you're too stubborn."

"You're missing the upside," she grumbled. "I'm too stubborn to ever stop loving you, even if you get sick of me first." A little smirk pulled at the corner of her mouth. "Maybe that's the downside, depending on how you look at it."

"I know that too, milady." Gendry slanted his brows together in mock offense. "I'm smarter than I look."

"Thank the gods for that," she grinned.

"You wanna start something again?" He tightened his hold on her waist, pushing his fingers into her ribs.

"Nope," she denied him with a smile, wrapping her arms around his chest to squeeze him. "This is good." Arya was right about that so he held her close and rested his forehead on her hair. It struck him that there would never be a 'moment' when everything was 'back to right'. They can't go back: nobody can, everyone keeps on forward if they want to or not. Gendry wouldn't return to the time before his lady got sad. Even if he got the chance, he wouldn't take it because he loved her more every day since then.

Chapter End Notes

A mighty battle waged in the kingdom of Microsoft between Windows and Word. I, the meek peasant, was caught in the clash of frameworking. Yes, to run macros in Word 2010 whilst using Windows 7, one must first pass the dreaded NET Framework Optimization Service. Many nights passed while I did my best to avoid the carnage. My CPU ran and nigh fifty to one-hundred percent at times!

The heat... coming from my laptop will haunt my dreams for years. Scripts! Command Prompt! Dear gods, the humanity! When it was over, I realized it would never truly be over because someday Windows will want to give me updates. I will become frustrated with a minor issue with one program and think a tiny little bitty update might help. On that day, I will make all the same foolish mistakes, damn me.
Their group traveled in silence with their leader far out in front: no one said a word for hours. Not since Drogo started east with no explanation and they all naturally followed. Snow expected Grey Worm to reveal the intent of their course. Yet, he said not a word, using his hood to shield his face. It shocked him to hear their Orc leader was in fact royalty but he did not press for answers. They air between them was thick with tension he would not be the one to snap.

"But I don't understand," Arry was the first to break the silence. "What is Drogo exactly, a king?"

"It shall all be explained in time..." Grey Worm's lack of explanation left Snow unsatisfied as well.

"That's horseshit!" She rounded on the High Elf, hands on her hips and feet spread apart. Nymeria stood behind her, not snarling but a ridge of hair rose along her spine. "None of us will abandon him no matter what the truth is, so just tell us!"

"For once," Snow added quietly, "I agree with Arry."

"Hey," she aimed a scowl in his direction and this time the giant wolf did growl at Snow.

"I think she's right too!" Little Nhee piped up, already appointed herself the Halfling's squire. "Perhaps I am new to this group but I expect us all to trust each other." Drogo halted his step and turned around to give the High Elf a blank look. It seemed they were communicating telepathically but their expression gave nothing away.

"Very well," Grey Worm nodded gravely, pulling his hood down to reveal tired features. "I shall tell you the tale though it is not only mine." He suddenly looked up, whipping his head back-and-forth. "Wait Drogo, they're here!" Green light blinded Snow, knocking him down and slamming his body to the ground. There were shouts and battle cries from all side but his entire body would not move. He couldn't even open his eyelids to observe the commotion or see who attacked.

"Templa ista a' kuile Snow de," the voice inside his head was Grey Worm. He was performing a curative incantation to remove the paralyzing spell that caught him. The instant the curse's binds were loose Snow sprung into action, facing the attackers. There were five figures in black robes: a sixth lay on the ground at Drogo's feet. The one nearest to him was casting a protection spell on the other four.

His eyes scanned the field to lock with Arry who slowly nodded. Their boisterous comrades held the attention of the attackers. He and the Halfling crept towards their respective targets on the outside. The shield caster did not notice Snow's approach until he was just behind her. Snow gave her a quick death, one clean slice across the throat and she crumpled to the ground. A loud snarl followed by a scream drew his attention across the battlefield.

Nymeria and Arya dispatched another enemy and they moved inward to join the fray. Spells and weapons hurtled through the air but these fools stood not a chance! Only three remained, all backed against each other but still full of fight. Each held a powerful spell charging in their hands, ready to
be cast. His group flanked Grey Worm, who cast a ring of fire around their attackers. They had nowhere to run and no attack left, the battle was all but over.

"Peace, kindred!" Grey Worm called out to their trapped foes. "Lay down your arms and surrender to save your lives!" Now that Snow paid attention, he realized all of their attackers were High Elves. Also they dressed in the same style of robes Grey Worm wore.

"Traitor, you dare speak to us!" The leader's high-pitched voice twisted with pain from the fire licking up her robes. "Die and face the judgment of your maker!" The sorceress thrust her hands forward, flinging the swirling purple spell at the group. Nhee darted out in front, throwing up and minor shield spell. Pod was right behind her with a reflection chant, which dispersed the spell. The other two cast their spells to break the shield but both bounced off.

There was no choice: these High Elves down would not admit defeat even for their lives. Grey Worm lifted his hands and the fire became an inferno, consuming the attackers. As the flames died, the High Elf stared at the charred remains before falling to his knees. These were not just his people: it was obvious he knew them personally.

"I think," Arry collapsed beside Grey Worm, "you owe us that explanation now." The Halfling had no tact: their comrade was grieving and she demanded answers. Grey Worm nodded sluggishly and rose to his feet. He waved his hand over the bodies and murmured an incantation so that their fallen attackers dissolved into the earth. The High Elf turned to face them and the group crowded around him. Drogo kept his distance but did not leave them behind, as Snow feared he might.

"There is a city on the eastern edge of this continent," Grey Worm's voice was low. "Groh Harbor, a united Human-Orc community that came together a generation ago against a common enemy. My people were that enemy, at the time I was a novice but I believed in my people's cause. Our maker promised us that land so that we may stop our nomadic wandering. One night I had a vision, as did an Orc witch doctor and a Human seer from the city. An heir would be born and he would bring an end to all wars... forever."

"Drogo," Snow glanced to their stoic leader who pretended not to listen. "Is the heir?"

"The Orcs and Humans unified their people through marriage," Grey Worm continued. "The empress was expecting her first child... With a joyful heart, I told my mentor that we would finally be able to stop fighting. She went straight to our leader with my report and had a bounty put on Drogo's head. From the moment he was born, someone has been trying to kill him."

"That's why he's so damned tough," Podrick remarked.

"My precognition raised my rank considerably," the High Elf glanced briefly to Drogo. "I was assigned to join the group sent to assassinate the child prince. I betrayed all of my people that night and stole the infant Drogo to keep him safe. Ever since, I have stayed by his side, protecting and shielding his location. The war has been at a stalemate, both sides too afraid to attack or make peace. I still have a friend on the inside... she sends me messages whenever there is news."

"And what news is there?" Snow had a feeling it was nothing good.

"An attack on the city is imminent," Grey Worm's already worried features tightened. "In Groh Harbor, most believe Drogo is dead and are fighting each other again to name an heir. Their defenses are weak while there is unrest between the races. The point of a mixed race prince was to create a leader with equal concern for both sides. My people have been waiting for a weakened moment to attack. It is not safe for any of us to make the journey to the city, least of all him. Yet I understand his need to protect his people, especially from themselves."
"It goes without saying," Pod sobered, "we're with you and Drogo to the end."

"I cannot ask you to risk your lives," Grey Worm bowed his head. "We will be under constant attack when we enter the kingdom."

"We're not 'asking' to come along," Arya bobbled her head arrogantly.

"You know I'm with you," Gendry added.

"I was more than ready to follow him into battle before I heard his story," Nhee spoke up. "It is what my sister would have wanted me to do." Her voice was quiet a first but strengthened with each word. "The elders say that each of us is born for a purpose, one thing we will accomplish in our lives. I believe this might be the purpose for which I was born, to help bring an end to all wars."

"So," Hot pie chimed in, puzzled expression on his cherubic face. "What you're saying is... Drogo is a prince?" Grey Worm closed his eyes to mask his exasperation and nodded his head. "For real? Whoa, that's amazing. He don't seem like a prince at all!"

"Smartest thing you've said, Hot Pie." Arya ribbed the Dwarf, drawing a few chuckles from the tense group. Together they faced Brawlis, The Devourer, and even lost Khaleesi. Now they were heading straight for the nation of warrior mages hunting them. This mission might be harder than all of their adventures put together... the bell rang. The somber tone of the game stayed with the group as they packed up their belongings. Torgo's recent loss made it was difficult to smile around his grieving friend. The whole sad experience put some things in perspective for Jon.

Life is too short to push away the people he should keep closest. All along, he'd been sitting up on his high horse and looking down on everyone. He 'knew' he was right and everyone else was just wrong. That attitude put distance between himself and his once good friend. Even worse, he let it affect his family: both of his cousins and even Ray. That guy was just too damn pitiful because he lost his love and never got over her. At the time, his hero uncle Ned undoubtedly scoured his parent's 'so-called love'.

That's not how people act when they care for and respect each other. Jon now resented the judgment his uncle passed on mom and Ray. If he'd been more supportive of their relationship, would things have been different? Thinking of Ygritte, he understood: it must've been anguish for his parents to separate. Ray reached out to him and he hadn't called the man since that day they met. In the meantime, for weeks he watched the deterioration of Arya and Gendry's 'relationship'.

Jon felt smug about it: that was difficult and shameful to admit but true. Hells, he was surprised they lasted this long with Arya's demanding nature. He accepted his younger cousins' relationships as something he couldn't change. Later it occurred to him: they have the right to make choices without his judgment. In his arrogance, he considered himself high enough to judge them all. Now he wanted to wipe the slate clean and stop lording over everyone.

He waited outside the empty room for Gendry, always the last to leave. Godsdamn him if his new mentality didn't actually change his mind. Rather than criticizing their carrying on, he envied them for stealing a moment together. If they felt for each other as strongly as he loved Ygritte, he was genuinely happy for them. The door swung open and Gendry strutted out, smiling and humming a jaunty tune.

"Gendry," he quickly followed to catch up, "hold up."

"Hey," Gendry turned around with his eyebrows raised high in surprise. "how's it going?"
"Not too bad," Jon caught up and they started walking together. "Pretty good actually but it could be better," he took a deep breath to steel himself. "I might possibly want to apologize for the whole Arya thing."

"Water under the bridge," Gendry waved and a dismissive hand. "You don't have to say anything, I totally get it." He squeeze the straps his backpack tight and heaved a heavy sigh. "It's normal you would worry about Arya."

"That's not it," Jon shook his head, wishing he could blame overprotectiveness. "You two both told me how you felt about each other and I didn't really believe you. I was the one who didn't get it, but I do now."

"You're in love," Gendry grinned knowingly. "Did some asshole try to get in the way of your relationship?"

"Yeah... me," he chuckled because it was the truth. "But I figured out pretty soon that I'd regret it if I fucked things up with her."

"I'm happy for you," Gendry clapped him on the shoulder. "If everyone could find someone to love we'd all be a lot better off."

"I doubt that," he laughed again but their time ran short and he needed to get to the point. "So... if you could help me smooth things over with Arya-"

"Oh-ho-no way, man." Gendry flat out refused, taking his hand away like Jon was diseased. "That's on you," it didn't look like he could be convinced.

"Come on," Jon pleaded, "she only listens to you." No one held a grudge like Arya. Lately she treated him with little more than cold indifference. Not that he did anything right to deserve better, seeing as he's been so full of himself.

"You're full of shit if you think Arya Stark listens to anyone." This egghead still had no idea how much his cousin idolized him. All the same, he had no right to judge Gendry not good enough for Arya: that's her choice.

"And you're blind," he countered, "if you can't see how hung-up she is on you." Gendry didn't seem to know how to respond as they approached the locker hall. "I gotta get a book for class, please talk to her for me."

"Fine I'll do it," Gendry relented and waved to round the next corner. "Catch you later."

"Thanks," Jon called after him, "see ya man." He changed course to walk down the opposite hall towards his locker. He stood in front of his locker and heaved a sigh before setting his back down. By the time he entered his locker combo and opened the door, Arya approached him.

"I hear you want to make up?" She raised a brow and pursed her lips. "What's with that?"

"That was fast," he pulled out the book he needed from his locker.

"He texted me," she smirked.

"Coward," he scoffed as he stuffed the book into his bag.

"You're telling me," Arya laughed but it was a little weak. "So, why would we need to 'make up' - aren't we cool?"
"Do we seem 'cool' to you?" Jon turned to face her as he pushed his locker closed: he missed the way they used to be. When he lived up north, she was the one person he could be completely honest with. They spent many nights talking until morning about any and everything. In that way, he was even closer with her than Robb. This tense distance between them was all his fault and it was time for it to end.

"Look," he eyes darted around uncomfortably. "We don't have to 'make up' - all I ever needed was for you to chill out about Gendry. And stop looking at us all disgusted with your judgment every time we touch. Don't think I didn't notice," she curled her upper lip in a sarcastic sneer.

"We're good on that," he promised and meant it this time. "I swear on my life to never judge or look down on your relationship again. What you do is your business and I should be happy if you're happy."

"That's the way it should've been from the get-go," she rolled her eyes. "Let's hang out soon." Arya punched her sharp knuckles into his bicep. "I miss you, asshole."

"Sounds good," he rubbed his arm, "wanna go paintballing?"

"I have been waiting my whole lifetime for someone to ask me that question." Arya's grin came with a little evil glint in her eye. "I'll bring my boyfriend and you bring your girlfriend. We can team up couple-versus-couple."

"It's on," he already felt like a load lifted from his shoulders. Why was he being such an asshole this whole time? Somebody needs to slap the shit out of him sometimes and get him out of his own head. Plenty of people would volunteer: he'd wager Ygritte would be first in line.

"Call me and we'll set it up," Arya got in one last jab before twirling around to saunter away. As he watched her, a flash of red caught his eye. That willowy figure moving gracefully through the packed hall could only be one person. Why not go three-for-three on this day of reconciliation?

"Sansa," he called as he jogged to catch up to her long stride. When did she start to walk with such confidence?

"Jon!" Sansa looked so pleased to see him, twisting the knife of guilt in his gut. "I haven't seen you in forever! I think it's been since the wedding... sorry I've been busy studying lately. I know that sounds like a bad excuse but I swear it's true."

"To be honest I've been avoiding you," he came right out and said it. It was best to get everything out in the open and clear the air. "Sorry about that."

"Why would you avoid me?" Sansa never hid her emotions and Jon cringed at her sudden crestfallen expression.

"It's completely my fault," he hurried to reassure her. "First, Arya and Gendry and then you started dating the hound on my advice, no less." Jon bowed his head apologetically. "I was being a judgmental asshole to both of you and I'm really sorry."

"You worried about me?" Sansa continued to surprise him with her unexpected reactions. "Aw Jon, that is so sweet, you really are like a brother. Robb would act the exact same way... No, he'd probably try to fight one of them."

"I would never try to fight the hound," he guaranteed.

"Sandor," she stressed the name, "is friends with Ygritte." That was something else Jon struggled to
accept. "We could double sometime! It would be so much fun... I promise." What she proposed didn't sound 'fun' but it was worth a try.

"It's a date," he felt another burdensome load drop off his shoulders.

"I'll text you later," she radiated happiness, "and we'll talk details."

"Thanks for understanding about my being an asshole," he returned her smile sheepishly.

"I forgive you as long as you don't avoid me anymore." Sansa smiled cheerfully but her expression snapped when the bell rang. "Oh, I've got to get to class!" She whirled around, red hair flying over her shoulder, and left without another word.

"Don't study too much!" Jon called after her, glad to see she was still the same girl he grew up with. He should've paid closer attention to how much more open-minded she became this year. Until now, he considered her naive and assumed the hound tricked her somehow. Sansa wasn't so gullible anymore, but he let himself be blind to that fact. Each of today's reconciliations lifted a burden he didn't even notice. As if an icy crust formed over him and made his body numb but today, it melted away.

PODRICK

He heard the hushed voices of coach and a man, coming from the cracked office door. Without thinking, he pushed in to find Mr. Jaime Lannister and coach sitting together. They had heads bent towards each other, engrossed in a private conversation. The pair jolted apart when they finally become aware of Pod's intrusion.

"Sorry coach," he apologized. "The door was open."

"Rick," coach's voice raised in pitch, "if you could just wait outside-"

"No, I have to be going." Mr. Lannister stood up and aimed a tight smile down at coach. "Thank you for your advice, coach Tarth."

"It's no trouble at all," she rose to follow him to the door, "good luck." A horrible feeling tightened Pod's gut at the way coach watched Mr. Lannister leave.

"I can't even imagine," coach leaned against the doorframe and bowed her head. "The poor man..."

"Are you okay?" He could tell she wasn't, even before she nodded her head. "The poor man..."

"I'm quite alright," she straightened up, "much better than some."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Pod hoped Mr. Lannister had cancer or something and she was just being supportive.

"I can't without breaking Mr. Lannister's confidence." She walked to her desk, head still hanging as if heavy with her thoughts. "Apparently he's having serious trouble with one of his students." Coach blew out a heavy defeated sigh as if she were the one with the troubles. "I only wish I could give him better advice than I did."

"Your advice is always the best," he gave her his most cheery smile.

"Every teacher needs a student who sucks up to them," she returned his smile.

"I don't do it to 'suck up' to you," he insisted. "I hate seeing you so worried: your sunny smile always
brightens my day."

"Brownnoser," she rolled her eyes and chuckled before heading out of the office. "I am late to a meeting with coach Selmy but I'll be back in an hour." Coach stopped at the door, resting a hand on the doorframe, and beamed at him. "Even coaches need their students' support: I would lose all hope if not for you, Rick." With that, she left to attend her meeting and Pod walked to the door to watch her disappear.

"I was flirting with you," he muttered to himself, "but you didn't notice." These years of pining would be worth it if she ever looked at him the way she watched Mr. Lannister.

Chapter End Notes

A nice long Jon chapter with a little DnD action and a dollop of Podrick at the end. I don't know if I'm more excited to write Sansan going out with Jon and Ygritte or a Gendry paintballing competition!

Next up, Sansa lives a day everyone dreams of: the reason being sixteen is sweet! And can Arya explain why she doesn't trust anyone? Stay tuned for the next chapter.
Spectrum of Dishonesty

SANSA

It seemed like she was waiting for this day since she was born... the day she got a car. A snowy white used 2007 BMW 3 Series 328i, spacious with a high crash-test rating. The perfect vehicle for a busy high schooler. Daddy seemed surprised by her choice but he never tried to sway her. This was the perfect car for her, elegant and adaptable to a number of situations. They could take a summer trip with this car, maybe to their family cabin in the Riverlands. The possibilities were endless with steering this smooth!

"Thanks for this, daddy." Her voice was tight though Sansa tried to control it... this day was too special. A vehicle signified she was entering adulthood, far more than going through puberty. This car gave her the freedom to make all her choices, comings and goings, on her own.

"You are the one who asked me to save your allowance," he deflected her gratitude.

"You are too generous," Sansa knew he spoiled her but that meant her parents loved her. "But I won't complain."

"You work hard to maintain perfect grades," daddy maintained his position. "That's your job as a student and it should be rewarded."

"It was all worth it," her eyes welled with happy tears. "I love this car so much."

"It is dangerous to cry and drive," he scolded her lightly.

"I love you daddy," she quickly swipe her eyes and blanked the tears away.

"Lemoncake, you are still my little girl." Even Daddy was starting to sound a bit choked with emotion. "I trust you, Sansa. As a father, the fact that I can trust you means more than you know."

"Arya wants to make up with you," she broached the subject carefully. Their father never argued, he 'listened', and that made it difficult to convince him. He already made up his mind about dealing with his youngest daughter. "She's been talking about it but always says she will 'get around to it'. You know stubborn doesn't begin to describe her." Daddy nodded thoughtfully, always 'considering her words'. "I wonder where she gets it from... Daddy, admit it, both of you are cut from the same cloth."

"No, she's like Lyanna." His voice took on that exhausted breathy tone whenever he spoke of Arya. "That's what has me worried."

"Aunt Lynn is a kind, caring woman and she raised Jon very well." Sansa sensed that daddy wanted to argue but unfortunately, he did not. "If Arya is like her, then that reassures me." After a moment of prolonged silence, she huffed out a breath. "Dad, if you don't talk to her soon I'll be disappointed in you."

"Guess my lemoncake is not such a little girl anymore." Daddy seemed so sad she almost wanted to placate him but he was right... She was not a little girl anymore and he should accept it. "I am lost
when it comes to Arya, who is nearly a stranger to me now. Every decision I make about her turns out all wrong somehow. Often, I think your mother would handle her better. To be hated by my own child is something I never thought to experience."

"Oh daddy, she doesn't hate you!" Sansa felt so horrible that he was this distressed but waited so long to talk about it. "That's silly," she chided. "Even if she hates you a tiny bit, that's normal for teenagers. Except for me of course, but then I am an exceptional teenager." That got a chuckle from him and she decided to share her idea. "We should go out for a family dinner but I could get called away... That would give you a neutral and public place to encourage a calm talk."

"It seems a bit juvenile," his reluctance was obvious.

"So is not talking to your daughter," she countered pointedly. Before this year, she never talked back to daddy. Being with Sandor made her realize, arguing is part of conversation in all relationships. Raised voices and tears accompanied some of their most enlightening discussions.

"Every time you talk like that, I swear I hear your mother's voice." Sometimes it was difficult to remember how hard her parent's separation must be for them. "And she is right remarkably often... I cannot believe I am agreeing to this."

"I'll set it all up," she smiled, "don't worry about a thing." Sansa pulled her new car in front of their apartment building to drop daddy off.

"Drive safe," he reminded her as he opened the door.

"I will," she smiled as she watched him get out. "See you tonight!" Sansa was in a seventh heaven, driving straight to the pet shop to pick up Sandor. Butterflies flitted in her stomach when she saw him waiting outside. She beeped to get his attention and he pushed off the wall to approach the car. He walked all the way around to check it out before getting into in the passenger side.

"Well?" Sansa was most nervous about his opinion because he knew about cars.

"It's nice," he stretched out his legs, "roomy too." Sandor tilted his head towards her and grinned. "Good pick, little bird - it suits you. Where are we headed?"

"Because I am not a cruel and heartless bully I will tell you." She put the car into drive and pulled away from the curb. "A small cafe hangs pictures of local celebrities on the wall. I thought that sounded cute. And apparently they are famous for their sinfully sweet mochas."

"That sounds right up my alley," he amused himself by poking around to inspect the car. The café was only a short drive away and she found a good place to park near the entrance. Doing everything in her own car for the first time was such a thrill! They went to the counter to order two mochas and sat down once they got their drinks. She opened her mouth to say something when Sandor groaned loudly.

"Let's sit somewhere else - I can't have that ugly face staring at me." She looked at the wall to see a picture of a basketball team and recognized one of the players.

"The tall man?" Sansa scooted closer to inspect the picture... it was the same man, she felt sure of it. Somehow, she remembered that man's impassive face, small dark eyes, and low voice. When she glanced up to meet Sandor's gaze, she saw... fear. In her heart-of-hearts, she always knew the truth. The tall man was Gregor Clegane and she didn't tell Sandor earlier... Because it might scare him out of Kings Landing, away from her, for good.
A sick, twisted part of him felt relieved - he'd been waiting for this shit all along. He didn't know how or when but Greg would always be the dark shadow over his life. There'd been too much peace and that had him constantly looking over his shoulder.

"You've seen this man before?" He jabbed his finger into the face he hated most, watching panic fill her eyes. "This one right here?!" She lowered her eyes to the table, holding something back. Sandor struggled to keep his voice down when he noticed people looking. "Where - tell me exactly where you saw him?"

"In Winterfell," she whispered. "We ran into each other by... accident."

"That was no fucking accident," he snarled. This is why he can't let his guard down - allowing her optimism to infect him. It was a fantasy to believe they were ever safe from Greg. "What the fuck was he doing in Winterfell?"

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I should not have said anything, maybe it was just someone who looked like him." Not a chance, there isn't a whole lot of tall, evil-looking men walking around. Sandor knew well how that type of man stands out. Sansa remembered meeting him because he sticks in the mind like gum on shoes. A single tear spilled through her lashes and rolled down her cheek.

"Little bird," Sandor stood up and held up his palm to her. "Come on, we can't talk here." She dashed away the wetness on her cheek and accepted his hand. They held onto each other tight as they walked out of the cafe to her car. "He's still a problem for us but I haven't figured out how to solve it. If he comes back here, you're not safe." They let go of each other to get into the car and he continued once the doors closed. "We talked about it before-"

"Please," she whimpered, "you can't leave... we've worked so hard and-"

"Listen," he cut her off, "I'm not going anywhere." Sandor refused to have another second of his life controlled by fear. He was a man now and it was time for him to make choices to protect his happiness. "I already said I'm staying - so I'm not going anywhere. But we have to be smart about this. You need to take self-defense and start carrying some kind of weapon in your car."

"We can still talk to my father," she suggested. Mr. Stark was the kind of man who put family first. There was no way he would let his daughter date the brother of a psycho who threatened Sansa. Sandor respected that but - no turning back now - he couldn't let the little bird go. Not even for her benefit, he never fucking claimed to be the good guy in this.

"Your dad gave me some advice the other day - told me to find my passion." Sandor couldn't say to the man he already found it. "All of my passion is for you, Sansa. You're the most important person in the world to me. If you see Greg again, go straight home and tell your father everything. Then call me and we can figure it out together."

"What will you do if you see him?" Sansa must know he couldn't answer the question so he just shook his head. "I will look for a self-defense class tomorrow," her voice perked up.

"We'll stop by the sporting goods store later." Now was not the time to panic - it was time to make a stand. "We'll get you a pocket knife and pepper spray," he racked his brain for more defenses. "Maybe a taser," he noticed her grimace. "Don't make that face - this is serious."

"I know," she fixed her face to look more confident. "It's just a little scary to even think about."

"We have to think about it," he resisted his instinct to shield her from every danger. Sansa said she loved him and wanted to be with him no matter what so that's what he chose to believe. He told her
from the get-go it would be hard to be with him and she never backed down. His life was a black hole and everything he loved died - maybe he never fought hard enough. "This is part of being with me."

"I'm willing to do whatever it takes," and she meant it. "We can handle whatever comes at us." Sansa was far stronger than he assumed when they first met. Sandor could tell she was scared and she'd be a fucking idiot not to be. There was far more determination in her bright eyes than fear. If she set her mind to something, everyone better get the fuck out of her way. He'd always be right there behind her - willing to do any and everything to keep her safe.

**ARYA**

"Why don't you trust anyone?" The doc asked that question the instant his butt hit the chair cushion.

"It would take less time to explain why trust is a waste of time." And she didn't feel like explaining herself today - it would put a crimp in her good mood. The doc stayed silent, waiting for her explanation. "Not today, doc, I'm actually feeling pretty good."

"Are you?" Amazing how he could ask a question without any inflection of judgment or disbelief. "I think practicing is giving me more energy." Unfortunately, it did nothing to aid her meditating or help face her enemy.

"Ah," he nodded, "and how goes the practicing?"

"Practicing with my sword only helps my physical skill." Arya felt like a failure for not being able to figure it out.

"Is that a bad thing?" The doc made a good point, she did have more energy and that translated to a better mood.

"I'm actually getting good," she couldn't help grinning. "I'm quick and hard to hit."

"But you are not able to face your pursuer yet?" Leave it to him to knock her down when she was feeling high.

"I still can't see them - they're too far behind but their gaining..." Arya felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. "They always gain a little bit every time I stop running." All of this was bringing her down and starting to piss her off so she decided to change the subject. "I'm thinking of making up with my dad."

"Oh?" A flicker of interest flashed across his eyes and she took pride in noticing.

"It's needed to be done for a while," she leaned against one armrest. "I kept putting it off because I don't feel like I should be the one to apologize. My cousin is like my dad, super serious and overly concerned with what's 'right'. The other day he tells me he accepts my relationship with Gendry. My first instinct was to tell him to shove his blessing where the sun doesn't shine. After all his fucking grief and dirty sideways looks."

"But then?" Ooooh, he really was curious. H'ghar must think her daddy issues are the cause of her problems. Isn't that a little cliché?

"When he admitted being wrong I felt amazing. It still felt good to talk about it. "Like I dropped a heavy backpack on the last day of school. So I think this grudge I'm carrying around for dad is too heavy." Arya decided to play along with his little theory for now and keep him distracted.
"So you want to make amends to unburden yourself?" He made it sound so selfish! She wanted everyone to get out from under this relentless weight.

"It's been hard for everyone - us not talking." Sometimes she wondered if this was dad's punishment, ignoring her. "The thing is we can't truly make up because he's dead wrong, even my cousin owned up. I should be able to date whoever I want and it's shouldn't be up to him or anybody! It's the 21st century - my dad doesn't own my virginity. It was mine to give up to whoever I wanted and I picked Gendry. Who, when, where, and how should be my choice, nobody else's."

"But?" He watched her with impassive eyes, which betrayed wariness for only an instant. Arya nodded, realizing she needed to give him more.

"I can't keep going like this with my dad," she could admit that much. "Even if that is based on some white lies, I want us to have a relationship again."

"Have you tried being open with him about your boyfriend?" He didn't fully believe her about the strictness of her parents, most people don't. Isn't a therapist supposed to trust their patients?

"If he even got a whiff of Gendry," she stressed, "I'd be on a plane north that day. He's old school like that and mom is even worse." When her parents say 'save it for marriage' that's what they literally mean. Does anybody really even do that anymore? They're living in a fantasy world! Even their perfect precious Sansa is getting some and there was no reason she shouldn't. Of course, they'd never suspect her perfect sister of anything. How do some girls look like perpetual virgins?

"Then this is the root of the tension between you and your father," the doc summarized. "His refusal to accept your choices."

"That about sums it up," she grumbled. "Can I just tell you about my week now?" The doc nodded and she started sharing what happened to her over the last several days. After they bullshitted for a while the hour ran out and she headed home. The instant she stepped inside, Sansa demanded they go out for dinner. Arya could eat something so she agreed and went back to her room to set her bag down.

"Arya," Sansa whispered too loud as she closed the bedroom door. Her sister used that tone when something was up. "I need to talk to you," she approached nervously. "You are the only person in the world I would trust with this secret. Promise me you will never tell anyone what I tell you."

"I swear on my life," she meant it sincerely.

"Sandor's brother is a dangerous man," her words faltered.

"Gregor Clegane," Arya revealed what she knew. "The once promising basketball star disgraced by a violent scandal." At least that's how the media put it, a 'shame' that his career was ended abruptly. The world doesn't care if the heroes are really monsters - we're entertained.

"How do you know...?" Sansa only just seemed to realize Arya knew everything. "Never mind, the truth is I ran into him in Winterfell at the mall." Arya's stomach tightened but she kept her face and impassive. "Neither Sandor or I think it was a coincidence. This man scares me but I refuse to let him bully me. I want to take some self-defense classes and it would help if you came along."

"You did the right thing coming to me," she reached out to take hold of her sister's hand. "We can take the classes and practice on our own together. Nobody can hurt you if you don't let them."

"I never want to be a victim again," Sansa squeezed her hand. "Thank you, Arya."
"What are sisters for?" Arya gave her a reassuring smile and angled her head at the door. "Alright, I'm starving - let's go already!" She let Sansa hold her hand as they walked out of the room, hoping it gave her some comfort. They took her sister's new car, beating the dinner rush to get seated right away.

"Oh goodness," Sansa slapped her forehead. "I completely forgot that I promised to help my friend today! Daddy, I feel terrible but I have to go. I can be back in time to pick you two up..." Her sister was a horrible liar.

"Of course lemoncake," dad indulged Sansa - what a shock. After her sister left, the conversation died except when they spoke to the waiter. By the time their food arrived at the table, the quiet was driving her crazy.

"Dad," she broke the uncomfortable silence, "I need a favor."

"Go ahead," he set his fork down to look at her.

"Has mom talked to you at all about coming for a visit?" She promised Sheri ages ago that she would get Bran down here and that's what she intended to do. Not many things made Arya happier than those two mooning over each other.

"She mentioned it," he acknowledged, "we haven't made any plans. It would be difficult for your mother, with Rickon and Bran."

"It would mean a lot if they could come down for spring break." Arya gave him her most pleading look but he didn't seem affected. "Bran and I used to do everything together until his accident and now we don't see each other. I need another chance," she begged quietly. "I did the right thing but it still ruined Winterfest for everyone. You know I never wanted to leave Winterfell or be stuck with Sansa!"

"I know," he inclined his head and folded his hands on the table. "You have been angry with me since before Winterfest-"

"You think," she interrupted, "I've been acting like this because I'm 'angry' at you? That's not it at all - I wish it were that simple."

"Then tell me," he urged quietly, almost pleading. "We used to talk about everything."

"No we didn't," she sighed and stirred her mashed potatoes around the plate. "I just said what you wanted to hear because I liked making you happy. You're wrong about a lot of stuff, you know."

"I am just a man, Arya." He admits it like a burden he bears instead of the greatest stroke of luck in his life.

"And I'm just a girl," she pointed out. "I have to figure out how to live in this world and sometimes it is way too hard. I'm not mad - okay sometimes I get pretty mad - but mostly I'm just so freaking exhausted I can barely stand it. Can't you just cut me some slack? Am I really that awful," the tears welling in her eyes were genuine but she didn't hold back.

"I will call your mother tonight," he relented. "We will discuss bringing the boys for a visit. I would do anything for you, Arya." Apart from giving her boyfriend a chance, or accepting her decisions.

"I really think I need a pony," she joked tentatively. "I could name him Snowflake and keep him in my room."
"That might upset Sansa," his expression relaxed into a smile.

"Psh, you kidding?" Arya waved a hand at him. "She loves ponies." His soft and deep chuckle was something she hadn't heard for a while. It surprised her how much she missed that sound - she used to make him laugh all the time. This was better, not honest or even all that respectful but better. She couldn't resent him for the rest of her life. Being on his good side will help save her from groundings in the future. If she hid Gendry, well and long enough, dad would eventually come around. It sucked to admit but she hated lying to herself more - the doc really helped her.

Chapter End Notes

Last night was not good... not good. I got about two hours of sleep and five hours of 'Diners Drive-ins and Dives'. Stress-induced insomnia is not fun, people. The worst part was I only checked the classics channel to catch the last 30 minutes of 'Fiddler on the Roof'. TRADITION! Perfect for panic-prone insomniacs, a story of ultimate perseverance while accepting change. With music and dancing and romance of course - what a film. To those of you who endured last week along with me: next week has to be better.
Tests of Body and Mind

Arya hadn't been this excited in a while, grinning and bouncing with every step. To see her so happy and carefree made his heart do flip-flops all day. He knew her better than she knew herself most of the time. It wasn't just the paintballing, she was happy to have Jon finally on their side. About time too, Gendry was just about to give up on the guy. Been such good friends and then one day: poof, things just went cold between them. The Lincoln didn't like driving on gravel, so he parked a short hike from the warehouse structure.

"We're going paintballing," she sang off-key as she got out of the car. They both slammed their door shut, breaking the eerie quiet of this place. Gendry walked around the car and their hands came together like magnets. "We're going paintballing!" Arya was just too damn cute, swinging his hand and skipping along beside him.

"Hey," he stopped and tugged her to turn around.

"Hmm?" Her smile faltered as gaze eyes lowered to his mouth. He drew her closer and pushed away the hair always falling in her eyes. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders to lift herself up, bringing their lips together. For a moment, he forgot everything: the gravel underfoot and bright sky overhead. Only the warmth of her smiling lips against his meant anything. "Nope, none of that now," she shoved him away, "keep your distance!" Her grey eyes narrowed into tiny slits. "We're - going - paintballing!" Arya whirled around and marched ahead and he had to hurry to catch up.

"At least let's hold hands," he whined, holding his hand up in front of her.

"There's no hand-holding in paintball!" She stubbornly crossed her arms and refused him. He made a disappointed sound and let his palm slap against his thigh. "Okay just a little," she grabbed his hand and quickened her pace. "Hurry up!" They ran the rest of the way to the industrial building, with Arya tugging him along behind her. To see her so full of energy made Gendry want to drop to his knees and thank the gods. Maybe they really did listen to his prayers after all: just do things in their own time.

Ygritte and Jon waited for them inside, decked out in some serious paintballing armor. Good, if he was going to take some shots then at least he would wear some bloody armor. This plastic shit had nothing on forged steel, hammered to unbreakable strength. Nobody appreciates the old world standards, though steel might make stealth a bit hard. They both received guns and gear and they put the armor on over their clothes. Who cares if they got in a little paint on them?

"Alright kiddos," Ygritte clapped her hands together. "Let me explain how it's done-

"I think we get it," Arya interrupted, "point and shoot." She demonstrated her ability by popping Jon in the chest.

"Hey!" Jon wiped at the dripping paint on his chest armor.

"Oops," she shrugged, "guess it's not that hard."
"This is gonna be fun," Ygritte chuckled as she loaded a fresh cartridge into her gun.

"I think you'll regret those words," Jon shook his head and followed her example. Then he took a minute to demonstrate how to load Gendry and Arya's guns.

"I'm starting to regret being born." Gendry looked between Ygritte and Arya, both giving each other death stares. The guys would be the ones not getting out of this alive.

"We might not have to worry about living much longer." At least he'd have Jon for company in the seven hells. Nah, he's been good so maybe he get to go to one of the seven heavens. Even the most glorious heaven would be too lonely without Arya. Ygritte gave them a head start and Arya took point while he followed her lead. They walked around the compound to the dense forest behind it. No one came after them as they explored the woods. Gendry had a feeling they were lulled into false sense of security.

"We're walking around in a circle," she hissed. "We need to backtrack." A crunching sound came from behind them but only he noticed.

"Shit," he breathed, slapping a hand over her mouth and dragging her behind a tree. Jon and Ygritte snuck silently past but didn't notice their shady hiding spot. His heart pounded and he didn't breathe until the coast was clear. "Whew," he wheezed out the held breath and uncovered her mouth. "That was close."

"Good job," she praised in a hushed whisper.

"Any excuse to cover your mouth," he teased and bowed his head to brush his lips across hers.

"Aw," Ygritte's voice made them both snap up to look at her. "isn't that sweet?" She fired off a quick round at Arya, catching her in the chest. Pure instinct made him raise his gun and hit her square in the stomach. "Shit!" She cupped her hands around her mouth. "Jon, they're here!"

"Run!" Arya screamed at him, shoving him away. "Go, Gendry!" He did as commanded, scrambling up to sprint away in the opposite direction.

"Get him Jon!" Ygritte cheered for her counterpart and Gendry heard footfalls closing in behind him. He ran into a thicker part of the wood, looking for hiding space, and ducked behind a wide tree. To muffle his heavy breath he covered his mouth, clutching his gun in his other hand.

"So it's down to us two," Jon's voice came from behind one of these trees but no telling which one. Gendry's heart pounded and he was too afraid to poke his head out and give away his position. "Who would've thought?"

"We could just call a truce, buddy." Their girlfriends would never let them live it down but at least neither of them had to take a shot. Call him a coward but he didn't like the idea of being shot, even with paint.

"I think I've cut you about as much slack as I can," Jon wasn't just talking about paintball.

"And I'm grateful for that," he peeked out to scan the trees opposite his position. Gendry could see the muzzle of Jon's gun sticking out from behind a nearby tree. "So don't be too mad," he muttered, abandoning his hiding spot to creep behind Jon. It didn't seem very sporting but Gendry shot his friend in the back. The paintball exploded in a neon shower of color against the black armor.

"Fuck," Jon moaned as he turned around, bumping his fist against the tree. "Fucking ass! Where did you come from?!" Gendry shrugged, not sure what else he could've done. He never really thought he
would win, just played his best.

"You got him?" Arya and Ygritte caught up with them. Gendry nodded in answer and the smile that spread over her face was breathtaking. "We won?! Oh my gods - we fucking WON!!!" She dropped her gun, broke into a run, and launched at him. The force of her attack pushed him a step back as his arms closed around her. "We're the champions of everything!" Ah, victory sure felt sweet. He didn't often get the chance to show off in front of Arry and it felt good.

"Now for round two," Ygritte spoke up. "This time, girls against guys." Arya immediately released him, shoving him back. Her face was a mask of determined bloodthirsty need for victory.

"No mercy," she retrieved her paintball gun and shoved in another cartridge. Gendry gulped: this wouldn't end well.

"We'll give you a head start." Ygritte, a dangerous smirk on her face, stepped up behind Arya. "Run, you idiot!" She stomped a boot on the ground and Gendry and Jon both moved their asses. They both knew it was only a matter of time before they met their painted end. It wasn't exactly his idea of a good time to run through strange woods, hunted like an animal. All the same, he would do it every day if Arry would always be this happy.

SANDOR

The backseat of Sansa's new car was way more comfortable than the back of his Skylark. A classic car comes with downsides - it's about performance over comfort. Sansa's heart beat steadily against his naked chest as he held her in his lap. They finished a while ago but neither wanted to separate, too warm and comfortable. Sandor embraced her in contented silence, soothed by the sound of her soft breath. She was pressing her lips against his throat and sending shivers all of his skin.

"I thought we'd be studying today?" He nuzzled into her hair, smelling the sweet scent of the silken strands. Not that he'd rather be studying - just today was the test. It might've made him a little nervous, especially now that the pressure was really on. This had to get him into Crownlands University if he was going to stay in Kings Landing.

"No," her hot breath tickled his neck, "now we just relax. I have faith that we studied hard enough and everything will be alright." Her body tensed and he knew what she was thinking because his thoughts turned the same way. Greg's shadow followed them everywhere since the cafe, looming larger than ever. "I know you don't want to talk about it, and I certainly don't want to talk about it. Then I feel like we have to talk about it and I can't stop myself. So pick something else we can talk about."

"I can't believe I'm bringing this up before you." How was this topic the first that popped into his head? "Why aren't you on my ass about prom?"

"Ha!" Her burst of laughter would've deafened him if she'd been on his good side. "You must be joking," Sansa's whole body trembling as she giggled like he asked the most ridiculous question. "How could prom possibly compare with the college entrance exams?" She heaved a happy sigh and rested her head against his shoulder. "I think you underestimate how much I've had to mature to be your woman."

"My woman?" He didn't think she'd ever called him herself that before.

"Aren't I?" There was a tiny note of doubt and her voice.

"You are," he assured her. "You're everything - my love, my little bird, mine." She made a happy
humming sound and tightened her arms around his chest.

"If you're that excited about prom," she chortled - at least he amused her. "We can go dress shopping after we get our test results."

"Can't wait," he replied dryly. "Listen, don't listen to me when I tell you 'don't argue' - but don't argue. I want a repeat of the Winter Formal as my gift to you."

"Arigh," Sansa surprised him by agreeing right away. "It can be your thank-you gift for helping you study... I deserve it." It made him happy to get his way but he expected at least a little bit of arguing. He sorta hoped to have at least one small disagreement with her. Not really, but to prove he didn't have to act like a complete asshole. He's never been in the right during their relationship - breaks a man's pride. "Since it is warming up, maybe I should wear something a little more daring? The girls on the squad always look so glamorous and I look like a teen princess."

"You are a princess," he kissed the top of her head. "It suits you. Let those girls be 'glamorous' - that's their thing and they work hard for it. Your beauty is effortless and everyone can see that."

"That's so sweet," her voice raised in pitch like she was close to tears. "Sometimes, I think the things you say to me are poetry."

"You bring it out in me," he grinned against her hair. Sandor hardly believed it himself, the hound whispering sweet things in his lover's ear. Stranger things have happened than an ugly man finding love.

"Do you think...?" Sansa pulled back and looked up at him, her expression guarded. "Will you stay in a dorm next year?"

"I was thinking about getting an apartment," he confessed.

"This is not a lecture, just a question." Her eyes darted away in an attempt to hide her obvious concern. "Can you afford that?"

"Not right now," he admitted, "but my uncle and I talked the other night. I would've told you earlier but I was still thinking about it. Vlad wants to save his marriage so he has to move out of the city. So he's thinking about opening a second shop in the burbs and letting me run the main store."

"Would you have time to run a business and keep up with school and basketball?" Sansa made an effort to hide her worry but failed adorably. Sweet little bird can't hide a thought in her head and he loved her more for it.

"That's why I had to think about it before I said yes." Sandor wanted her to know that he can take care of things. That he could think seriously about his future - about their future. "If I hire a part-timer to run the place during the week I can work the weekends. That wouldn't give us a lot of free time, unless you want to hang out here with me in the store."

"We can run the shop together on the weekend," she was suddenly excited. "It'll be fun!"

"What would be more fun - a bed, with sheets," he pulled her close again. "All in a place that belongs just to us."

"To 'us'?' The question was so quiet he barely heard her.

"My place is your place," he confirmed. Did she really doubt it? It was his fault, always making her be the strong one keeping them together. Not anymore, he would fight even harder to make up the
difference.

"I think I'm starting to see the appeal of this idea." Sansa turned her face to nuzzle his chest and he could feel her smiling. "In case you wanted it, you have my approval." Sandor held back a snort at that comment. It should be obvious by now that he did everything for her approval. Good, it wouldn't do for the little bird to know how much power she had over him. How empty would life be if he never felt her eyelashes tickling his chest?

"It's time," she reluctantly broke their peace. "The College Entrance Exams wait for no one."

"I'm ready," he nodded and loosened his hold so she could pull away. Actually, his self-assurance was gaining - he never studied this much in his life so it had to pay off. After they dressed, it was a short drive to the testing center. They waited in line, signed up for the test, and made sure they brought all the right stuff. With every passing minute his confidence faded and the churning in his stomach worsened until she grabbed his hand.

"No matter what happens," she stopped just outside the testing room. "We're in this together. Don't pay attention to other people. Just think about me, remember all of our study sessions. Everything I taught you is inside your head... I know you can do it." Her words were to encourage him but she seemed to be comforting herself more. "Don't make random guesses or get caught on one question, do as much as you can the right way. What else...?" The little bird looked twice as nervous as he felt.

"A kiss for good luck?" He tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear and she smiled up at him. Sansa's hands slid around his neck as she raised up on her toes and he wrapped his arms around her waist. Their mouths met in an unhurried kiss that melted everything around them and made his heart race in a good way. Sandor reluctantly raised his head to break the kiss and set her down to stand flat on the ground.

"Feeling lucky?" She grinned as they let each other go, ignoring the people passing them.

"Let's get this over with," he led the way in to the testing room. The place was full of people but they were all distracted so none wasted time to stare is face. They set down next to each other, armed with their pencils and unwavering resolve. All through the test, he felt confident about the answers he filled in but he didn't know a lot. At the end, he checked all of his work and filled in a few harder questions. By the time it was over, he didn't know how he did but he was glad it was finished.

"How do you think you did?" There was a crease between her eyebrows from furrowing too much in concentration. Sandor just smiled at her and grabbed her hand to get them out of that fucking room. Once they were outside, he took a deep inhale a free air.

"Think it went okay," he slung an arm around her shoulders as they walked toward her car. "I guess."

"Don't be nervous," she wrapped her arm around his waist. "You worked hard and I'm proud of you no matter what the outcome is." He bowed his head so his forehead rested on the top of her hair.

"I love you," he whispered.

"Again," she demanded.

"I love you," he said it louder.

"I can't hear you," she sang. He threw his head back and inhaled a deep breath, ignoring the people around them.
"I love you, Sansa!" At his loud declaration, she let out a squeak and hid her face against his chest. She pretended to be embarrassed but she loved shit like that.

"Let's go on a date to celebrate," she looked up to reveal her red cheeks and beaming smile.

"Anything you want," he agreed immediately. If she asked the moon, he felt light enough to jump up and grab it for her. He walked Sansa to the driver's side and opened her door for her, shutting it once she was in. Once, he would've resented her new car but he appreciated how hard she worked as a student. If he could afford it, he would buy it for her and Mr. Stark felt the same. Sandor walked around and slid into the leather seats - the girl had classy taste.

"Did you learn anything during all this time studying?" Sansa never expressed any interest in teaching but she'd be good at it. She drove just like a driving instructor too, checking all her mirrors before pulling out.

"Yep, I'll do anything to see you naked." He held up one finger and then put up another. "And I fucking hate math."

"You can't hate math," she tittered. "It's a collection of principles guided by logic and natural laws."

"No more definitions," he growled, "I can't take any more."

"Then be serious," she pouted.

"I don't hate math," he relented, "I just like reading and writing more. All of those rules and numbers will be out of my head in a few weeks. They just don't make sense to me."

"What major do you want to pick?" Sansa loved school to an unhealthy degree. "Oh, I think you would love-"

"No more school," he begged. "We're not talking about school or studying for the rest of the day."

"What else is there to do...?" Her flirtatious tone tensed the muscles in his shoulders.

"Naughty little bird," he reached over the consoles to squeeze the top of her thigh.

"I don't know what you mean," she feigned coyness.

"Sansa, I feel an 'emergency' coming on." Even if he scored too low on the exam to get him into Crownlands, completing the test felt like a victory.

"I think I feel it too," she made a humming sound, like she was weighing her options. "Rain check on the celebration date?"

"It might not be a 'date'," he grinned, "but we'll be celebrating." They should be panicking, that was would he would've done before. Greg was a ticking time bomb and someday the clock would run out. In truth, part of him still wanted to pack a bag and run like a coward, fast and far away as he can get. If he left, he would never stop thinking and worrying about Sansa. It'd be no easier living with her ghost than putting her through hells by staying. Sandor could face his greatest fears for her so he trusted her love was just as strong.

The little bird taught him more in one year than any of his teachers and not just algebra. She showed him how to love and to trust another person enough to cry in front of them. Before he met her, all the world's lessons accumulated to 'you're on your own'. Sansa turned everything upside down, showed him how beautiful life could be. No, he wasn't fucking stupid or naive - this would get uglier before
it was over. Beauty is worth protecting and fighting for, that's all.

Chapter End Notes

"Run, you idiot!" Tee-he-he! Anyone, anyone? Skyrim... voice actor Michael Hogan, star of Teen Wolf and Battlestar Galactica. Doesn't matter, I met him once and he was so friendly. Anyway, I've been backed up on paperwork all winter but I'm finally digging myself out today. The last three months have been considerably more stressful than I thought they would be. BUT! I should get to move home in less than seven weeks! My kitchen, my closet, my *home*! I can finally unpack! I find it interesting that the new season of GoT starts up just as I'll be getting back. Coincidence or fate? I'ma wall-mount my 50" TV like it's never been wall-mounted before... seriously, I never got around to it before. But now, oh yes, it's on.
GREY WORM

He stood flanked by his comrades on the mountain ridge looking down on a hopeless sight... Groh Harbor, the Human-Orc city by the sea, and its impressive fortification. They would have to go deep into enemy territory to get into the city and once inside, a High Elf would not be welcome. Parts of the barricade crumbled from damage while being rebuilt in other places. That wall reaffirmed the righteousness of his choice to take Drogo all those years ago. The efforts of both sides bore no fruit other than erecting this barrier to divide them.

"Sehanine save us," Pod stared overawed at the surrounded city. All around that wall, his people lived a meaningless life, suffering a perpetual cease-fire. Grey Worm would stop at nothing now to save them, no matter the danger.

"I did try to warn you," Grey Worm sighed. "This mission will be fraught with peril."

"I'm not afraid," Arry sneered down at the camp.

"That's what scares me most," Gendry turned his back on the view and walked to stand beside Drogo. Their leader refused to look in the city's direction, staring off into the sky and seemingly lost in thought. As a youngling, Drogo could never shield his thoughts from Grey Worm. They learned much from each other in their time together.

"How can the city survive?" Nhee still had the heart of a youngling, concerned for the people more than herself. In his long life, he learned that young ones could be the wisest in the group.

"The land here is fertile," he explained. "Enough for Groh Harbor to sustain its population." Enough for his leaders to proclaim this place their 'promised land'.

"Then it can never grow larger," she deduced and he nodded in answer.

"Arry," he gained the Halfling's attention, "you and Nhee will come with me." Grey Worm waved them both over to stand by his side. "We will meet a friend who can lead us through the camp and into Groh Harbor. She helps refugees, many of my people see the failure of our leaders but to speak against them is treason."

"Take no risks," Drogo approached and put a hand on Grey Worm's shoulder.

"If we are discovered," Grey Worm put on a brave face. "I can teleport without an incantation carrying Nhee. Your identity might be revealed and the whole camp will be crawling with enforcers. Then we would have to think of another plan."

"What about Arry?" Gendry often showed excessive concern when the Halfling was involved. Humans have such short life spans yet rarely act on their feelings.

"Who asked you to worry about me?" Arry rested a hand on the health of her dagger. "I can disappear into the shadows - they'll never know I was there." She and Nhee took each of Grey
Worm's hands as he bowed his head to begin the incantation.

"Lye auta wanwie i' tal ram," he murmured just louder than a whisper. A white light flashed in front of his eyes and the familiar swirling sensation twisted his stomach. When he blinked his eyes open again, they stood just behind a large tent on the outskirts of the camp. The Halfling moved faster than he knew she could, grabbing some nearby garments from a clothesline. Arry and Nhee donned the dark tunics, veils, and headscarves. With their faces covered, they could pass for females of his kind.

"This way," he guided them into the encampment. Grey Worm left his own hood up, in case they passed someone he knew. Unlikely, most of his friends had been tortured and killed for being 'traitors'. That senseless cruelty was a ploy to goad him out of hiding. One by one, his family and friends lost their lives simply because they knew him.

"This is tragic," Arry whispered, looking around at the hopeless people. Old women sat on the sandy ground with babies in their arms. Young and old men, and young women worked tirelessly to provide food for the elite and their forces. The people only retained enough sustenance to keep their families alive. "Why would your leaders do this?"

"On the promise of prophecy," he looked around and everywhere saw the heartbreaking struggle. "Our clan started as captured prisoners of war to be sold as slaves. One ship, transporting a thousand people, sailed into a sudden terrible storm. The craft went ashore on an island, barren of life or food."

"That's awful," Nhee's voice trembled as she scampered to stay close by his side.

"How did they survive?" The Halfling's interest surprised Grey Worm, filling his heart with unexpected nostalgia. It felt bittersweet to speak of these things in this place.

"Of those thousand prisoners," he explained, "one possessed the gift of foresight. Some even called her a prophet while all recognized her gift. The prophet foretold that a ship would arrive to save everyone and she would return to lead our people when we claimed our rightful home. Her first prediction came true not an hour after her passing."

"You don't believe in that bullshit anymore," she surmised.

"I believe it with everything I am," he corrected her mistaken assumption.

"Then why betray your people?" The Halfling could live another hundred years and never fully understand his motives.

"Our leaders interpreted the prophecy wrong," he kept his voice low as everyone around them could be an enemy. Those who withhold information from the leadership find themselves accused of treason. "They prey on the blind ignorant faith of my people or use fear to intimidate them. I believe that the prophet has come again to lead my people home."

"Do you mean yourself?" The Dragonborn's soft question caused Grey Worm to chuckle, though his spirit remained somber. Before he could answer, a familiar voice resonated within his head.

'It has been too long, my old friend.' White Dove's internal voice always sounded like she was smirking.

'I will be at the rendezvous point momentarily.' He sent his thoughts to White Dove while retaining his fluctuating emotions. Anticipation bubbled in his stomach, a feeling he long since forgot about. After all this time, the thought of seeing his childhood truelove still made him nervous. Everyone assumed they would grow up and marry, even them. He supposed life wasn't over yet, there might be a space for them in the world of peace he longed to bring to fruition. Grey Worm led his comrades
to the rendezvous point where White Dove waited in a pale gray headscarf and dark patterned tunic.

"Grey Worm," she smiled as he approached, more beautiful than ever.

"White Dove," he walked to meet her, taking her outstretched hand into his. "You have my thanks for risking yourself in this way."

"Quick," she turned to lead him down a back alley. "We must not tarry any longer or the enforcers will become suspicious."

"Does the leadership know we've come back?" Grey Worm looked over his shoulder to make sure Nhee and Arry were following close behind.

"When don't they know something?" White Dove was still vivacious but there was a subtle tiredness to her smile. "My mind is so shielded, I barely know my own thoughts."

"You must know how grateful I am for your help," he squeezed her hand, allowing his gratitude to pour forth into her mind.

"I trust you, Grey Worm." She looked at him with the sudden serious expression, even a hint of tears collected in her eyes. "I always have."

"Someone is coming," Arry hissed from behind. Grey Worm expanded his psychic detection, sensing several enforcers coming their way.

"Run," Grey Worm waved for his comrades to pass him. White Dove took the lead as he brought up the rear of their group. She led them through alleyways tucked behind stuffed together tents until they made it to the city wall. Against the stone and steel reinforced wall, a young wizard strained to hold open a portal. The disciple clearly had talent yet it was being drained rapidly by fear. No warning came as a paralyzation spell flung passed his ear, courtesy of an enforcer.

"Halt!" The leader of the enforcers teleported in front of their group as four other surrounded them. Grey Worm recognized the tall dour man as a fellow pupil of his tutor. Harry did not hesitate to fish her small bow from her satchel and shot an arrow at the leader. The lanky High Elf deflected the attack easily with a shield spell but left his other side unguarded. Nhee flicked a spray of embers at him, setting his long dark robe aflame. "CLOSE THAT PORTAL," the leader of the enforcers shrieked as he tried to extinguish the flames.

"Keep it open!" White Dove yelled to her young resistance member. "Don't you dare close that hole!" Unfortunately, the lad panicked and abandoned the open portal in the wall. "Bloody Hells!" She raced to the wall and held the portal open. "Grey Worm, go! I'll hold them off!" White Dove began chanting softly as Grey Worm stood at her back to give her cover.

"I won't abandon you," Grey Worm stood his ground, hurling a lightning bolt at the nearest enforcer.

"Elf!" Arry called his attention to the portal. "We've got a problem, riders coming from the other side!" Their problems increased tenfold when several more enforcers appeared and began attacking immediately. Nhee performed an advanced fire wall attack that held off their foes long enough to make it to the portal. "Come on Nhee - now!" The Halfling shoved to the Dragonborn through the portal and then jumped through herself. Grey Worm made sure he was the last through the portal. White Dove pushed him aside to close the portal before collapsing exhausted against the wall.

"Everyone kneel!" Grey Worm dropped to his knees, wanting to show the approaching Human riders that they were no threat.
"What?!" Arry still stood, dagger in hand and ready to fight.

"Do as I say, Halfling!" She glared at him but sheathed the knife and slowly knelt. "We mean no harm," he called to the riders. "We surrender ourselves!"

"Who are you?" The burly Human sat astride a powerful war horse raised his crossbow, pointing it at their group.

"More refugees," his long-legged androgynous comrades spoke up, sneering at them. She turned to the robust Human male, assumedly the leader and lowered her voice. "Shep, we should lock them with the others."

"The people who come here," White Dove trembled with rage. "Are escaping one prison and you-!"

"Now is not the time for debate," Grey Worm interrupted her before addressing the leader. "I am the one who stole Prince Drogo many years ago. I have come to return him to his parents."

"You have the prince?" Human leader chuckled as he dismounted and moved to stand in front of Arry. "Little small for half-Orc, isn't he?"

"I'm not Drogo you dunderheaded oaf," Arry spit on the man's leather boots, "and when he gets here I'll tell him all about you. What's your name?"

"Mouth on you," the Human grabbed her by her collar and pulled her to stand, lifting her off the ground.

"Feet too," she reared back her foot.

"Arry, no!" Grey Worm spoke too late... Arry had already kicked the Human and his codpiece. The red-faced man dropped the squirming Halfling and grasped between his legs. The other Humans burst into action, dropping from their horses with weapons in hand.

"GO," Arry screamed, shoving to the incapacitated Human to the ground. "Get out of here now!" Without thinking, Grey Worm grabbed White Dove's arm and teleported on pure instinct. Once the world stopped spinning, both of them were kneeling on soft grass. His comrades soon surrounded them with offers of assistance and rapid questions.

"Where's Arry?" Gendry was the first to reach them, stooping to help Grey Worm to his feet. Nymeria whined for her mistress as Hot Pie helped White Dove stand.

"Where's Nhee?!" Pod put a cork in his wine flask as he joined them.

"Wah' happen'd, comrade?" Hot Pie moved to stand too close by Grey Worm's side and the whole group was crowding them.

"I made it inside the wall," he finally managed to speak. "It did not go as planned..." Grey Worm looked to White Dove but she only returned his helpless stare. Both Arry and Nhee were prisoners now, because he chose to save his love.

"Let's go now," Gendry was ready to go charging in without a plan.

"We should wait for the cover of dark," Grey Worm insisted. "I can only teleport to a place my eyes have seen and the city peacekeepers will be watching."

"Are Nhee and Arry waiting for us?" Podrick narrowed his eyes at Grey Worm and flooded his
conscious with guilt.

"You could say that," he shifted his guilty eyes to Drogo. 'I have failed you.' Yet his leader only shook his head, turning his gaze towards Groh Harbor. The half-Orc did not need to telepathically explain his thoughts. Drogo had faith in Arry and Nhee or else never would have accepted them into the group in the first place. "They were captured by Humans, I did not see any Orcs among the peacekeepers."

"That," Drogo continued to stare at the city, "will change." Grey Worm believed him.

MISSANDEI

Every morning she woke up forgetting the last two weeks... that pop passed away and Torgo changed. Missa held onto the hope that seized her heart when he requested they meet today after school. She sat in her last class as long as she could, to ponder on what to say. Every time they spoke, it always ended badly to say the least.

"Missa, are you alright?" Ms. Durrandon interrupted Missa's pessimistic musing.

"I will be," she had to believe that. She closed her eyes, sucked in a deep breath, and exhaled very slowly. Finally, she stood up from her desk, gathered her bag and headed out to the place they promised to meet. She would not even consider that he intended to break up with her today. She rounded the building to see him sitting on a bench, looking up into the cloudy sky. Somber neutral colors dulled his conservative wardrobe, his hair was shorn to the scalp. No more vivid rims framed his spectacles... just gray. Like he decided overnight to grow up and become the man he thinks pop wanted him to be.

"Torgo," she forced a smile as she sat down beside him.

"Hi," he looked down at his shoes as he greeted her. He still avoided her eyes when they met, but not out of shyness. It was more like he could not bear to look at her because it pained him.

"I'm happy you wanted to meet." Missa forced as much cheerfulness into her voice as she could. "How are you?"

"Okay," he nodded slowly, looking anything but 'okay'. Torgo never cried, not one single teardrop in front of her. She did plenty of crying for both of them. The last time they met, she ended up sobbing and making a fool of herself. It happened the time before as well, and the time before that. For the gods' sake, he lost his father and she only met the man few times. Even so, pop's passing changed everything for them.

"Then... that's..." Her throat tightened but she swallowed hard, the last thing she wanted was to start crying again. That's all she seemed to do around him anymore so of course he hated being around her. "Can I do anything for you?"

"I don't need you to do stuff for me, Missa." At odds with his words, his voice did not betray any annoyance, only resignation. "Can't you just sit here with me? There's something I have to say face-to-face..." Then it happened, she could not hold back anymore, the tears streamed out of her eyes and down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," she covered her face but it did nothing to hide her emotional state. Missa bit the inside of her lip hard to control the sudden and humiliating waterworks. The pain only made her want to cry even more.

"Why...?" Torgo asked the question she simultaneously asked herself. Missa had no idea why she
was crying, she never cried this much in her life. "Please don't cry," he requested without offering any comfort and it was selfish of her to expect any.

"I'm sorry," her stomach hurt from trying to control her automatic weeping.

"It's okay," he puffed out a breath, "I'm sorry."

"I don't know what to say," her voice quivered but she forced the words out. "Every time I see you, I start to cry and I cannot stop it." She huffed tiny breaths between her words and thought she sounded like a whiny child. "I am so scared that we are breaking up... if you need space because you're grieving, I understand. So, are we...?" She did not really want an answer.

"I just need some time," his eyes remained glued to the cement. "When I'm with you I want to feel happy but I don't want to feel happy right now. And I making you miserable, I don't want that either. Does that make sense?"

"Don't worry about me," she dabbed her eyes with her fingers. "Whatever you need, Torgo. I'm just so sorry about pop."

"He really liked you," a hint of a smile curled his lips. She thought of those lips on her own and wondered if she would ever feel that softness again.

"The feeling was mutual," she sniffled and tried to smile. "How is your mother?"

"Stronger than she looks," his spine straightened up at the mention of his mother.

"It runs in your family," she tried her best to give him a cheery smile but it fell short.

"I love you, Missa." He finally looked at her and she wished he had continued to conceal the dogged resolve behind his thick glasses. Torgo might not say the words 'I'm dumping you' but essentially, that is what he meant. "My feelings for you haven't changed... but I think I've changed and I need to get used to it."

"I love you too," she whispered, afraid to start crying again. Thankfully that did not happen and both of them sat in silence for a while, neither knowing what to say. After some time passed Torgo stood up without a word and walked away. He never looked back and she watched him until he disappeared around a building. Perhaps it had all been said without having to say it. Love is all well and good but it does not heal all wounds nor solve all problems.

After he left, all her tears dried up and she did not feel like crying at all. How does that makes sense?! Anger bubbled up inside her, but Missa did not know who to direct it at. This is what she deserved for being ungracious about Dany and Margaery's dramatic lives. Even though she knew they never deserved a moment of unhappiness she still assumed they made it worse for themselves. Missa expected cold rational compartmentalization from her heartbroken friends, never really knowing how it felt. Well, now she knew and wished she didn't. This sad state of affairs felt dramatic enough for her entire lifetime.

Chapter End Notes

Cute art of teen Dany and Missa [I saw on Deviantart]:
I needed a change so I started posting a new fic. Check it out: "A Trueborn Prince" (alt-uni-canon fic in which Gendry is the crown prince. You're welcome.)
Sheri stood in the center of her room, holding her phone in her trembling hand and just staring at it. She wanted this for so long but never actually thought it would happen. Bran was coming to Kings Landing for the entirety of Spring Break - a full week! Arya just called to give her the good news so it was only a matter of moments before Bran called. Through her elation, a sharp thorn of fear pierced her heart. They fell so fast for each other and this was all still so new.

In Winterfell, things happen so easily between them so she did not have to make any effort. What if that easiness stayed behind up north? She didn't know the first thing about being a good girlfriend. She only just started learning how to be a good friend! What if she said or did something that jeopardized his feelings for her? The phone rang and her thumb slid over the answer button before her mind could stop it.

"Hi," she cleared her throat to cover the climbing pitch of her voice. Bran could detect even the slightest tremor so she had to keep calm.

"Hey," he sounded fairly pleased with himself. "I assume my sister ruined everything by telling you first." Sheri didn't mind as Arya pulled it off by finally making up with her father.

"I just heard," her voice betrayed genuine shock but nothing else. "I almost don't believe it." Sheri sat down in her desk chair and braced an elbow against the top. The waves of shifting emotion had yet to subside, washing her with flashes of joy and trepidation.

"Believe it," his enthusiasm only made her feel guilty for being nervous. What if her lack of confidence drove him away? "Spring Break will be here before you know it." It could not come soon enough for her.

"I can't wait to see you in only six days," she meant that sincerely. The wait would be the worst part, all her nervousness would melt away when she saw his grinning face in real life. In person, it was impossible to ignore the way he looked at her. What if her imagination embellished the interest in his gaze?

"I'm worth the wait," he confided in a mock conspiratorial whisper.

"I am well aware of that fact," she went for some lighthearted flirtatious banter but came out a bit strained. Sheri closed her eyes and prayed he did not hear the odd inflection.

"There's something weird with your voice," he picked up on it right away. "What's wrong?"

"If I tell you what I was thinking," she buried her face against her hand. "You will think I'm foolish." There was no point in trying to hide it, so she tried to downplay it. "It's just my silly mind messing with itself."

"I already cherish your eccentricities," he assured her. "Nothing can ever diminish my enduring respect for you." Bran exuded a kind of comfortable confidence that Sheri would never have. Her
knee bounced up and down in a nervous habit of tapping her heel against the ground.

"I sometimes worry," she hesitated before taking a deep breath and letting it spill. "It is possible that our romance was inspired by the lovely winter holiday atmosphere." Perhaps they were swept up in the drama of Winterfest and it heightened their feelings. How else could their instant connection be explained?

"You think I won't still like you in the summertime," he chuckled, not taking her concerns seriously.

"I told you it was foolish," she had to admit at least that much. She loathed her tendency to lie awake at night, thinking of every possible dreadful scenario.

"No more than my worry," his sigh whooshed like a wind tunnel in her ear.

"And that would be?" Sheri knew he wasn't serious or else she would immediately be plunged into a sea of panic.

"That I will like you even better in the summer," he admitted with exaggerated dread.

"Is there really a danger of that happening?" Sheri grinned in spite of her jittery nerves keeping her on the edge of her chair.

"Think of it," he complained, "the sunshine cascading through your long dark hair. I'm inevitably doomed to see you in shorts and a tank top. How will I survive that sort of torture?"

"You poor thing," she rolled her eyes.

"I never knew that I could like anyone as much as I like you." Bran's voice softened and lowered, sending a shiver down her spine. "Gods only know how much more I can want to kiss you."

"Easy now," she giggled, "it won't do if I have a heart attack before we meet again."

"I'll save the heart attacks until Spring Break," he teased. "Should we make plans for what to do during my visit?"

"Let's just go with whatever we want to do right when we want." That way there wouldn't be too much pressure on her to show him a good time. Sadly, in Kings Landing there were no special places she wanted to show him.

"Sounds like a good time," he laughed softly, in keeping with his easy-going nature. "Just blow wherever the wind takes us, I like that."

"What if all I want is for you to hold me the whole time?" Sheri's cheeks flushed hot as she asked the question.

"Then my arms will get tired," he acknowledged, "but I won't let go." Bran went quiet a moment and Sherry imagined he was smiling at nothing just like her. "There's somewhere I want to take you," he revealed, "it's a surprise."

"You are planning to surprise me in the city I live?" Sheri huffed a laugh at his apparently unceasing boldness. "That's a bit audacious, Brandon Stark."

"Audacious is my middle name," he declared with enthusiasm. That reminded her of Arya's insistence that her middle name was 'danger'.

"You Starks have such strangely descriptive middle names." Sheri knew for a fact his middle name
was 'Artos' but decided it was more fun to play along.

"My parents are cool like that," he joked.

"Speaking of parents," her mind went back to worrying. They would be closer than ever distance-wise, but would have to not raise his parents' suspicions. Mrs. Stark gave Sherry a few hard long looks of the last few days of Winterfest.

"They don't think I'm capable of dating." His sad tone squeezed her heart, she knew how that felt.

"My parents are the same," she sighed, "I guess there's an upside to everything. Arya spends so much energy hiding Gendry - I don't think I could do it."

"Arya's problem is she has no patience," he contended and not for the first time. "What would happen if I couldn't come down there for Spring Break?"

"Nothing would change," she supposed they would carry on as usual.

"I would still call you every day after school," he agreed but it still surprised her. "And someday, maybe years from now, we'd meet again." He always said the most wonderful things, they were hard to believe sometimes.

"You really feel that way?" Sheri regretted asking the question, thinking it sounded like an accusation.

"Don't you?" He laughed instead of being angry over her doubt. "Aren't I in your head every night when you go to sleep?"

"Stay out of my head," she chastised lightly, "my thoughts are private." Bran ignored her cheerful reprimand and waited for a real answer. "I'm always only thinking about you."

"That's not gonna change." Bran seemed so sure of himself but then, that's how he always spoke. "I won't stop thinking about you either."

"You're so confident," she did not bother to hide her jealousy.

"When it comes to you," he insisted quietly. "Don't miss me, Sheri: I'm coming to you in six days."

"I'm waiting," she promised.

**DAENERYS**

Irri and Rakharo stopped talking to each other after their innocent night spent sleeping next to each other. That's how she and Drogo first started their relationship. Without Marge's encouragement, Dany would certainly have mucked up her chance. Only Irri, stubborn like all Dothraki, never sought the counsel of the great matchmaker living in the same house. Meanwhile, they all had to suffer through the silence and longing looks across the breakfast table.

Enough was enough: she had to step up her matchmaking. Drogo would tell her to mind her own business but he would be wrong. This is her business! From personal experience, she knew how happy a good relationship makes a person. Those two really liked each other but their parent's traditions were holding them back. How silly is that? No, it was past time for someone to do something and that would be her. She started by finding Rakharo repairing the fence near the house.

"M'ath, Rakharo." Dany approached him as casually as she could but made an effort not to appear as
if she was acting casual.

"Hey Dany," he greeted her with a friendly smile, "hash yer dothrae chek asshekh?"

"I always ride well," she boasted and he chuckled. "Listen, I know it's none of my business." She was so full of shit it was difficult not to burst out laughing. "Irri asked me to ask you to meet her in the barn."

"Really?" Rakharo's dark brows knitted together in concern. "How did she seem?"

"A little nervous but," she let her words trail off, "never mind."

"Tell me," he was hooked.

"Irri smiled when she said your name," she falsely confessed. "I think she's planning to tell you something."

"Really?" His head turned towards the back of the house, in the direction of the barn. "Is she out there now?"

"She will meet you there," she explained. "Should I go tell her you agree?" He seemed to deliberate a moment before nodding his head.

"Sure," he agreed, putting down his tools and picking up a rag to wipe his forehead.

"I will go tell her," she smiled again before turning around and sauntering to the house. Once she was out of Rakharo's eyeshot, she broke into a sprint. Dany raced up the stairs and tore through the house to catch Irri walking out of the hallway. "Irri," she caught the girl by the arm, "you will never believe what just happened! Rakharo just came up to me and begged me to ask you to meet him."

"Is something wrong?!" Irri's brown eyes opened wide in utter panic.

"He was," Dany feigned hesitation. "Oh never mind, I shouldn't say."

"What is it?" Her concern for Rakharo was so adorably obvious.

"His eyes were watery and red," she whispered. "He refused to tell me the reason but he seemed desperate to see you."

"Really?" Irri covered her gaping mouth. "Do you think he cried because of me?" Dany held back her internal celebration and took Irri by her shoulders.

"He wants to meet in the barn right now," she urged Irri towards the door. "He's waiting for you."

"What should I do?" Irri looked so torn that Dany almost felt guilty for playing with her. "I don't want him to be hurt but he's been so difficult! I don't know if things can work between us. His mindset is just too old-fashioned and I need to date him before I ever consider marrying him."

"Then go tell him that," she coaxed. "He needs to hear it once and for all."

"Alright," the nerve-racked girl nodded slowly, "I'll go." She marched forward to the front door and walked out with her head held high. Dany waited a moment and quietly followed to see Irri's dark curls disappearing into the barn. She approached the door and retrieved the bar, fitting it into place and then letting it slide home with a loud thump. "Is anyone out there?" Irri banged on the barn door but it was closed tight.
"Hello?!" Rakharo joined her in banging on the door. "Dany, Drogo!!!" The couple's shouting brought Drogo running from the outside fence. He stopped when she grinned at him, confessing everything with one look.

"Fin ajjin ojil?" Drogo's dark eyebrows rose slightly as he approached her: his 'worried' expression. "What did you do?" He keeps trying to stop her from setting up Irri and Rakharo but she planned to continue undeterred.

"I did what needed to be done," she grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the barn. "They needed a little push so I helped them spend some time together." Drogo stopped and extracted his arm from her light grasp.

"Dany," his black eyes stared hard at her, "no."

"You can't tell me what to do, Drogo." She smiled at him, not bothering to hide her smugness. "Anha'm jin ivedz chiori." Dany reasserted her status as an untamable woman.

"No good will come of it," he shook his head and looked up towards the loft. "They will climb out."

"I removed the ladders," she chuckled evilly.

"You have no control in this," he crossed his arms and looked down at her. "Yeri rhellaya ajjin edavrasa."

"Anha efichisak haz yeroon!" Dany disagreed that her interference was making things worse. "Don't be such a sourpuss," she pouted and tried to shake his arms loose but his stance did not change. "You're not really mad are you?"

"No," he relaxed his posture and she curled her hands around his arm again.

"I am sorry that my antics interrupted your work," she rested her head on his shoulder as they walked towards the outside fence. "I decided how I want to celebrate my eighteenth birthday," she revealed. "I will celebrate the end of girlhood with a final sleepover." Dany raised her head to look up at him. "Do I need to explain what a slumber party is?"

"No," he answered in his usual way.

"And the next day," she gave his arm a little squeeze. "Will be just for us." Drogo nodded but did not seem enthusiastic. "If it will make you happy, I will take down the bar." He looked down at her and gave another solemn nod. "Alright, you talked me into it." She stood up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek and spun around to jog to the barn, slowing as she approached. As quietly as she could, she removed the bar and crept away. If her suspicions were right, they wouldn't try to open that door for quite a while. On her way to the house, she pulled out her phone and dialed Sansa's number.

"Hello Dany," Sansa answered in a singsong voice.

"Hello Sansa," she echoed. "I already asked Arya and she said yes so I hope you will too." Dany realized she was putting the cart before the horse. "Sorry," she stopped rambling, "I'm going out of order. I'm having a sleepover and all the girls will be there. You have to come, it won't be the same without you."

"I would not miss it for the world," Sansa's enthusiasm rang in her voice. "Slumber parties are so my thing!"

"I knew it," Dany performed a little soft-shoe victory dance on the gravel. "Perfect, I will text you
the details later and adorable pajamas are mandatory."

"I can't wait!" Sansa could always be counted on for some girlish enthusiasm. Dany stood outside the house and chatted for a moment with Sansa before hanging up. She headed inside and immediately set to work putting the ranch in order. Once, she would have thought herself above 'women's work' and considered it a waste of her talents. After living on the ranch, she realized housework is essential to get anything done.

The guys work themselves to exhaustion, doing things she would never have the strength to do. They depended on Irri to carry the entire household. Without hearty food prepared, they would go hungry or eat food with no nutrition. Dany took it upon herself to lock Irri up so she accepted the responsibility of her work. And work it was! Laundry, dishes, sweeping, mopping, washing windows, and cleaning toilets! If only mother saw her doing this 'servant's work'!

That was the problem, not the 'women's work' or the 'servant's work', but the common scorn held for those jobs. The work absolutely needed to be done, but many people lack appreciation for this back-breaking labor. Dany could never bring herself to perform these tasks if it went unappreciated. Thankfully, the men in this house understand the balance of ranch life. Even Ortho praised her cooking once with a 'davra'. Drogo walked in, interrupting her thoughts just as she started work in the kitchen.

"I have set them free," she called over her shoulder, "if they wish to leave."

"Good," Drogo shook his head. Dany's stomached fluttered with giddiness as she moved around the kitchen to clean the day's mess. How did she feel more carefree now, only three days from adulthood, than ever? She looked over to see him peeking out the back window, a smile on his face against all the odds. Despite his protests, he cared about what happened between those two out in the barn.

"Still not coming out?" Dany feigned casual interest but really wanted to know.

"You could have left the ladders," he chuckled softly and left the window to stand beside her. Drogo picked up a towel and started wiping off the counter. This whole scene felt so domestic and Dany wondered at the impossibility of her own feelings. She felt more grown up and childish at exactly the same time. Perhaps that is the secret to growing up, learning how to embrace one's inner child instead of suppressing them. For the sake of maturing, she flicked a few drops of water at him and giggled at his dark stare. He retaliated with a flick of his washcloth but she shimmied out of the way.

They continued cleaning, taking little swipes at each other to keep the mood light. Even when they disagreed, their relationship was strong enough to endure. Unconditional acceptance was still a new thing to her but she was fast growing used to it. Her childhood was a whirlwind of her father's breakdowns and endless tutors. Her mother expected the perfect child, so Dany endured her childhood until it killed her desire to be childish. At least, that's what she thought until she came to the ranch and found a place in Drogo's family.

Chapter End Notes

This one is for Ysabela, who wanted a Dany and Drogo chapter. Don't hesitate to request a POV if you're missing a character lately.

SPRING BREAK! Whoooooo! Bran is coming, Cat is coming... and Robb is coming.
How will Myrcella react? Things to look forward to so stay tuned!

It's been a lot of work (and no one asked for it so I don't expect thanks) but I think my Dothraki Translator is workable enough to go into a 'beta' phase. ([http://lingojam.com/DothrakiTranslator](http://lingojam.com/DothrakiTranslator)) If anyone has any translation suggestions leave a comment! (Seriously go nuts.) I just took it public but it's not nearly there. Use it for whatever your needs are and help would be much appreciated! (Dear gods please help me I'm so 'yofi norethaan' for undertaking this project!) If there is a word that the translator cannot convert please take a look on this page - Dothraki Vocabulary. Please leave the word or phrase, and the definition, in the translator's comments!

“There is no shortage of fault to be found amid our stars.”
“Hazze ajjin vo gerikh ki ziyenelat tat tikh ez ma kishi shieraki.”

I won't say *nobody* appreciates me, but I don't think anyone appreciates *just* how awesome I really am.
"Doc," she barged into the office, dragging her overstuffed schoolbag on the ground with one hand and wiping her forehead with the other. H'ghar stood over his desk, shuffling a few papers in his hands. "Awesome-sauce, I don't have time to waste today." She practically dove into her chair, dropping her bag on the floor and looking at him expectantly. The doc took his sweet time settling into his seat, and then folded his hands in his lap.

"Last time you offered to explain why 'trust is a waste of time'." Of course, today wasn't going to be an easy one. When did the doc ever let her have it easy? Tonight dad wanted her home early for 'family dinner', so Sansa expected her little sister to be there and would make that pretty-face-of-disappointment if Arya didn't make an appearance. That didn't leave her any time to see Gendry and he had the whole night off. This appointment was cutting into her real life.

"Fine," she sighed and rolled her eyes, expecting this on some level. "The 'lie' is streaming to us twenty-four-seven - corporate-manufactured news, music, movies, and television. My stupid generation lives for it - we live by it. Those same juvenile sheeple mock the absurdity of religion-driven motivation. That's - why 'trust is a waste of time'. We're all being lied to all the time." Arya folded her arms and sat back, feeling smug. "Most of us never realize it."

"You think television and religion are outright lies?" His lack of reaction disappointed her just the tiniest bit. It's not like she expected praise for higher thinking - but still. The doc seemed like a smart man, she wasn't saying anything he didn't already know.

"Of course they are," she sneered. "All meant to control the masses in the exact same way. The Septons used to tell us how to live but we've 'evolved' since then. Now the flickering box tells us how to look, how to think, and who to be." Not her, she saw through it and despised the ridiculous and obvious way the almighty 'TV' is the new religion of the ignorant masses.

"Can you give me an example?" His line of questioning caught her off-guard. Today she hoped they would work more on meditation so she could show off her hard work on self-introspection. The dark woods in her subconscious were becoming familiar and new pathways revealed themselves. Still, none of the paths she found led to her relentless pursuer and she could not stop running through her mind.

"Just one example?" Arya couldn't think of the best case to make her point because there were far too many. "I've never been to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, most people haven't. I have no idea how an AA meeting actually is. What I know about it is a manufactured fictional version of AA." She blinked, breaking their eye contact, dumbfounded by his blank stare. "It's got 'anonymous' in the name, but everyone knows exactly what an AA meeting is supposedly like."

"How does that affect you?" H'ghar wanted this to be personal, but it wasn't. Arya simply shook her head in response while none-too-subtly fishing her phone out of her pocket to check the time. "Couldn't a person struggling with addiction be persuaded to try a meeting because of a fictional portrayal?" Somehow, his lack of approval seemed argumentative - challenging her opinions just like
everyone else. "Is fiction really the same thing as lies?"

"That's not what I said," she shoved her phone away and glowered at the cryptic doctor supposedly 'helping' her. Yeah, helping her waste time! "It's the faith in the fiction that makes it a lie," she insisted. "If everyone believes a lie - doesn't that make it the 'truth'? We're such good liars that we fool ourselves all the time."

"You count yourself among liars and fools?" This sharply dressed sudo-guru, staring at her over his thin frameless glasses, was the last thing she would have pictured when imagining a therapist. Before she came to the doc, she thought therapy was a stuffy room and an unpleasant disapproving man with a clipboard. Because that was the image of 'therapy' bored into her brain over her lifetime.

"I do," she sniffed and looked away, "it's no using lying to myself anymore - I'm too smart."

"You compared modern entertainment to dying religions-"

"They're still clinging to life in my home," she assured him. Dad must be the last person alive still worshiping the Old Gods and her mother constantly bemoaned the dwindling followers of the Seven. Except, over half the people in Parliament identify as a follower of the Seven, so it's a slow passing.

"Is that your true resentment," he dug in deeper, "with your parent's old-fashioned morals?" H'ghar got stuck in the details while she couldn't move any closer to the big picture. What was the point of wasting this much time? She felt a lot better than before so maybe she didn't need a counselor anymore. "Are television shows and movies not the parables of our time? Don't they teach us something, even if we disagree with the message?"

"Forget TV and religion," she sighed and dropped her weary head into her hand. "That's not what any of this is about."

"What is 'this' about?" He wasn't a very good therapist, asking her to solve where her 'crazy' was coming from - that's his job. "Isn't it about trust?"

"Lies," she corrected. "The world rewards good liars and punishes people for wanting to live their own truth." A long time ago, she thought about hiding her true self to make everyone else happy. When she did her best to 'fix' herself - it looked ridiculous. Arya knew she would make a bigger fool out of herself by trying to keep up some make-believe version of herself. "People assume there's something wrong with me if I don't want to be like a 'normal' girl."

"Do you think there is something wrong with you?" Above all others, that had to be the stupidest question the doc ever asked.

"I'm here, aren't I?" Arya waved a hand around the room - a shrink's office. "There's obviously something wrong with me. Still," she leaned back, breathing a heavy sigh. "Most of the time I don't think I'm the crazy one, everyone else seems nuts to me. Everyone but Gendry, I get him at least." Once she recognized that he loved her, everything he did always seemed perfectly reasonable. She didn't need to know 'why' to just accept the facts.

"And you feel pressured to lie," he surmised, "in order to survive in a world of liars."

"I lie every day," she stared down at her sneakers. "But I couldn't that day." Arya bit down hard on the inside of her cheek - she didn't want to talk about this!

"That day?" There he went again - the shorter the question, the harder to answer. His face betrayed no expression but Arya learned to pick up on the small changes that revealed his interest. Likewise, the doc learned to tell when she would not be pressured to say anything more. "Can you give me an
example of how the world 'rewards good liars'?"

"There are so many," she huffed a humorless laugh. "The person who hit my brother with their car should have stopped and called an ambulance." Her whole body started to tremble and her stomach clenched. "They just drove away like nothing happened and nobody knows they are a filthy child-cripper! Bran might walk today if they helped him but they ran away like cowards!"

"Give me something more personal, Arya." Was he never satisfied with her pain?!

"More personal than that?!" As impossible as that seemed, something came to mind right away. "Both of my older siblings dated before sixteen and got away with breaking my father's rule because they lied. I got caught the very first time I kissed a guy. I didn't get in trouble for breaking the rules - I didn't lie well enough! Lies are all people want and all they can give!" Arya stood up, grabbed her bag, and headed for the door.

"You still have ten minutes," he called after her.

"I'll take them with me," she muttered as she passed through the open door and shut it soundly behind her. Arya inhaled a deep breath and continued on her way out of the building. She really couldn't lie to herself anymore - she needed the doc's help. He taught her how to control her emotions and how to tap into her subconscious mind. Next week she'd apologize and stay an extra ten minutes if it made him happy. Today, she just needed to live her life instead of sitting around talking about it.

SANSA

She rushed down the hall towards the front of the school, clutching the straps of her backpack to keep it from jostling about. Volleyball practice went long today and she didn't like to keep Sandor waiting... and she missed him all day. It was all too tempting to try and wheedle a date out of him but today she had other plans. Sansa hurried to their usual meeting place to find him leaning against the Weirwood tree, looking down at something in his hand.

"Lover," she slipped her arm around his as she approached his side and looked down to see what held his attention. Sansa was pleasantly surprised to see there was a small book in his hand, which he closed and stuffed into his pocket. Sandor straightened up and turned to face her. "You waited here this whole time for me?"

"Could be," he grinned and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "I have an emergency."

"I think... I might have the same emergency," she whispered back before flashing a wicked smile.

"Let's roll," he started to walk ahead, taking her along by her hand.

"Nope," she stopped and pulled him in the other direction. Today she had to let romance take a backseat... Sansa had something very important to say.

"Nope?" All he had to do was stand still to become an immovable force so she was required to explain herself.

"This time I'm taking you somewhere," Sansa beamed a bright smile at his bewildered expression. "Don't argue," she turned his favorite phrase back on him. Sandor narrowed his dark eyes at her in confusion before shrugging like he didn't care.

"Anywhere my little bird wants to go," he let her lead him, "I will follow as her loyal hound."
"Nope," she laughed and wrapped her arm around his waist, "my man should always walk beside me." He slung one long arm around her shoulders and they walked together to her car, parting to get inside. As she drove, Sansa distracted herself by chatting away about her day. She described how practice went, and how much she was looking forward to this weekend. Sandor listened to her hopes and complaints, interjecting blunt comments when necessary.

Sandor did not ask where they were headed and even if he asked, she would not know exactly what to say. The ride took less time than she thought it would, and her nerves were starting to get a little jittery. Still, she refused to let nervous tension or fear stand in her way anymore. Sansa pulled her car up in front of the gate and butterflies flapped around in her stomach. She rolled down her window and reached out to punch the numbers into the keypad to open the gate.

"Where are we?" Sandor leaned forward to peer beyond the wrought iron gates but they were covered with beautiful trailing ivy.

"Apparently," she pulled her arm back inside to retake the wheel. "My father bought this house." Sansa slowly pulled her car in as the gate opened to reveal a beautiful mansion. "He plans to show it to my mother over Spring Break and convince her to stay in Kings Landing." A shockingly thoughtless idea in her opinion. She chewed on her lip to keep herself from saying more, timing would be very important for this conversation to go smoothly.

"Isn't that a good thing?" He picked up on the strained tone of her voice. "I know you miss your mom and brothers."

"I worry about my parents," she confessed quietly but left it at that. Sandor seemed to recognize her reluctance to talk about it and she was grateful for his understanding. Sansa parked and led him to the entry, opening the front door with the key daddy gave her.

"Fuck me," he whispered as they walked inside, his quiet voice echoing through the giant room. As she took a step inside, she glanced over to see him still hesitating in the doorway.

"Come on," she slipped her hand into his and led him further into the house.

"Whose furniture is this?" His fingers ran over the back of an armchair, stroking the silver brocade stitching in the fabric.

"It all came with the house," she explained. "A common practice with houses this size." Sansa walked into the front sitting room and a stood in the middle.

"Rich people are fucking weird," he snorted a laugh. Sandor had this way of making her feel bad about coming from a wealthy family but she recognized he did not mean to insult her. In his eyes, she wasn't a 'little rich princess' anymore because she worked hard to prove her loyalty. If only her hard work could extend to the rest of her family, maybe he wouldn't feel so intimidated anymore.

"Fuck me twice," his head swiveled around the room, "this room is bigger than my whole house."

"This is just a house," she stressed softly. "an unnecessarily big house. My father thinks if he shows this big beautiful house to my mom, she will want to move here."

"I would," he was still distracted by the house and not paying attention to the meaning of her words. She wanted to show Sandor or that this was just a big house, not part of her identity.

"This house is truly gorgeous and filled with many expensive things." Sansa stroked her fingers over the soft leather sofa, looking down to admire the light blue color. "In my life I have seen a lot of beauty and been happy far more often than sad. I can't help wanting to share some of my good
fortune with you."

"If you're trying to make a point," he moved to stand next to her, "I'm not getting it." Sandor's expression was almost suspicious and definitely wary. She wanted to have a serious conversation about their relationship but didn't think that had to be a bad thing. To buy herself time, she turned and walked further into the house towards a large staircase that led to the second story.

"I told you my younger brother is in a wheelchair?" Sansa sat on the bottom of the ostentatious staircase, wondering what her mother would think of these steps. The only other way to get upstairs is to take the service elevator in the back of the house. It would probably bother mom more than Bran, and daddy would stay oblivious because no one wanted to upset him.

"A hit-and-run, you said." Sandor took a seat next to her, a step higher to stretch out his legs... Maybe because he knew she had some difficult things to say. Was he keeping his distance for her comfort or his own? Sansa often felt she didn't have the right to be sad compared to her parents and even Arya, the closest of them all to Bran.

"I thought about it a lot after the accident," she confessed, "what life would be like in a wheelchair. For me it would mean giving up volleyball, I would never look down at anyone again, it would change the way people look at me." She dashed away a few tears and leaned forward to stare down at her shoes. "Neither of my parents has coped with the accident as well as any of us, including Bran."

"Shit," his soft curse held a sympathetic tone so she accepted it that way.

"Daddy is so focused on building up the company, for his family, he doesn't realize he's ignoring us." Once she started, every dark worry in her heart poured out. "He's blind to everything Arya has been going through. Mom treats Bran like a baby and goes to ridiculous lengths to protect him from everything." She wanted to look forward to her mother's visit but all of these fears overshadowed her anticipation.

"Sorry, little bird." Sandor braced his hand against the step he sat on and lowered down to sit beside her. "That's rotten luck, about your brother. I get why your parents can't handle it, but you shouldn't be so stressed about it." He took her hand into his own and gave it a little squeeze. "You're not alone, you can talk to me."

"Daddy thanks this big beautiful house will make us a 'whole' family again." Sansa lifted her head to admire the vaulted ceilings before turning her eyes towards him. "But no matter how big or beautiful, this is just a house. Even though my family has money, we have problems just like every family. I would never compare my family's problems with yours but I haven't been sheltered from everything. I can handle anything... I am not the damsel in my own story."

"I know that," he looked confused, like he didn't know if he should be defensive or supportive. "I've seen you handle a volleyball." Sandor missed her point and she worried that her explanations were too vague. Somehow, she recognized that there was a connection between his apparent inferiority complex and her family's wealth. It is probably the same issue he has with Dany... he can't relate to her because she is 'a rich girl'.

"We haven't been talking about the real danger out there," she insisted. "We don't know when or how, only that a bad man might amuse himself one day by hurting us."

"I dunno know what to say," his deep voice turned gruff with emotion. "If I were a good guy, I would stay away from you-"
"That's bullshit and you know it," she retorted, causing his surprised eyes to snap up to meet hers.

"Little bird," the corner of his mouth turned up, "you cussed." His apparent amusement did not amuse Sansa... this was important!

"It upsets me when you talk like that." She took her hand back and crossed her arms across her ribs. "I know why you think things like that."

"I can't help it," he sulked.

"I know that too," she blew out a frustrated breath... this wasn't going at all like she hoped. "I signed my sister and me up for a self-defense class yesterday."

"Good," he seemed somewhat relieved but not happy. Sandor stared down at his boots for a long time while she awaited the result of his contemplation. "You think I'll try to dump you again, I won't."

"That's not it, or not all of it." Sansa tried her best to put the words together and her head before speaking aloud. "I need us to move past the way you see my family's wealth. We both have to move past the little things if we are going to stay strong. Not just because of... him. You were right when you guessed my parents would never accept us if they knew your brother made threats against me." They would do anything to keep her safe, even break her heart.

"What would you do if they found out?" He asked the question she avoided asking herself because any answer would hurt somebody she loved.

"I don't know..." Sansa doubted she could go against her parents to that extent and knew giving up Sandor would be impossible. "But if anything scary happens, I know my parents would do anything to keep both of us safe. I know my father would never turn down anyone who asked for help."

"You're right, I'm still uneasy about you coming from money." His confession did not come easily but then his shoulder seemed to relax and he even smiled a little at her. "Might be, I'll never really think I deserve someone like you, except you say I do."

"I don't lie," she gave a tentative smile back.

"It's just that," he took her hand back and held it gently between both of his. "Every day I feel sorry - to you, your sister - your father. I won't do that anymore, fuck the small shit, other couples can bicker about nothing and everything. We won't be like that, I swear." Sandor looked so serious and it was completely inappropriate but a laugh bubbled up inside her and she could not contain it. "What's so funny?"

"I feel so grown up," she giggled and covered her reddening face with her free hand. Sander took a hold of her wrist and held both of her hands.

"We've the place to ourselves - could play house." His unabashed wicked tone left no room to misinterpret his words.

"In my parent's house?!" Even Sansa was not entirely sure why she was whispering so shrilly, as no one else was around. "You must have lost your mind."

"Well, they haven't moved in yet," he reasoned, as though he said a reasonable thing! Sansa stared at him, slack-jawed in a state of bewilderment, before standing up and heading for the door. "Sansa, wait," he caught up to her in a few short strides, "I'm just kidding!"
"I suddenly crave something sweet and cold," she turned to flash a smile at him. His worried expression melted away once he saw she was not really upset... maybe even a little tempted by his suggestion. "After," her smile turned wickedly coy, "we'll have dessert."

"We're okay?" A shadow of doubt still hung across Sandor's face. It would take some time for all she said to sink into his head but she was willing to have this conversation until he understood. To be strong enough, for anything that might try to damage their relationship, they had to admit any weaknesses and overcome them. They did not have to dwell on the fear of danger in order to be ready for it.

"I'm certain," she wrapped one hand around his arm and started towards the door. "If we both work hard, we will always be okay." They walked together to the entryway and he opened the door for her. Outside the air tasted cleaner and fresher than before she walked in and Sansa breathed it in deeply. Now that she knew what true happiness was, she would never let anyone take it away. Not even Sandor.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to sansa_sandor_shipper and MissMallora for suggesting a Sansan chapter - not sure if it's what ya'll were hoping for but this is what came to mind. I really enjoy fulfilling requests so... thanks! <3 And GO NOW to "Growing Up Northern" (http://archiveofourown.org/works/4158708/chapters/9384321) - the fic that gave me strength when I couldn't post because...

This should come as no shock to anyone as it should've been no real surprise to me: I have sustained a startlingly serious writing injury (RSI). What caught me off-guard was how severe the injury became and how long it lasted. In April, I started waking up with numb fingertips and that worsened over a few weeks. I applied sports cream regularly without questioning if writing fanfic is a 'sport'. Eventually, pain and weakness forced me to take a longer break than I'd've preferred.

After almost 5 weeks, I regained use of my left hand, but then my right hand started suffering the same symptoms from overuse. My immune system suffered because I could not take care of myself properly, bringing on a bad cold. Basically, life sucks. *However*, I can't give up so I simply have to look at this as an opportunity to work harder in a smarter way. I bought a new mouse for ambidextrous use, I will utilize speech-to-text programs more, and I will make periods of rest part of my writing routine.

If I can continue to post regularly without hurting myself, that would be as very gratifying ending to this dreadful experience. To everyone's reading, do yourself a favor and learn how to avoid wrist strain and Carpal Tunnel Syndrome - RIGHT NOW. Don't be a single-minded dolt like me and take care of your precious hands. I'm open to suggestions in the comments about preventing wrist strain and other typing-related injuries.
MYRCHELLA

With the occasional exception of her mother, everyone underestimated and ignored her. Contrary to mother's philosophy, shopping and chardonnay do not fix all life's problems. Neither does stalking but Myrcella was starting to get desperate, ever since she found out Robb was coming south. Cousin Shireen, who happened to be good friends with Arya Stark, revealed that tidbit of information.

It might be easier to befriend the younger Stark sister but that would only emphasize Myrcella's age. Sansa was her ticket, but getting closer to her proved difficult because they were not in the same grade. Sure, they spent time together at practice but the whole 'practicing' thing got in the way of deep conversation. This train of thought led her to the despicable act of stalking but it paid off to have a driver follow Sansa.

A few days ago, the girl went to a local community center and signed up herself and Arya up for a self-defense class. That's what Myrcella did too, for the exact same time as the Stark sisters. She needed to learn everything about Robb before he came down in order to make a better second impression. The first time they met, she barely said two words to him before stammering like a complete dummy! Oh, this had to work or she would just be some crazy girl!

Butterflies flapped around in Myrcella's stomach as students of the self-defense class, women of all ages and fitness began filing inside. What if the sisters changed their minds about the class? What if they caught on to her totally desperate stalking?! Just when she was about to give up, a familiar willowy redheaded figure floated into the room gracefully. This was it... time to put those acting classes to good use!

"Oh my gods!" Myrcella might have overly exaggerated her surprise but tried to smooth it out with a bright smile. "Sansa and Arya, what a coincidence."

"Is it?" Arya raised an eyebrow, her expression utterly dubious.

"I'm glad there is someone here I know." Sansa smiled and put her arm around Myrcella's shoulder. "Everything is more fun with friends."

"I was surprised to find out this class is completely free." Myrcella skirted the edge of the truth, careful to keep her expression innocent. "Honestly, I don't know why I haven't already tried this."

"It will be good to get some exercise," Sansa grimaced but it was still pretty. "I got so fluffy over the winter."

"I will murder your entire family," the younger Stark girl suddenly threatened her sister. "If you ever complain about your perfect body again." Arya's threat surprised and startled Myrcella.

"But, you are part of my family." Sansa simply laughed at her sister's creepiness.

"Then I'll have to murder myself as well." Arya smirked and crossed her arms, living up to her reputation. The entire freshman class knew Arya Stark, the girl always mouthing off to teachers and
getting sent to the principal's office. She was either admired or feared by everyone but no one actually seemed to be friends with her.

"You can't murder yourself," Sansa scoffed good-naturedly at her sister's ridiculous joke.

"Watch me," Arya challenged, "there's nothing I can't do."

"Alright class," the instructor entered the room, pushing a large cart stuck with what appeared to be floor mats. "Please gather around." The middle-aged dark-complected man set eyes on Sansa and seemed to recognize her. "Ah!" he approached their group and smiled at the elder sister. "Señorita Stark!"

"Señor Forel!" Sansa greeted the man warmly with a cheerful smile. "I didn't know you taught self-defense."

"My passion for teaching knows no limits," he returned the kind expression before gesturing to Arya. "Even this small boy here can learn defense against a larger opponent." Mr. Forel seemed very charming and Myrcella liked him instantly.

"I'm a girl," Arya grumbled.

"It doesn't matter," Mr. Forel ignored Arya's protest. "Girl or boy, you can protect yourself. The trick is to be smart and keep your calm. Can you do that, girl?" The sullen girl stared daggers at their instructor before reluctantly nodding her head. "Students," he spoke louder. "I am your instructor, Syrio Forel. Girl," he addressed Myrcella, "if someone threatens you what is the first thing you should do?"

"I don't know," Myrcella flushed with embarrassment and dropped her gaze down to her shoes.

"If you believe someone is a threat to your safety," he spoke up so the whole class could hear, "always try to escape first. If they want your money, give it to them and run away. Run towards open public places where you think people are. You're not children anymore so avoiding strangers will not keep you safe. In fact, most victims of violence are harmed by people they know. Your best defense against an attacker is to find someone who can help you."

"What do we do if our attacker has us trapped?" Sansa seemed so serious all of a sudden. "What if he doesn't want money, but to hurt us?"

"Excellent question Miss Stark," he scanned the group of gathered students. "This is the question you are all thinking, no? What if you can't run away? Then, you must be prepared to do anything to defend yourself. This is exactly what I am going to be teaching you over the course of this class. First, I will need a volunteer." Mr. Forel pointed at Arya. "You, skinny girl."

"My name is Arya," she sneered but strutted to the front of the class to stand next to the instructor. Myrcella thought Arya was brave, even if she acted more than a bit strange.

"Let's pretend that Arya here wants to attack me," he addressed the class, "and I have nowhere to run. She might think that I am an easy target but my first chance of survival is making her reconsider. So, Arya, grab my wrist and I will demonstrate the first step of resistance." Arya took a firm grasp of the man's wrist and grinned confidently despite her small size.

"Grab your trapped fist with your free hand," he narrated his movements, "and step back while shouting as loud and aggressively as you can. LET GO!" His voice boomed throughout the room and everyone jumped, including Arya. "There, you see?" He held up his freed hand. "You want to make your attacker rethink your strength."
"Can just screaming really make an attacker run away?" Myrcella doubted she could ever intimidate anyone, especially when paralyzed with fear.

"Most predators look for targets who are alone and defenseless," he explained seriously. "They are cowards who assume their target will be too afraid to fight. You must use your fear, and the natural boost of strength it gives you. Be loud and confident to scare off any possible attackers and draw attention to what is happening. Now everyone partner up and practice what I have shown you."

"Partner?" Myrcella smiled shyly at Sansa, who nodded in acceptance. Arya was left without a partner so she paired with the instructor. The girls faced each other before Sansa suddenly grabbed Myrcella's wrist. "Let go!" She tried to wriggle her wrist but could not get loose.

"You can do better than that," Sansa encouraged.

"Let go of me!" Myrcella grabbed her trapped fist and tried to step back but Sansa was still too strong! For some reason, Joff popped into her head... he used to grab her roughly sometimes to scare her. "FUCK OFF!" She managed to pull free and stumbled back a few steps before looking up to see Sansa's shocked expression. "Oh! I'm so sorry-"

"Don't be!" A slow smile spread across Sansa's pretty face. "That was amazing," she grinned and held out her fist, "now let me try." As Myrcella grabbed the other girl's wrist, a rush of confidence built up inside her. She took this class to get closer to Sansa as a way to learn about Robb, but it was turning out to be so much more.

**GENDRY**

In the late afternoon, the sky turned darker early from gray clouds rolling in from the south. Only a few droplets hit the Lincoln's windshield as he pulled up into the pizzeria parking lot. All day he wondered why Arya asked to meet at the restaurant instead of riding together. He hoped against all reason that she had some kind of 'good' surprise for him because she'd been acting plenty mysterious.

When he stepped out of the Lincoln and caught sight of Arya waiting out front, he realized that she was the surprise. Gendry recognized her the second he laid eyes on her but he still couldn't believe it. A barrette fastened her short hair to one side, leaving a few loose tendrils brushing softly against her face. She was distracted, smoothing down the side of her disobedient hair, and he was mesmerized. It's not that she wasn't always pretty: she's the most beautiful person he ever saw. But dressing up for no special reason was something he never expected her to do. Prom and the renaissance fair were both 'occasions' but this was just a regular date. Arya looked up and a little shy smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, melting his heart. The picture she made would stay etched into his brain for as long as he lived.

Her smile widened as she waved over her outfit and bobbled her head from side to side. That's when he realized he was still standing in the middle of the parking lot, grinning like a fool at the prettiest girl ever. So he jogged to her, finding she looked even prettier up close. She shined in a way he would never be smart enough to describe: Arry was truly a 'highborn' but now she fit the part.

"Wow," he looked her over with growing appreciation and uneasiness. This was always who Arya Stark was supposed to be, someone totally out of his league. Then he noticed the bright red converse on her feet and that little detail squeezed his already melted heart. Even in fancy clothes, she was still herself and that felt instantly reassuring.

"You don't have to look so surprised," she grumbled and rolled her eyes.
"I must've died and gone to the seven heavens," he grinned at those adorable rolling eyes. "Your hair is so shiny, milady." That quip set a little sneer on her lips, but one side tilted up just a bit. Gendry glanced over her again, appreciating her whole look. "Basically, what I'm trying to say is: you look really pretty."

"Thank you," she smoothed down her white satin blouse. Arya looked down to her sneakers and tapped her toes together, glancing around like she was embarrassed. They stood there for an awkward minute: him still in shock and her looking self-conscious. "You haven't seen the best part yet," she took his hand almost gently and led the way inside the restaurant. The smiling hostess guided them to the back of the building where a private booth waited.

A white tablecloth covered the table and a single flower in a glass bottle stood in the middle, simple and perfect. None of the other tables were decorated, making him dangerously close to bursting into grateful happy tears. Gendry held it in as he slid into the booth and she sat down beside him. The instant they were seated, two servers carrying pizza approached the table.

"No way," he whispered in awe as the servers set the humongous pizzas down. The largest was obviously a breakfast pizza with bits of bacon, crispy shredded potato, and fried eggs on top. Beside it sat a pepperoni pizza, in the shape of a heart: which just about broke his self-control holding back grateful sobbing.

"Did you do all of this?!" He stared down at the pizzas in disbelief before looking up at her grinning face.

"By hand, every pepperoni has been touched by me." She snickered when he looked up, almost believing her like an idiot. "I just made some reservations and a couple special requests so don't flip out about it."

"I'm serious," he insisted. "I'm pretty sure I'm dreaming: only my dreams are never this good. This is the best thing anyone has ever done for me."

"The night is still young," she waggled her eyebrows: the old Arry was definitely still under that light brush of lip-gloss.

"I can't believe you did all of this," he stared at the feast with grateful admiration. "Just for me."

"Who else would I do all this for?" She grabbed a white ceramic plate to set it in front of him before pushing the breakfast pie closer. "Eat your pizza."

"This must have taken a lot of time to put together." He overloaded his plate full of pizza, hypnotized by the melty cheese stringing between the pie and his plate.

"Actually, it was kind of fun planning it all." She piled several slices onto her plate still avoiding his eyes and adorably embarrassed. Gendry smiled to himself and held back from teasing her, though mightily tempted. "I kept thinking about the look on your face when you saw everything." Then she gave him a mischievous smirk and the way her gray eyes sparkled blew him away every time. "I love that dumb look on your face."

"That's just how my face looks," he frowned before grinning at her.

"Your body makes up for it," she assured him before shoving a large mouthful of pizza between her lips. "Honestly," she chewed open-mouthed, "Sansa helped me with most of this." That was obvious, with all the makeup and skirt wearing.

"You asked for help: from Sansa?" Gendry exaggerated his amazement. "This is truly a night of
"It's not even close to over yet," she quirked her eyebrows at him. Then her expression softened as she held his gaze. "You get why I'm doing this, right?" For the most part, he never tried to understand her: that would be a pointless struggle. He didn't need to understand exactly why she was doing this to 'get' it.

"No shit," he ruffled her hair lightly and liked that he messed up her pretty look a little. "You wouldn't do this for just anybody."

"Nobody but you," she leaned over to press the greasy kiss against his cheek. "I'm yours."

"I know," he wiped a bit of pizza sauce from the corner of her mouth and pecked her on the lips. "But it is nice to be reminded, especially with pizza." They smiled at each other for a moment but hunger won out over long gazes into each other's eyes. Between the both of them, they devoured both pizzas and even ordered some hot wings and cinnamon twists for dessert.

Satisfied and full, they both thanked and generously tipped their servers before heading to the front doors. Gendry reached over Arya's head to push open the glass door and noticed it was pouring down rain. Spring most definitely arrived, mom always told him to bring an umbrella, but he forgot again. They stepped outside and waited a few moments to see if the rain would let up any: it didn't.

"We'll have to run for it," he peered into the thick rain at where he parked.

"Race you," she challenged with a smirk.

"Ready," he crouched into a racing stance, "set-"

"Go!" Arya was off like a rocket into the downpour, puddles of water splashing underneath her brightly colored sneakers. He stayed on her heels and the thought occurred to him: they could both win. His hand stretched out to reach her shoulder, tugging her around and making her lose her balance until he caught her at the waist. She didn't miss a beat: curling her hands around his neck and lifting herself up as he curved over her.

Their lips met as her body melted against his, nearly bursting his heart from the pent-up need surging throughout his body. He could never explain how much her unexpected sweetness meant to him. Just beyond his brainpower sat the words to express his gratitude and recognition for how hard she tried her best. So he surrendered his mouth to her hungry kiss and hoped she understood everything he couldn't say.

Her tongue separated his lips to explore his mouth, stimulating a burning need that tensed every muscle in his body. His hand tightened around her waist as the other fisted a handful of her wet hair, holding her tight: like she might melt away if he released her. The chilly rain could not cool the heat from her warm lips and hot tongue flooding his senses. The kiss was full of urgency as building lust warmed his skin.

I can't feel the rain... with your lips on mine

Then she suddenly slipped out of his arms and took off running towards the car, laughing as she beat him soundly. He chased after her, grinning from ear to ear: feeling like a winner anyway. They both jumped into the Lincoln and slammed their doors closed to keep from getting more soaked.

"I'm freezing," she laughed through her chattering teeth. "This shirt is totally fucking useless."

Gendry glanced over the translucent fabric clinging to her chest as he stretched to the backseat to
grab his hoodie.

"For milady," he wrapped the sweatshirt around her shoulders and she slipped her arms into the sleeves.

"Such a gentleman," she smirked up at him as droplets of water ran down the sides of her face.

"Just a blacksmith," he smiled down at her.

"I have to go," she pouted, "I promised Sansa that I'd be home early tonight. She wants to go over the moves we learned today in self-defense."

"As much as I want to keep you," he let go of her reluctantly. "Sansa needs you, so you gotta go." Arya explained earlier about Sandor's brother making threats against the happy couple. It put his own relationship difficulties in perspective: those two had it seriously rough. "I can just call Hot Pie and see what he's up to tonight."

"I want to stay with you but I've only got the one sister - have to keep the silly girl safe," she sighed wearily before giving him a sideways glance. "You never lecture," her tone sounded surprised for some reason.

"Why would I?" Gendry had the sense to be worried but he trusted Arry to do whatever she thought was right. "You wouldn't listen to me anyway," he grinned but she was still frowning like he gave the wrong answer. "And I trust you: more than anyone." She blinked a few times, her expression never changing before she launched at him and attacked his mouth with hers.

His hands were reaching for her, even before his brain caught up, and found her waist. He hauled her to him, pulling her over to straddle his lap as their mouths smashed together again. Her soaked skin had gone cold but her mouth was still unbelievably hot, sending a strong wave of desire coursing through him. The kiss was pure addiction: full of the lust, hunger, and domination he learned to anticipate from her.

Arya's arms encircled his shoulders and heated longing rushed under his skin, chasing away any lingering chill from the rain. His heart pounded away as she continued her heavenly attack on his mouth, pulsing all the blood in his body straight to his cock. She pushed down against the unmistakable bulge behind his zipper and moaned a pitiful frustrated sound. Then, as abruptly as she pounced, Arya pulled away and flopped back in her seat with a huff.

"Take me home," she slicked back her wet hair and aimed her hungry gaze his way. "Before I break my promise." Gods, he loved that dangerous look in her dark eyes.

"As," he wheezed, "milady commands." Gendry blew out a shaky breath and turned the key over in the ignition. This surprise date had been so perfect and he didn't want it to end. A selfish voice in his head tried to convince him how easy it would be to talk Arya into staying over with him tonight. Someday, they would live together for the rest of their lives and she would miss living with her sister: missing her tonight was a small price to pay.

Chapter End Notes

I had to make an art set for that kiss - it had to be done! I think I get my obsession for rainy kisses from ISWAK, but it's pretty popular throughout manga and Asian dramas.
Even before that, I think classic Hollywood really started the 'kissing in the rain' trend.

I want everyone who read this chapter to realize this is a fairly *realistic* representation of self-defense classes. In my bum-fuck-nowhere town there are at least 10 FREE self-defense classes within 15 miles of my house. They are *everywhere* and usually *completely free* (though not all are created equal so do the research and stay informed). For the same reason you buy car insurance or eat plenty of leafy greens, do yourself a favor and take the time to check out a self-defense class. Call or visit the websites of local martial arts schools and colleges.

Ignorance and wishful thinking will never save anyone from anything. You can quote me on that.

Links to more information about violent crime and self-defense:
http://www.crime-safety-security.com/
http://alexandriava.gov/SexualViolence#prevention
http://www.wpi.edu/offices/police/advice.html
http://sexgenderbody.com/content/only-rapists-can-prevent-rape#ixzz0QI08ot4O

A brilliant metaphor about women's self-defense:
"A dog breeder would be considered insane if they separated puppies by sex, allowing only male puppies to play and learn adult survival techniques as they tumbled around "hunting" a ball. We would consider it absurd to train the females not to growl, roll around, get dirty, or fight back if attacked. Notice how dogs behave when they're playing. Their play is a gentle form of fighting, veritable rehearsal for the real thing should the need ever arise. The female pups do not sit on the sidelines watching or cheering the males; they are just as actively entangled in the pile of "fighting" dogs. A bitch that never used her ability to protect herself wouldn't be good for her litter."
Champions

SANSA

In daddy's office, her emotions bounced from unbridled enthusiasm to guilt and then back to impatient excitement. This weekend might be the most important of her life... not only because her team was going to crush the other volleyballers. Sansa was going out of town with her boyfriend for the first time ever! Ohmygods, it felt like such a massively grown-up thing to do!

"I'm sorry I can't be there for your championship, honey." Daddy looked so guilty that she could barely meet his gaze. Honestly, since the championship location was announced, she hoped he would not be able to come.

"That's okay, one of my teammates' dad records every game." She leaned against the edge of his desk and gave him her brightest smile to cheer him up. "You won't miss a moment of the action."

"Are you sure you will be alright?" His expression flickered between apologetic and worried. If only it would be of some comfort to him, knowing that Sandor would be with her the whole time.

"I will be staying with Jeyne's mom, she is a sweet lady." Her twisted stomach untangled as his expression relaxed. Daddy reached into a drawer to pull out his money clip.

"How much do you need?" He began pulling out large bills, one at a time.

"Well..." The guilt came rushing back but she actually did need some money, keeping gas in the car and all the other upkeep was draining her allowance. "The girls were talking about going out for a nice victory dinner and maybe some shopping. But I have money saved up."

"Is this enough?" He held out more than twice the amount she needed for the whole weekend.

"Thank you daddy!" She rushed forward to give him a tight hug and a kiss on his bearded cheek before accepting the money and putting it in her pocket.

"I love you lemoncake," he gently cupped the side of her face and smiled proudly. "Go show that other team what Starks are made of."

"I love you daddy," she gave him another quick kiss before heading out of the office to finish getting ready to go. As soon as she stepped into her bedroom, the phone rang.

"Lover," she answered the call. "Are you waiting for me?"

"Impatiently," he growled.

"I'll be there in just a minute," she bit her smiling lip before making a kissy sound into the phone and hanging up. Sansa grabbed her overnight bag and her sports duffle before looking around the room one last time. Unfortunately, she was not able to convince her sister to stay with daddy this weekend and she felt bad about leaving him alone. Parents are people too so perhaps he would enjoy some quiet time to focus on work.
"Bye daddy," she called as she walked through the front door, "I love you!" She bounced on her toes excitedly as she rode the elevator down and practically sprinted to the parking lot. Behind the wheel, she forced herself to be calm and not speed to their meeting place. Sansa spotted his car, with a familiar towering figure leaning against the front, and parked next to the Skylark. Sandor walked to the back of her car to get her bags out of the back as she popped her trunk open.

"Did you pack your whole bedroom," he teased as she walked back to meet him.

"Only the essentials," she protested his teasing as he loaded her things into his car. As soon as his hands were free, she grabbed his wrist and turned him to face her. "So... don't keep me waiting!" Sansa got her exam results in the mail and knew he must have received his as well. Sandor shook his head as he turned to slam the Skylark's trunk shut and her heart sank.

"Today I mailed my application to Crownlands," he suddenly smirked. "I think I'm gonna get in."

"What percentile are you in?" Sansa could barely contain her excitement.

"80th," he grinned even wider.

"Oh my gods, I knew you could do it!" Sansa released his wrist and threw her arms around his waist to give him a tight hug. After taking the College Entrance Exams, she started to think about the possibility of graduating early. By her senior year she would be taking all AP classes anyway, it was almost a waste of time. Maybe she could talk to Principal Varys about graduating next year, and then she would be only a year behind Sandor.

"It's no big deal," he wrapped his arms around her, tilting his forehead against the crown of her hair. Their future together had always been somewhat uncertain but now it seemed so bright! A seventeen-year-old college student was not unheard of, even kids as young as thirteen have done it. Daddy could help pull some strings to get her accepted into Crownlands. It would be like a dream, they would be the cutest couple on the campus... high school sweethearts!

"Alright little bird," he released her. "We gotta get on the road." Sansa snapped out of her daydreaming and focused on her life right at that moment. She had a championship to win! They jumped into the Skylark and headed out onto the open road. "You should rest up on the way, to be fresh for the game tonight."

"I am a little sleepy," she leaned her seat back and stared out the window until drowsiness pulled her to sleep. Her mind fell into a fantasy dream of happy thoughts with everyone she loved all together and content.

"We're here," he gently shook her awake and she looked around to see they were parked in front of the hotel.

"How long before the game starts?" She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes before lifting her seat to sit up.

"We still have a few hours," he smiled as he reached out to straighten her mussed hair. "We can get some food if you're hungry."

"Food is not what I want at this particular moment," she smiled coyly as his brow raised.

"I'll get us checked in," he winked at her before getting out of the car. Sansa busied herself by unloading her bags from the trunk and after a few moments, he returned to help carry everything to the room "What's up with all your smiling? Aren't you nervous 'bout the game?"
"I'm too ridiculously happy," she could not keep the cheerful expression off of her face if she tried. Their room was nearby and he opened the door with their key card, setting the bags down just inside. Sansa closed the door behind her and immediately moved to give him a hug. "Most of the happiness in my life comes from you and the way you make me feel. I want you to feel just as happy."

"I'm plenty happy," he assured her. "Don't worry about that." He knew what she was getting at, that she still had a something to prove after their talk at her 'new house'. She trusted Sandor, she really did, but it's hard to break habits. The fear that he would try and break up again, because he wanted to protect her, remained because the danger lingered.

"I want more than your happiness," she looked up and held his gaze. "I want to make you feel joy, bliss... veneration." He rolled his eyes at her usage of advanced vocabulary, but she could not let all that studying go to waste.

"How're you gonna do that?" The corner of his mouth lifted into an expectant smirk as she trailed one hand down his broad chest.

"I have a few ideas..." She pushed her fingertips underneath the hem of his shirt to slide her palm over his taut stomach.

"That's a good start," his voice rumbled low as his eyelids slid shut. Sansa took advantage of his closed eyes, lifting up on her tiptoes to press her lips against his. Her hands lowered to the waist of his pants to unfasten his jeans and a slid a palm along the hardness straining against his underwear. "Gods, Sansa." His groaned words were somewhere between complaining and gratitude.

"Look at me," she demanded, willing him to see the intensity of her devotion. They stood there, just looking at each other for a drawn-out moment, until he unexpectedly smiled.

"I see you," he cupped her cheek and she turned her face into his hand. Sandor bowed his head to kiss her shoulder, moving up her neck and kissing along her jaw until he found her lips. "I'm yours, little bird," he murmured against her mouth, still smiling. "Do whatever you like."

"I would like you to be naked," the husky authority in her voice surprised her and he looked more than willing. He pulled back to tug his shirt over his head and tossed it on the floor. The perfection of his body never failed to astonish her, pulling an approving hum from her throat. Despite her impatience to touch him, Sansa crouched in front of him to untie and remove his boots. Then she pulled his jeans and underwear down from his hips.

His erection bobbed impatiently in front of her face and on a whim, she closed her mouth around the tip. Her impulsiveness earned an appreciative growl from him as he slid his hand into her hair. She took ahold of his hardness with one hand and braced the other against his hip, feeling his powerful body trembling under her touch. It felt good to be in control, making him desperate for her.

"I love you," she panted against his pulsing erection. "Every part of you is beautiful to me." It was easier to believe when he said those things to her because they were true for her as well. In her hand, his hardness grew stiffer as the tip of her tongue licked the base in light short strokes.

"Please," the word wheezed out with a whining groan. She stood up, taking him by the hand to lead him towards the bed, and gently pushed him to sit down. "Enough teasing," he growled and reached out for her.

"You said..." She stepped back out of his reach with a playful smile on her face.

"I know what I said," he grumbled and put his hands back on the bed. "You're just - wearing too
much clothes is all." At his adorable sulking, she hummed a little laugh.

"So impatient," she chided. Sansa took her time to remove her clothes unhurriedly, removing each piece of clothing deliberately slow while he stared at her with growing impatience. When the last to scrap of fabricate the floor she did not the instant go to him, making him wait just a little bit longer. "Problem solved," she smiled at the greedy way he watched her.

She pulled a pillow from underneath the covers and dropped it onto the carpet in front of the bed. She stepped forward between his knees and bent down, bracing her hands against the top of his thighs to press her lips against his. The moment he lifted his hand to cup the back of her head, she pulled away again. He groaned deep in his throat but let her do what she wanted.

Sansa knelt on the pillow in front of him, pushing her long hair back over her bare shoulders. One of her hands ran up his thigh, continuing over his bare chest, as the other grasped his erection. His fingers slipped into her hair as she bowed over his lap to fit her mouth around the tip of his hardness. At the same time, her hand pumped the base, starting slow and steady before picking up the pace.

A string of murmured curses faded into low moans as his hand slid down her back to curve around her waist. His pulse rushed between her fingers as the head of his erection swelled inside her mouth. Sandor groaned low compliments and professions of love but she could barely hear them over the pounding pulse in her ears. He let out one last low whine before his release rushed into her mouth and she swallowed.

"I've never been happier," he panted into her hair, "than I am right now." Sandor lifted his head so she could look up at him.

"I will make you this happy forever," she assured him, "you only have to let me." It had been a while since she was intimidated by using that word 'forever'... it seemed the only appropriate word. There were so many things in the world to be afraid of more than rejection.

"You have to make me," he breathed heavily as he fell back onto the mattress. "If I don't let you - make me."

"Try and stop me," she challenged as she crawled onto the bed to lay beside him. "I can do anything."

"Give me a minute," he blew out a deep breath.

"I'm tired," she snuggled closer, "let me nap a bit more before the game."

"Love you," he murmured. "So much - gods, so much." As she melted into his warm embrace, her sleepy mind tried to remind her of all the worries that should be keeping her awake. Then again, it felt so nice and safe... right here, right now. Sansa knew the world was not made of rainbows and sunshine, but that was more reason to capture whatever happiness life offered.

**YGRITTE**

She tried to approach Tansy about Myranda bullying her but the girl denied everything. No one was willing to talk about the harassment so Ygritte didn't have anything but her gut to go on. Myranda kept dodging her calls and skipping practice, telling coach that she was sick. As the weeks passed, her attention shifted to other stuff - like Jon - and preparing for the championship but she never forgets. Tonight, Myranda couldn't escape the team captain.

"You can't dodge me now Myranda," she pushed the girl back against the concrete wall. "What's this I hear about some Tansy girl? You giving her a hard time?"
"Captain," Myranda smiled sweetly, making Ygritte shiver from disgust. "That's none of your fucking business." The girl tried to shake loose, trying to get away in more ways than one. Not this time.

"You see, it is." Ygritte held onto Myranda's jersey and kept her pinned against the wall. "Everything is my business the second it affects my team. If you want to walk out on that court, I suggest you pay attention - coach listens to me. You know how well she tolerates bullying."

"I'm one of the best on the team-

"You're good," Ygritte could give her that. "We can still win without you."

"There's no problem, captain." She sneered and flicked her dark braid over her shoulder. "I won't go near that whore - I mean Tansy, again."

"And keep Ramsey away from her too," Ygritte warned. "Don't doubt I'm serious." With that said, she let the other girl go and waited for Myranda's response.

"Ramsey isn't going anywhere near that girl again - I can promise you that." Myranda's hard expression convinced Ygritte that she was telling the truth. "Our interests are mutual, I'm sorry to have troubled you. I'd love to keep talking, but I have to go kick some ass," she turned to walk away.

"Hey," she put a hand on the other girl's shoulder to stop her. "I want to crush the other team."

"No mercy," Myranda grinned evilly - a far more natural look for her - and brushed past Ygritte, heading towards the court. She watched the other girl jog out onto the court and decided to believe her warning would work. Now that she cleared her mind, it was time to join her team and lead them to victory. Ygritte inhaled a calming breath and visualized her team winning before heading out onto the court.

Coach called the team to huddle up and gave them the usual speech about playing fair and earning a win with hard work and sportsmanship. Ygritte and the other girls put their hands in together, piling on top of their coach's hand, and all cried out in unison - 'Victory!' The referee blew her whistle and announced the Kings had won the first serve. Sansa took her place, as did the rest of the team, and the whole gymnasium got quiet.

BAM! The first serve was sent over the net like it was a comet on fire, but the other team was in equally good form. The first half of the game went by at a whirlwind pace with both teams staying neck-in-neck. The hound could be heard howling from the stands, louder than anyone else. Ygritte got her team of one point ahead just before the buzzer rang to announce halftime.

Back in the locker room, coach Tarth didn't bother with a grandiose cheesy sports speech about this being the most important game or some such nonsense. She pointed out the weakness in some of the opposing players and reiterated her confidence in all of them. All of the girls rested and rehydrated before heading back out onto the court with a second wind behind them.

They stayed a point ahead but the other team remained relentless and Ygritte recognized the signs of fatigue in her teammates. The ball sailed over the net so fucking fast that her eyes could barely keep track of it but even sweating and exhausted her team refused to give up. As the clock ran down, the other team managed to spike the ball just over Irri's head and Jeyne went for the dig but fell short. This game would not end in a tie - her team had worked too damn hard to lose now! Yara took over for what would likely be the last survey of the game, punching it over the net. It came right back and Ygritte sprung up as high as she could to pound the ball straight down onto the other team's side -
final point. The buzzer rang and her team erupted into high pitch screams, rushing her with a group hug.

"Ygritte, Ygritte," they chanted her name over and over. She didn't bother to hide the tears streaming down her face as she looked into the crowd towards her cousin. Gilly was crying too, holding onto her slightly rounded stomach, and pumping her fist into the air. She should've been out here with her team but Ygritte would tell her later that this victory was in her honor.

SANDOR

After the game Sandor took a very hot shower while Sansa stood outside the hotel room to call her father, letting him know her team won. It was a great game and he nearly shouted himself horse cheering for her team. Finished showering, he put on a pair of comfortable shorts and left the bathroom to find her sitting on the bed, looking tired and beautiful. She looked up and smiled at him in that gorgeous way he hoped to never get used to.

"I have a surprise," he dug into his bag and pulled out a bottle. To celebrate Sansa's victory he got a bottle of champagne - the good shit. This was the first time he bought alcohol to celebrate instead of trying to forget his miserable life - it's funny how love changes everything. Sandor sat next to her on the end of the bed as he poured her a glass and then filled his own.

"How did you get this?" Sansa held up her plastic glass to admire the bubbling liquid inside.

"I haven't been carded since I was fourteen," he rolled his eyes at her worried expression.

"I've had this before," she confessed. "Daddy lets us have a taste on holidays."

"Nobody here to tell you 'no', little bird." Sandor tapped the tip of his glass against hers. "You did good tonight, let's celebrate that." As he tasted the tart bubbly drink, he watched Sansa take a dainty sip.

"It's delicious," she smiled and took another sip.

"What do you want?" Sandor had been waiting all day to pay her back for earlier this afternoon. "Ask me anything and it'll be done."

"Hmm..." Sansa took another sip of her drink before smiling at him. "I played hard tonight... I would love a massage." Sandor set their glasses down on the bedside table and moved to sit behind her. His fingers hooked under the hem of her shirt and she lifted her arms so he could pull it over her head, tossing it on the floor. He swept aside her long hair over one shoulder and unhooked her bra, pushing it forward over her shoulder so that it fell out of his way.

Sandor smoothed his hands down her spine, admiring how his fingers spanned her tapered waist. Her body seemed so fragile but she played like a warrior tonight, crushing the other team. She hummed as his hands smoothed up over her back to gently knead her shoulders. The tense muscles flexed under his touch before relaxing as her pale skin turned pink from the friction of his rubbing.

The tension in her body melted under his hands - meanwhile his cock grew harder from the sounds she made. He pressed his thumbs into her neck and she groaned something like 'god, yes' and 'that's so good'. It was the best kind of torture, touching her and listening to her moaning. Sansa sighed before letting out a muted whimper as his thumbs worked the length of her graceful neck.

His hands slid down to her shoulders to work her biceps and he could not resist lowering his mouth to the crook of her neck. Sansa hummed louder, arching her head back against his shoulder and giving him full view of her beautiful chest. He slid past her shoulders two cup the underside of her
breasts, using his thumbs to work the muscles underneath the soft flesh. Her fingers squeezed his thigh, letting him know that she was done being massaged.

Sandor hooked one arm around her waist, turning her towards him, and captured her mouth with his. As much as he wanted her - and gods he wanted her - he lay her down on the mattress and slipped off the edge to kneel in front of her. He pulled her shorts and panties off, tossing them aside before lifting her legs over his shoulders. His hands curled around her thighs to pull her closer to the edge of the mattress.

Sansa gasped as he bowed his head to kiss along her hipbone and down to the inside of her thigh. He kissed along the silky skin as he inhaled her intoxicating scent. His heavy breath puffed against the dark reddish curls between her legs and she squirmed impatiently. Her hand curled around his head as she whimpered tiny pleas that made his heart race inside his chest.

His lips kissed and nipped her thighs, aimlessly running his hand over the curves of her body as she softly moaned her approval. Her moans grew louder as his mouth moved closer to the center - the anticipation would make it better for her if he went slowly. He moved his hands down to spread her open before lowering his mouth onto her slick and swollen flesh. She gasped sharply, shuddering at the first touch of his lips.

Her thighs squeezed together around his head and he pulled her knees to spread her legs open, never pausing the movements of his mouth. She gasped and panted in between moans as she held her thighs tighter, swirling, and lapping at her sensitive flesh as she wailed broken encouraging pleas.

Her thighs squeezed together around his head and he pulled her knees to spread her legs open, never pausing the movements of his mouth. She gasped and panted in between moans as she pulled his hand up to her breast. His fingertips stroked the soft flesh and her hips bucked against his face in response. He cupped her breast, rolling the stiff peak between thumb and forefinger and wetness soaked his chin.

She moved with him, against him, submitting to and dominating the motion and pace. Adrenaline flooded his body, as her need to come became his own need to give her release. His tongue pushed inside her, pulling out again to move from her wet heat to the swollen flesh above. All the while, his hand teased her breast while the other stroked the inside of her thigh.

When her legs began trembling he pulled back to suckle on her and then her entire body begin to convulse. She threw her back to cry out a loud high-pitched note, singing for him at the top of her lungs. Every muscle in his body tensed as He continued until she slumped back, satisfied and exhausted. Sandor or took a moment to admire her sprawled out on the bed and breathless from his efforts.

While she recovered, he stood up and pushed his shorts off before crawling into the bed to kneel in front of her. He grasped his aching cock, pumping it once to relieve some pressure. Her glazed eyes roamed hungrily over his body and she held her arms open to him in invitation. His arm encircled her waist, as she held onto his shoulders, moving her to the center of the bed. Her legs trembled as they fell apart so he could move between them, bracing one arm on the mattress.

She reached between their bodies to curl her fingers around his cock and the soft warmth of her hand made his body tremble all over. He hovered over her as she rubbed the swollen head of his cock against her wet heat and he groaned as the tip slipped inside. Her hand guided him as he slowly pushed all the way inside her, sliding smoothly because she was so wet.

He settled down, embracing her close in his arms as she wrapped her legs around his, and panting
from the effort. She nuzzled her face against his neck, humming happy sounds as her palms slid over his back and shoulders. It took some effort to convince his body that he didn't want to come yet, especially when she rolled her hips impatiently. He thrust up once and she moaned loudly in his ear - greedy little bird wanted to come again.

He raised his knee to brace against the mattress and lifted his arm around her waist to arch her body against his. Her hips tilted down, making each of his thrusts slide against her sensitive slickened flesh. His mind had to focus completely in order to last long enough to make it good for her. It was easy to maintain control when his patience would be rewarded so sweetly.

"Did I make you happy, my love?" He loved the way she tightened around his cock when he whispered in her ear.

"Yes," she whimpered.

"You want to sing for me again," he rasped, "don't you?" He thrust his hips again, maintaining deep and long strokes and ignoring his body's need to release.

"Mmm..." Sansa whined in the back of her throat and writhed against him. "Yes," she panted.

"Go on then" he pleaded and commanded at once, "sing for me little bird." She arched her back and it grew harder to keep his thrusts steady. "I love hearing you sing just for me. Your mine, forever - I'll always love you." Her nails dug into his shoulders and he couldn't hold back anymore. "I love you Sansa," he growled against her hair as his release surged through his body. At last, she sobbed once and curled forward, shivering as she cried out.

He pumped into her until he couldn't anymore and then dropped his head against the pillow, panting into her hair. They lay like that for a while, breathing hard and holding each other. Sansa slowly stroked his back, her palm sliding over his skin in a comforting motion. His hazy brain suddenly wondered if he could get any happier than this.

"Sandor..." Her voice sounded so pitiful that he lifted up on his forearms to look down, seeing a tear spill from her eye onto the pillow.

"Why are you crying?" He brushed away the lone tear with the backs of his fingers.

"Because... I'm so happy." She glanced up at him, lashes wet and eyes shining, as she bit her lip and smiled. Her expression looked so sweet, he laughed softly. "Don't laugh at me," she pouted.

"I'm not," he dipped his head to kiss her pursed lips. "Just happy too." Sansa smiled at him, humming a contented sound as she closed her eyes.

"It was wonderful, thank you." She never had to thank him, if anything he should be the one doing to thanking, but he liked her silly sweetness. Sandor collected his remaining strength and rolled over to fall back against the mattress. "I had such a good day," she sighed, "I don't want it to end."

"We'll just have another good day tomorrow," his hand slid across the coverlet to link their fingers together. Sandor pulled her hand against his chest, over his still-pounding heart.

"Maybe if we try hard," she covered a yawn with her other hand, "we can meet in our dreams so I won't miss you."

"I love you." He closed his hand around her wrist and tugged her against him. Her breath resumed normally and he gathered her close, kissing her hair. "Dream sweet, my little bird."
"Love... you..." And she was out like a light, exhausted but there was still a little smile on her lips. It still blew his mind, that this perfect girl would set out to make him happy today - every day - and she did. Sansa somehow his whole life was happier, even when he missed her. This world of happiness that Sansa built around them couldn't be destroyed from the outside, he understood that now. Love has to be kept strong from the inside.

Chapter End Notes

I thought I would be writing mainly sports action this chapter... ended up writing a whole bunch of smutty action. Eh, I am what I am.

My birthday recently passed. So I think this is a good time to reflect on my recent past and muse on my near future. This recovery from my strain injury has taught me more about patience in the last several months than I have learned in my entire life. Slowly, painfully, I am learning to be more responsible about taking care of my hands.

In just a couple weeks, it will have been one year since I last posted a chapter in my first fanfic: "More than a Number". I loved writing that story, it was my first public writing and terribly overly ambitious for my experience - or lack thereof. You know, I started doing this without any confidence in my ability at all. That's why it was so easy for one callus comment to shred my confidence with MtaN.

I came into writing this story like a honey badger, ready to fight and bite and tear flesh off the bone before someone else could break me down. I've always preferred being alone and unhurt than being popular and constantly criticized. But after being recently told that my 'ships are shit', I just don't see the point of being angry anymore. Would I be angry if someone said the sunset look like shit?

I think the sunset is wonderful, and my writing is wonderful. I've come to believe that confidence isn't a matter of willpower but has everything to do with pride. I need to have confidence in my works: not expect others to react positively to my hard work. If someone else wrote my fics, I would be so proud of them for writing this much so well. It stands to reason that I should be proud of myself as well.

People have told me to 'grow thicker skin' and I always wished that I would become numb to heartless criticisms and asinine condemnation. That's the wrong thing to want, and I hope someone reads what I've written and comes to the same realization. True pride isn't a numbness to others' cruelty: it's like a shield that insults glance off without even leaving a bruise.
Marge offered to let Dany hold the sleepover at her house because her parents and grandmother were out of town on business. Loras was off somewhere with his much-bragged-about college boyfriend. Missa, Irri, Sansa, and Arya all showed up just in time for dinner. Marge outdid herself this time, having the chefs prepare every single one of Dany's favorite foods. All the girls sat around the extended dining room table, eating in their sleepwear.

After they ate far too much expensive and rich food, they retired to Marge's bedroom with a fresh bottle of wine. They piled up a bunch of blankets and pillows on the floor and sat around in a circle, passing around the bottle. Everyone was stuffed and getting sleepy but Dany wasn't ready for the party to be over yet.

"What should we talk about?" Dany snatched the bottle away from Marge, who was already starting to seem a little drunk.

"It's a sleepover, let's talk about sex!" Marge giggled as she fell back against the floor to reach around Dany and grab the bottle back.

"Give me that," Missa easily took the bottle out of Marge's fumbling hands and passed it across to Irri.

"I second that motion!" Irri raised her hand excitedly and then blushed as everyone laughed at her. "What? Virgins always want to talk about sex."

"Alright, who among us has the wildest stories?" Marge leered around the circle until her eyes landed on Sansa.

"Don't look at me!" Sansa's face turned beet red. "Sandor is a very careful and gentle lover."

"Where's the fun in that?" Arya flopped down on her stomach and grinned around the group. "I have some pretty wild stories."

"Oh my, I think I'm beginning to see Gendry in a new light." Dany waved to Irri to pass the bottle back. "I guess I imagined him as the gentle type."

"He's plenty gentle - I'm a little rough," Arya's face scrunched up in the most comically self-satisfied expression

"That poor boy." Dany chuckled before putting the wine bottle to her mouth and tilting it back to take a deep gulp.

"He doesn't complain," Arya reached across the circle and held out her hand.

"He doesn't dare!" Dany grinned as she passed the wine bottle.
"That's true." Arya nodded her head in acknowledgment before tilting the bottle back and taking a gulp. "So?" She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and smirked at Dany. "Details on Drogo the Undefeated." She tilted her head forward and stared through the hair covering her face. "Does he give you that dead stare the whole time?"

"Anything I say is going to sound exaggerated," Dany returned Arya's stare with a smug smile. "And not nearly close enough to how magnificent he really is."

"Cheapskate," Irri complained as she crawled forward to take the bottle for herself.

"What kind of 'details' would you like?" Dany arched a brow at her boyfriend's cousin.

"What's the weirdest place you've done it?" Irri giggled like the virgin she was.

"I guess the empty room." Dany thought her answer would depend on what everyone else thought was 'weird'.

"We have the same answer," Arya chimed in.

"What's the 'empty room'?" Missa finally spoke up, having been too quiet tonight. Not usually a talkative person, she had been much quieter than usual lately. The passing of Torgo's father seemed to have taken a toll on their relationship but Missa insisted things were 'fine'.

"It's just a storage room at school where we game," Arya explained.

"SCHOOL?!" Sansa slapped her hand over her mouth and stared wide-eyed at her sister. "You're both having sex at school?!"

"It was only once," Arya shrugged but obviously got a kick out of shocking her sister.

"I've lost count," Dany confessed.

"You dirty girl." Marge poked Dany's side with her elbow. "Jogo is certainly perfect for you."

"DROGO!" Arya and Irri shouted together at Marge before Dany could even speak up.

"Ohmygods sor-ry!" Marge managed to look shocked at the other girls' annoyance but really, it was high time someone said something.

"Technically," Sansa started timidly with an embarrassed smile. "I guess... I've done it in a pet shop."

"What does that even mean - technically?" Arya pestered her sister with obvious glee. "Did you or didn't you?" Everyone looked to Sansa, who ducked her head and nodded slowly. "Well done, sister. You're the pride of our family."

"Gods, stop Arya!" Sansa covered her reddened face with both hands.

"I'm still a virgin," Irri sulked, "so I don't have an awesome sex stories." Dany suspected Irri wanted to shed her 'virginity' label but the person she wanted would feel 'responsible' for her afterwards. Sometimes it seemed men either want to trick women into having sex or treat them like helpless children. Thankfully, Drogo proved that men are capable of being perfectly reasonable about sex.

"All of my great sex stories are about someone I hate," Marge joined in on the pity party.

"Boo-fucking-hoo: you're such a 'mopey Marge'." Dany was getting so sick of hearing what an asshole Joffrey was: there are plenty of perfectly good guys in this world. "Just go have great sex
with someone else."

"There's nobody at Kings that could possibly live up to my standard." Marge raised her nose up in the air: she could be so dramatic sometimes.

"It's a little high," Arya aimed a serious stare at Marge. "If you want my honest opinion." Uh-oh: The Gendry Incident was rearing its ugly head.


"I think you are right, sweetie." Marge returned Arya's stare with a taunting smile.

"I know I am, honey." Arya wasn't smiling at all.

"Then we agree," Marge seemed hellbent on creating trouble and Dany could only stare open-mouthed at her friend.

"I think so," the words gritted between Arya's teeth.

"Then you won't mind if Gendry and I stay friends." Marge must already be drunk to be so senseless! The whole room went dead silent as all of the girls stared at Arya to see what she would say.

"That's up to him." Arya's words did not match the murderous look in her eyes.

"Is it?" Marge smiled like nothing was wrong. "Good, I hoped you would say that."

"I had sex for the first time." Missa interrupted the intensity and everyone shifted their focus.

"And?" Dany cleared her throat and hoped Marge was done having fun at Arya's expense.

"It was... very nice." Missa smiled but it was probably the saddest smile that Dany had ever seen. "But since Torgo's father passed away we have not done anything."

"Poor sweet Torgo," Dany sighed. "I know he will come around soon, losing your father is something no teenager should have to go through." It was painful to watch the quiet young man become even more reserved. Torgo came to every DnD game and played even more seriously than before but he never talked about himself or his loss.

"I need something stronger," Arya announced and stood up to leave the room.

"And I need to piss," Marge also got up to leave. Dany thought about following after and lecturing her friend about not antagonizing Arya. No, she decided it was their problem and they could work it out themselves. It was her party and if she didn't want to be the peacekeeper for one night then she didn't have to.

**MARGAERY**

On her way out of the bathroom, she spotted Sansa standing beneath a large window, white moonbeams shining off of her bright red hair. Her beauty was almost unnatural and it was rare for Marge to be jealous of anyone's appearance. Jealousy wasn't even the right word for it - more like curiosity for what it must be like to live inside such a wholesomely beautiful person. Perhaps she should ask Sansa to pose for a portrait one day.

"Sansa," she approached the other girl, "you look absolutely gorgeous."
"In my pajamas?" Sansa smiled and looked down at her flannel sleepwear.

"You're one of those lucky girls who looks beautiful in anything." She turned to look up at the sky full of stars. "I was never sincere enough in my apologies or thanks to you. I might've never been sincere in my life before Joff stomped on my heart with a shit-covered boot."

"I don't think he deserves that much credit." Sansa's hand felt soft on her shoulder as she gently urged Marge to face her.

"You've been a true friend, Sansa." Marge bowed her head to look at her bare feet. "And to you, I never was anything close to that." She gathered her strength and looked up to meet the other girl's concerned gaze. "I want to officially start over. Before you say it, I fully intend to make up with your sister about Gendry." Her teasing had gone too far tonight, especially since she meant it when she said she wanted to stay friends with Gendry.

"I did not even know you three were on the outs, but I'm not surprised." Sansa smiled and rolled her eyes, shaking her head. "Arya lives her life like everyone around her is on a need-to-know basis. But it isn't like Gendry to be confrontational."

"I'm sure this won't shock you but I was the one at fault," Marge sighed. "In my defense, it's been a hard few months."

"I can relate," Sansa gave her a sympathetic look.

"But spring is here and the warmer air suits me better." Marge held a deep breath, holding it for a moment before slowly letting it out. "We've been through something together and I think you understand best what I feel." She tentatively reached out to hold Sansa's hand.

"If you ever need to talk," Sansa squeezed her fingers, "I'm here for you."

"You have literally no right to be this nice and pretty at the same time," Marge teased. "It's against the laws of nature, beautiful girls are supposed to be mean."

"I can try harder if it would make you more comfortable." Sansa crossed her arms and raised her brows. "You're a bit of an idiot to tangle with my sister."

"I love when you're feisty," she grinned at the other girl. "If I wasn't so scared of the hound I might put the moves on you." Marge laughed as Sansa's jaw dropped open. "Don't look so scandalized! Loras swears I'm a closeted lesbian but really, it's only when I get a little tipsy." She lifted both hands to brush her hair back over her shoulders. "Alright, wish me luck. I have to go make up with your sister."

"Don't let her near anything sharp," she giggled a bit before frowning. "I'm sort of serious about that..."

"Don't worry," she smiled and pointed at herself. "I'm really good at apologizing." Marge turned away to hunt down the younger Stark sister. "It comes from fucking everything up all the time," she muttered to herself. It didn't take long to discover Arya rifling through her father's liquor cabinet. The girl was trying to reach the top shelf but her arms were just too short.

"Arya," she got the other girl's attention.

"Oh good," Arya sneered and continued trying to reach a bottle on the top shelf.

"Don't be like that," she reached over the shorter girl's head to get the bottle, "here." Marge resisted
the urge to groan when Arya snatched the bottle.

"Can we skip this whole thing and go back to not knowing or seeing each other?" Arya acted like she didn't want to have anything to do with Marge but then poured two fingers into another glass and pushed it across the countertop.

"You're scared of me," she picked up her glass and swirled the amber liquid. "I would be too."

"I think you got that backwards," Arya leveled a dark stare over her glass.

"Oh I'm fairly scared of you - I can admit that." Marge took a sip and rolled the whiskey over her tongue before swallowing. "But I know I must scare you because you love Gendry as much as he loves you. He was scared too, when I kissed him, horrified in fact." Marge laughed at herself for being such an idiot and shook her head. "You can't blame me for liking him - he's so gorgeous and outrageously nice."

"You think you know how gorgeous and nice he is - but you don't know the half of it." To someone else it might sound like Arya was complaining but Marge heard something deeper. "He's insanely perfect, too perfect." The poor girl had an understandable inferiority complex.

"You won't lose him to another girl," Marge assured her while trying to tamp down her jealousy. It stumped her every day how she could have such loyal friends but her love life sucked royally.

"I don't need you to tell me that," Arya muttered under her breath before taking an unappreciatively large gulp of her whiskey.

"Knowing and believing are two different things." Marge might not be in the position to lecture anyone but this girl needed advice or she was going to lose something very few people get a chance at. "You know Gendry far better than I ever could. But do you really believe in him? Why did you get so jealous in the first place? If you 'know' that he would choose you over any other girl in the world - why freak out?"

"I can admit when others are right," the girl grumbled.

"So do it," she teased.

"I just did," her nostrils flared in anger.

"Not really," she took another sip.

"You're - right," Arya practically grunted the words.

"Thank you," Marge hoped they could all put this behind them now.

"Promise me that you've given up on him for good." A note of desperation hitched in Arya's voice. "Swear it to my face." There was something very pretty about the vulnerability in her eyes, something Marge never noticed before. This was likely a side of herself that the younger Stark girl did not show very often. For the first time, she saw the resemblance between the sisters.

"I have given up on Gendry," she promised, "he was never more than a fantasy anyway." Marge wasn't the sort of idiot to go around trying to win the affections of a young man head-over-heels in love with someone else. "But, if you ever let him go and I happen to be around," she shrugged at Arya's scowl. "Don't take him for granted, is all I'm saying. If it's not me, it'll be some other girl - you know it's true. He's quite a catch in a sea full of sharks."
"Maybe it won't mean much coming from me," Arya's sudden gentle tone surprised Marge. "I never expected to find someone perfect for me like Gendry. It can happen for anyone."

"That means a lot," she smiled before taking another taste of her drink. They lapsed into silence but it wasn't too terribly uncomfortable. Marge felt they had come to an understanding and she respected Arya and her relationship with Gendry even more. It might take some time to regain his trust but after throwing herself into her artwork lately, she wanted to collaborate with him more than ever.

MISSANDEI

She wandered a bit before finding the library and a quiet spot to sit alone. The party was fun and everyone was having a good time but somehow it felt like a betrayal to Torgo. Every time she laughed she thought about him being alone, consumed by his grief. They had not spoken once in an entire week and the hope that he might come back to her dwindled every day.

"Hey Missa," Sansa hesitated in the doorway. "Did you want to be alone?"

"Not really," she sat up and patted the seat beside her. Sansa smiled and moved to sit down on the couch. "I am probably a bit boring tonight." Missa felt this overwhelming urge to apologize to everyone and it was getting harder to fight.

"Not at all," Sansa lied kindly. "I can't imagine how hard things must be for you."

"For me?" Missa blinked at the other girl, certain she misheard her.

"My sister told me about your boyfriend's dad," Sansa explained. "The person you love is in pain... That's the hardest thing in the world. So many times I wished I could take some of Sandor's troubles to make things easier for him."

"I just don't know what to say to Torgo." Missa obsessed day and night, trying to think of the words that would magically fix this rift between them. As if, this relationship problem was like an equation and all a simple matter of focus and determination. "He loved his pop so much and honestly, the old man was the sweetest person. But I can't just keep crying in front of him, that makes me too horrible."

"I think..." Sansa leaned her head back against the top cushion of the sofa. "All you can do is be honest about your feelings and let him do the same. These hardships are what make us stronger in the end." Sansa aimed a strained smile up at the ceiling. "At least, I hope so."

"I hope so too," she also leaned her head back, staring up. "Thank you, for listening. Sometimes it can be hard for me to admit I need help." For too long Missa had put her desire to be 'perfect' before her need to be human. That is why she could not stop crying in front of Torgo, because even if she acted the 'perfect girlfriend'... It would not heal his pain. No amount of studying would help her pass this test or even ensure she would succeed.

Her twisted need to be flawless made her feel like a freak! The vast majority of her classmates were wealthy and white. Missa detested any assumption that her skin color or middle-class family put her at an insurmountable disadvantage or unearned advantage. She needed to prove herself constantly, like a sickness. Even with Torgo, more than she missed his shy smiles, soft kisses, and tentative lovemaking... Failure terrified her.
It's easy to say why I love to write: I was once a devastatingly lonely kid who fell into books to escape the real world. Now I want to create a 'world' for people to escape into, a place to help them forget how tired and unappreciated they are. My loftier goal is to help people feel stronger for when they inevitably have to come back and live in reality.

If I've done that for even one person, aside from myself - that was a nice surprise - then I don't have to dream any bigger to believe in my success. But I will anyway, because now I finally understand the value of having dreams for the sake of dreaming. My dreams will be Big and I don't care who thinks I don't have the right or the talent. Maybe even more important, I think my opinion of myself is more important than anyone's - including fans and supporters.

This fic has contributed to something that I never had before: honest pride in myself. Even now there's an almost undetectable voice in my head calling me vain and narcissistic (I didn't put those words in there). So now I argue with the voices in my head and feel saner than ever. My flaws make me human and my humanity is limitless. Always the gamer, I want to test my newfound power on a great challenge: the past contains my defeat.

The time has come to go back to the beginning and use my bolstered faith in myself to its fullest potential. My first fanfic, 'More than a Number' deserves a second chance. The struggle with my hands has only made me more determined, because the worst part wasn't the pain - it was not being able to write. Bluntly, I will have to prioritize a reboot to MtaN in order to keep my hands healthy.

Don't panic, dear readers! It has been an amazing experience to write SoSC and there is certainly a planned ending to this epic tale. However, this story has grown so much larger than I ever dreamed and it is a bit difficult to keep everything straight. While I am reposting MtaN, I will make a real effort to go back and reread everything I've written for SoSC. This will inevitably lead to more proofreading and editing but no large plot changes are planned.

For the few of you reading 'A Trueborn Prince', I will continue posting that fic sporadically. For the next several weeks I will be in 'editing mode', just to screw my head on straight. Hopefully, soon my dictation skills and creative juices will be meshing much more fluidly. I feel absolutely certain this is the right direction to go in and I know not everyone will be happy but I trust my gut on this one.

Thanks, most sincerely, for reading and enjoying my work.
"When I look at this picture," Sam handed over the black-and-white grainy sonogram as though it were as precious as an actual baby. "It feels like I have a big responsibility, but I don't want to avoid it... I can't wait for it." Jon shifted on his best friend's lumpy couch, looking intensely at the little black splotch to avoid seeing that pained expression on the Sam's face. "That's why I have to leave and take this job," he sighed as he took the image back.

Jon couldn't think of a single thing to say so he glanced around the tiny apartment to avoid his friend's eyes. It was so unfair that the nicest guy he knew had such a hard time and now Sam was even talking about going out of town to work. Sure, they needed the money and would need even more once the baby came. But how could he think of leaving Gilly all alone and going to the other side of the continent just for a better paycheck? It didn't seem right!

"You don't have to do this," even as he said it, his mind drew a blank as to any other options. "There has to be another way, somehow." Selfishly, Jon could not imagine going months without seeing his best friend. How much worse would Gilly feel, not seeing her husband? It's just not right.

"Do you have any idea how expensive it is to have a baby?" Sam's expression tightened as he pulled at the collar of his shirt. "I stayed up all night once and tried to figure out how much I have to earn to raise this kid properly. Actually, I don't think it can be done, but I have to find a way because I can't give up. It's more than a responsibility... it's something I need to do, I can't quite explain it."

"I know," Jon patted his friend on the back, feeling proud of Sam and sorry for him at the same time. "You just let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

"When I make enough money to get us on track, I'll come back." Sam glanced down the hall to the closed bedroom door where Ygritte and Gill disappeared to have their own talk. "In that time... I'll be counting on you and Ygritte to take care of them."

"Count on it," Jon agreed immediately, "we'll come by as often as we can." Wild horses couldn't keep Gritt away from her cousin and he would end up coming with her anyway.

"You could move in here," Sam smiled sheepishly, "use the nursery as a bedroom. I'll be back before the baby is born for sure and it would only be for a few... months." The guy put his pride on the line to ask this favor: how could Jon say no?

"If it would make you feel better," he grinned as his friend's expression turned red with embarrassed amazement. "I'd be happy to do it." Did he really expect any other answer? Even though they didn't share a drop of blood, he considered Sam like a brother because their hearts were the same. Jon knew how much Sam loved Gilly and if their situations were reversed, not that Ygritte needed anyone to look after her, Sam would do the same.

"Gods," Sam turned away and quickly swiped at his eyes. "You can't know how glad I am to hear you say that. I wasn't sure I could go if Gilly would be left all alone."
"You're my best friend," Jon pulled his pal in for a tight hug, patting Sam on the back. "I would do anything for you."

"Are we interrupting?" Ygritte's voice had the two guys jumping apart, looking up to see both girls smiling down at them. "Let's get some food," she jerked a thumb at Gilly's stomach. "Gill's baby is hungry for a gyro." Jon shot one more grin at his friend before pushing up off the couch to walk out the front door with Ygritte. Neither of them said anything as they got into the car and she didn't start it up.

"Well," Jon peeked at her, wondering what she and Gilly talked about. "Sam asked me to move into the apartment with Gilly while he goes north for work." Saying it out loud made the situation sound so serious but he didn't plan to change his mind no matter what anyone said. This was something he had to do for his friend.

"Gill did the same to me," Ygritte cleared her throat and fiddled with her keys to evade his questioning gaze. "Guess they're teaming up on us."

"So," he blew out the deep breath he was holding. "Us living under one roof: waddaya think?" She turned to look out the window at Sam's apartment and didn't say anything for a long moment.

"It would only be temporary," she glanced at him, "and my dad wouldn't try and stop me." Her face scrunched up into a contemplative sneer as she looked away again. "What about your mom?"

"She'd be okay with it," at least he assumed so, "if I said it was for Sam." Mom knew Jon had a hard time when they first moved south, meeting Sam had been a godsend.

"I want to be here for Gilly, she really shouldn't be alone anyway." Ygritte nodded as she said it, sounding like she was trying to convince herself. Then she suddenly grinned at him, a happy bashful expression he never saw before. "But, with us, you know - I think I'd like to live together even just for a while."

"I like it too," he smiled back at her.

"Wow," she blew out a long breath, "okay - we're doing this."

"How hard can it be?" Jon immediately regretted asking when Ygritte gave him a 'you-just-fucked-us' look. "Yeah, shouldn't've asked that. Still excited though: holy fuck we're moving in together."

"Temporarily," she interjected.

"Still," he exhaled a soft laugh, sort of in shock about how the whole situation turned out.

"I know," she bit her lip before grinning at him.

"We can do it," he took her hand and laced their fingers together.

"I think so too," she squeezed his hand before leaning towards him for a quick kiss. Ygritte slipped back into her easy confidence as she started up the car and pulled out of the parking spot too fast. Jon quickly clicked his seatbelt as she cranked up some music. He thought plenty of times about living with her but he never thought it would happen this soon. Where they ready for this? Doesn't matter, he already gave up on living safe: time to take a chance.

**BRAN**

He didn't want to do this: he really-really didn't. Be a man, he told himself, but it didn't do shit for his
confidence. What would Arya do? She'd march right in there, demand to know what she needed to know, and wouldn't leave without answers! That gave him the boost he needed to knock on his older brother's bedroom door.

"Come in," Robb called from inside the room and Bran pushed the door open before wheeling inside. "Sup, little brother?" He didn't even bother to sit up or look away from his phone.

"I need to talk about something," Bran grimaced as he shut the door behind him, "and you're the only choice I have."

"Your confidence in me is touching," Robb's fingers swiped along the screen of his phone distractedly.

"I'm serious," he glanced back at the closed door, imagining his mother's ear pressed against the other side. "Mom can't know we ever had this talk."

"Ah," Robb finally set his phone down and turned his head to look at Bran. "That sort of talk." He sighed as he looked up to the ceiling before squeezing his eyeshot. "Listen, buddy-"

"Don't 'listen buddy' me," Bran wheeled forward until his knees hit the side of the bed. "I have stuff I need to know, and you're the only one available to teach me."

"This is about Sheri Baratheon isn't it?" Robb arched an eyebrow and Bran looked away as he felt his face getting hot. "You little rascal, I wondered why you wanted to go south so bad."

"You get to go too," he reminded his elder brother, "win-win."

"All those college girls celebrating spring break in bikinis," Robb sighed and stared off wistfully at the ceiling. "I owe you one."

"I've come to collect early," Bran refused to back down after drumming up this much courage. Robb groaned again, set his phone down, and got up to sit cross-legged on the mattress.

"You probably don't need to worry about sex yet," he smiled casually like this wasn't difficult for him at all. "Making out's pretty great for a good long while. Come back to me about two years and I'll fill you in on the rest." Robb was right: it would be some time before Bran actually needed to know all this sex stuff. But it never hurts to be prepared.

"I'm not planning on wheeling out after this conversation to find someone to have sex with." Bran glared at his older brother. "Robb, I need to talk about it so I don't have to worry about it. Mom and dad keeping me in the dark like this is brutal and everything I found online is for people with working legs." His older brother flinched at Bran's bluntness but sometimes bringing up the wheelchair was the only way to get what he needed.

"What do you want to know?" Robb braced his forearms against his knees, clasping his hands together, and leaning forward attentively.

"Everything you know." Bran didn't envy his brothers reputation for being able to steal any girls' heart because he knew what no one else knew. Their rooms were right next to each other, he could hear his brother crying over every girl he loved and lost. Robb was a true romantic, forever pursuing relationships that could never last.

"Mostly you learn as you go, but I can give you the big tips." Robb held a fist up in the air and raised one finger. "First, sex is a process with multiple steps that are a little bit different for everyone."
"For me, there's only one girl." Bran frowned down at his hands fidgeting in his lap. Miss Shireen Baratheon was the perfect girl for him in every way. She's beautiful but doesn't know how much and he loved helping her to realize it. Her soft blue eyes looked at him first and not at the chair: the way they lit up just for him never failed to astound him. "I'm afraid, when it's time to level up our relationship: it won't be good for her because I'm half useless."

"I think everyone worries they won't be any good," Robb scraped the back of his nails against the patchy beard growing along his jaw. "Okay, I'll let you in on all the secrets of sex. You know what a two-pumped latex-sided shoofly-pooper is?" That didn't even sound real! Bran shook his head, feeling a little sick. "Good cause I just made that up," he grinned.

"Asshole," Bran muttered as he rubbed a palm over his face. "Be serious, will you? It took a lot to come to you like this."

"Okay: second," Robb held up two fingers, "actual sex is just the tip of the iceberg and figuring out the rest is half the fun. There are no magic tricks: everybody has different things they like best. Third, and most important, being bad at sex is really no big deal: everyone is at first. Just like everything else in life, practice until you're a master."

"That's it?" Bran thought it was all good advice but he was sort of hoping for a specific magical solution to his particular worry.

"I'm sure you've had some internet education," he shrugged. "The basic mechanics are simple enough. Keep in mind that porn is as much an accurate portrayal of sex like the 'Lethal Weapon' movies are documentaries about cops."

"I figured that one out on my own," Bran rolled his eyes.

"You and Sheri like each other," Robb nodded sagely, likely thinking himself quite benevolent for putting up with his pestering younger brother. "That's the hardest part, finding someone who likes you and you liking them back. Sex is all about trusting someone and earning their trust as well."

"That's really beautiful bro," Bran smirked at his hopeless romantic older brother. Sansa may have a reputation in their family for being a romantic but Robb wears the crown. That's part of what makes him such an appealing person to seek advice from.

"My point is relax and let it happen when it feels right for both of you." Robb smiled, seeing right past Bran's cool-guy sarcasm. "She already likes you, wheelchair and all: so try to give her the benefit of the doubt."

"Thanks," he smiled to show his true gratitude. "I feel better."

"No problem, little man, but let's just keep this between us," Robb turned a wary eye at his bedroom door. "Mom wouldn't understand why guys need to talk about this."

"I would've went to Arya but you're the only one here," Bran nearly choked as he realized what he was saying.

"What would Arya know about sex?" Robb narrowed his brows and stared hard at Bran. "Do you-?"

"You're right," he spun his wheelchair around as fast as he could and hauled open the door, "ha-ha-ha, I'm kidding! Thanks for the guy talk!" Bran shut the door behind him and immediately dropped his face in both hands, feeling like the world's biggest idiot. "Real smooth asshole," he muttered to himself before he heaved a sigh and headed back to his room to consider his brother's advice.
PODRICK

He let himself stand in the doorway of her office, taking in the view of coach hunched over her desk, concentrating hard on the papers in front of her. The front of her short hair was held back by a sweatband and her leg was lifted so that the heel of her foot perched on the edge of her chair. Gods, could she be any more gorgeous? Alright, if he stood here any longer it would start to get creepy.

"Knock-knock," he rapped his forefinger against the door as he walked into her office. "I thought you might be here."

"Rick," she smiled but then frowned disapprovingly. "I'm going to have to insist you behave like a normal teenager: go out and have some fun on your break."

"Isn't it supposed to be a break for the teachers as well?" Pod ignored her chastising and took a seat across from her on the other side of the desk.

"Teachers never get a break," she gestured weakly at the piles of paperwork on her desk. "I meant to keep up with the system you set up for me but it's hopeless." Coach leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms and looking him over with a concerned expression. "Why don't you go spend some time with your friends?"

"My friends all have girlfriends or jobs," he let out an exaggerated sigh. "I really don't have anything better to do then helping you." Because there was nothing else he would rather be doing.

"Uh-oh, somebody is feeling left out." Coach gave him a sympathetic look but it was tinged with amusement. "I used to be one, so I know that teenage girls have strange taste. Rest assured, in a few years, they will come to appreciate a guy like you."

"Would you date me?" The word spilled out of his mouth before Pod even knew what he was saying. "I mean a guy like me, when you were my age."

"I was a rather silly teenager," she grinned as her eyes glazed over with nostalgia. "I had the most ridiculous crush on the hottest jock in school, even though he was a total jerk." Her expression turned somber as she looked around her cluttered desk. "By the end of college I realized what separates the boys from the men. Nowadays, if I met someone reliable, generous, and kind: I would date him in a heartbeat and my mother would be thrilled."

"Great," he grumbled sarcastically, "only about a decade before I'm attractive to women."

"Don't go getting down on yourself for not having a girlfriend: it's hardly a crisis," Coach waved at herself, sitting up straighter and pulling her shoulders back. "I'm practically an old maid but you don't hear me whining about the single life. My mother is plenty disappointed enough for the both of us. Besides, I depend on your eternal optimism, if you start giving up now then I'm just doomed."

"Come on," he perked up and started to gather some paperwork together. "If we work all day then you might actually get to enjoy some of this vacation." She flashed him a grateful look and it made him feel guilty. He wouldn't rather spend his break with anyone else. How could she not have realized how he feels by now? What if she already knew and was just being nice to him out of pity?

"That's the spirit!" She beamed brightly at him before turning her focus down to attack the paperwork with refreshed energy. Coach is right, he should be out enjoying his young life and not in here pining over his teacher. But every time she smiled, her eyes lit up and a feeling of well-being washed over him. A day without her smile, even if he spent it having fun with his friends, was hardly
worth it.

Chapter End Notes

Spring Break Begins! This one is dedicated to MissMallora, because she's lovely and awesome. (I'll try to update SoSC at least once a month!)

I was going to post this chapter yesterday but my friend came over and we gorged ourselves on Creamy Dill Turkey Meatloaf (let me know if you want my recipe) and played Catan until 1 a.m. - Wheat, Sheep, Ore! Now I feel like utter crapola, having ignored the fever I just got over a few days ago. Worth it.

If you have some time, I would *really* appreciate a few more people giving my revamped fic a chance: http://archiveofourown.org/works/4538091/chapters/10328364

But honestly, you should be reading MissMallora's *amazing* Lyanna&Sandor fic: http://archiveofourown.org/works/4158708/chapters/9384321. (It completes me.)
Family

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Just Jet-lagged

ROBB

Dumped again, by the glorious Roslin Frey: this time he needed to put some distance between himself and his broken heart. He knew Roslin would never feel as strongly about him as he did about her because she was so passionate about her religion and related studies. She had tears in her eyes as she broke it off, saying that she was caught between the secular life and a calling to the Septahood.

Robb assured her that he understood but he couldn't lie to himself: it was a waste. They loved each other, how could the gods not want them to be together? How could such a young person know what they want for the rest of their lives?! Before Roslin dumped him, he could have sworn he was ready to commit to her for life. Now, he was not even certain he respected her decision. Did he truly love her that little?

The flight south really took it out of him, especially the two-hour layover: the perfect time for his phone battery to die. It didn't matter because the one person he wanted a call from was ignoring him. At least, because of Bran, they got to be seated on the plane first. More importantly, they got to leave first. Even exhausted, he jumped up from his seat to slide his mom's carry-on bag over his shoulder before moving to help his brother.

"When we go home," Bran groaned, "just knock me out and ship me back in a box." That sounded pretty good, considering how much Robb disliked hurtling through the air in a tin can with wings.

"Only if there's room for me," Robb quipped as he pushed the wheelchair down the off-ramp. With two heavy bags hanging from his shoulders: he got them off that plane as fast as he could, immediately spotting his family waiting at the gate.

"DADDY!" Rickon's battle scream echoed through the airport as he dashed ahead. The boy launched into dad's waiting arms and squealed with laughter as he was lifted up into a tight hug. Robb understood his brother's enthusiasm but kept his cool. Unsurprisingly, underfoot waited impatiently at the gate entrance to hug Bran while ignoring everyone else.

"I missed you," she grumbled quietly, never one for big shows of affection. Arya was always the toughest one amongst them, even when she was just a tot. Back when she was little, their parents fussed and fretted: trying to make her more like Sansa. They thought they were doing the right thing but the constant comparison put a chip the size of Westeros on his littlest sister's shoulder. It was good to see that his sisters were finally getting along much better nowadays.

"Same here," Bran petted her untidy hair. The pair were the closest in age amongst his siblings and their separation had been hard on both of them. Personally, Robb thought it was cold of his parents to separate them so soon after the 'accident' but Arya was getting out of control back then. It was like her brother's unfortunate fate broke something inside her and nobody knew how to fix it. Now she seemed calmer and had settled down in the south far better than he expected.

"Ricky," Sansa pouted at her little brother "What about me?" Rickon quickly wriggled out of dads hold to lock his arms around Sansa's hips. As soon as dad was free, mom practically fell into his arms and they stood there hugging for a long time, neither saying a word.
"Dad," Arya whined, "you're hogging mom." Their parents ignored her, clinging to each other like it had been a decade since they last saw each other.

"You can hug me," Robb grinned at his little sister and opened his arms wide.

"Psh," she rolled her eyes but stepped into his embrace. "Missed you, bro."

"I missed you more, underfoot." He kissed the top of her hair and didn't ask before sliding one of the bags off his shoulder and onto hers. She handled the weight with no problem, as expected of his badass baby sister.

"Alright Stark family," dad raised his voice just enough to sound commanding. "Let's move!"

Everyone fell in line to march out of the airport with big smiles on their faces. Robb felt damned lucky he got to be a part of this family, with two parents who loved each other and their children even more. He didn't feel the least bit embarrassed about how happy it made him that they all loved being each other's family.

Robb knew exactly how rare this kind of familial happiness could be, most of his friends' parents barely seemed to tolerate each other if they even stayed married. Divorce seemed like the saddest tragedy that happened with such easy regularity: two people deciding to break their family forever. He would seek this kind of unbreakable love for the rest of his life: to make a loving family with someone and share everything. Maybe he just had to stop looking for it and love would find its way to him.

"Sansa," daddy called her to the front door where he waited for mom to finish getting ready so they could go out to dinner. She reluctantly put down her game controller before hurrying to the front door. "I am leaving you in charge tonight-"

"Not Robb," she tossed the teasing comment over her shoulder at her elder brother. Robb retaliated by sticking out his tongue at her like a child.

"Call me if anything catastrophic happens," daddy pulled on a charcoal sports jacket and distractedly checked his pockets... for keys! He smiled as he pulled them out, revealing his entire plan with one look.

"Dad," she mustered up some courage. "I think you should hold off on showing mom the house..."

"You will have to tell me why?" He kept his voice down, glancing over her shoulder before returning his worried eyes to her face. It was now or never! If she did not express her opinion then she would most certainly regret it later. Her parents had been apart for so long, they deserve to spend this time simply enjoying each other's company.

"Because of Bran she's not ready," the words rushed out. "The hospital and doctors who saved his life are in Winterfell. She hasn't given up hope that he will walk again. Next year Bran will be a high schooler and his choice... to move here or stay up north, will mean more to mom than any beautiful
house." Sansa inhaled a deep breath and held it as she peeked up at her father.

"Lemoncake," he smiled and lifted a hand to cup her cheek. "I am blessed to have such wonderful children. However, you are not supposed to worry about your parents."

"I think," she sighed, "part of growing up means worrying about the people I love." Sansa took his hand from her face and held it between her own, bravely keeping her head up. "Trust me on this, if mom wanted to live here..." Well, she would never call her own mother 'assertive' but Arya gets it from somewhere.

"The house is not going anywhere," he conceded with a nod. "It can wait another few months." A sigh of relief whooshed out of her mouth and a sense of pride in herself swelled within her heart. It's still a surprised her, how much braver she had become in less than a year.

"Ready to go?" Mom appeared like a vision, stunning from head to toe in an understated classic dark navy dress.

"Cat, you look radiant." Daddy seemed positively stunned by his wife's beauty and a feeling of pure joy washed over Sansa. She had almost forgotten what it felt like to bask in the glow of her parent's enduring love. This time of separation had been painful but it seemed that everyone in the family had become stronger for it.

"It's true, mom." She smiled at her mother and held two thumbs up in approval. "You look amazing!"

"Thank you dear," mom drew her in for a quick hug, lightly touching their cheeks together. She smelled like home and comfort, nearly pulling happy tears from Sansa's eyes. "We won't be out too late, make sure Rickon is in bed by ten."

"I'm not tired!" Rickon somehow heard his bedtime being discussed while still fully engrossed in his video game. Their parents chuckled as they turned to leave, daddy opening the door for mom.

"Have a good time," she called after them, turning the lock over once the door was closed. Just as she moved to rejoin her brother in front of the television, a familiar buzzing sound distracted her. Sansa headed down the hall and into her bedroom, unplugging her phone to check the screen and finding a text.

'Come outside?' Sandor knew that she was trying to spend time with her family so she immediately worried that this was some kind of emergency.

'Why?' She erased a few unnecessary exclamation points and punched the send button with her thumb. The seconds ticked by like hours as she waited for his reply.

'A surprise', his answer filled her with relief as she dropped down onto her bed. Sansa wished it was paranoid to remain in a constant state of near panic but refused to let her guard down. Never again would she be caught unawares by anyone who wanted to do her or her loved ones harm. 'Promise you'll like it.'

'I'm coming now', she plugged her phone back in and raced to the mirror to check her face. Her siblings ignored her as she walked calmly towards the door... no one even noticed her leaving. She scuttled to the elevator with growing excitement and pushed the down button enthusiastically. After an impatient moment, the elevator doors slid open and she gasped in surprise. Sandor stood there, leaning against the side wall and smirking at her!

"What...?" Before she could form a question and speak it out loud, he reached forward to grab her
wrist and tugged her inside. "Ah!" His arm caught her around the waist and pulled her against his body.

"Surprised?" His overly satisfied expression made her smile despite still being in a mild state of shock.

"I am," she answered with the breathless laugh, "very much." He leaned forward, stretching out one long arm to push the button for the top floor. "What are you doing?"

"Going up," he winked before rolling his eyes and chuckling at her. "You should see your face right now." Sandor pulled her close and tilted his forehead against hers. Just when she thought this day couldn't get any better...

"You might be changing my mind again, about surprises." Sansa locked her hands around his neck and stood up on her tiptoes to press her lips against his. "This is fun," she whispered the confession.

"There's more," he held up a bright red gift bag and her curiosity tripled.

"Tell me," she pouted. "Please Sandor, I'm begging." He only smiled his teasing grin and shook his head in denial as his arms encircled her waist tighter. The familiar soft rumbling sound he made caused a bubbly lightheaded feeling, like she drank too much champagne. Sandor bowed his head to kiss her neck, causing her pulse to speed up and almost making her forget her curiosity.

"Three," he quietly counted down the floors to the top, "two - one." Ding... the elevator doors slid open. "This is us," his hand moved down from her waist to hold hands with her. Sandor led her into a narrow hallway with a door at the end, beyond that was a cityscape wonderland. The rooftop was paved with a cool gray cement with a railing around the entire edge.

"You know," she looked around, taking in the rather spectacular view of the city at dusk. "I have never been up here." From the roof of the high-rise apartment building she could see almost the entire city, even their school. The sun was slowly sinking behind wispy clouds, painting the sky in hues of pink and purple.

"It's nicer than I thought it would be." He set the gift bag down on the ground and pulled a rolled up blanket out. "Here - stand back." Sandor whipped the blanket to unroll it and laid it out on the ground, crouching to smooth a folded corner.

"Is this...?" Sansa observed the scene with rising delight. "Oh-my-gods, a picnic!" Sandor just snorted a laugh and pulled out a small white box to set it in the middle of the blanket. The contents of the box nearly stopped her heart from pure bliss. "With lemoncake..." And to think that her surly boyfriend still denied frequent accusations of sweetness! Her man was in all kinds of denial because he was guilty as charged.

"If you start crying," he jerked his chin over his shoulder at the door behind them. "I'll just leave." Contrary to his words, he sprawled out on one side of the blanket and looked up at her expectantly. Sansa turned her eyes up towards the sky and blinked a few times to hold back her happy tears.

"But I'm so happy," she knelt down on the blanket, tucking her skirt around her thighs.

"Eat," he stuck a plastic utensil into the top of the cake and held a bite up to her mouth. Sansa obediently opened her smiling mouth to accept the cake, which was divinely lemony. "How's your family?"

"Good," she covered her mouth as she chewed, "all of them. Everyone is going to be cramped into the tiny apartment but no one is complaining... yet."
"Good to hear," he took a bigger bite for himself.

"I wish I could spend all my time with you during the break." Sansa gave him an apologetic smile and scooted closer so that their shoulders touched. "I'll miss you," she moped, grateful that he was the one person she could always complain to even when she didn't have the right to whine.

"It's fine - long as you remember that you're mine all summer." By the wicked look on his face, she could tell exactly what plans he had for them over the summer break. Somehow, even after all they've done and been through, it still made her blush. Sansa distracted herself by bending forward to retrieve a spork, scooping up a bite from the middle of the cake.

"You're mine for forever," she kissed his cheek and held up the bite of cake to his mouth. "After spring break, we can go on any kind of date you want."

"There's only one 'kind' of date I like, little bird." One corner of Sandor's mouth lifted in a smirk before he chomped down on her sweet citrusy offering.

"I'll leave it up to you," she tilted her head down to hide her embarrassed but eager smile, letting her loose hair fall between them. "Maybe you won't be able to surprise me so much next time."

"How about," he pushed her hair back over her shoulder, "you surprise me." The prospect of actually surprising him for once filled her with a terribly wonderful thrill.

"I might have an idea..." The thought that came to mind was undeniably shocking, even she did not know if she could go through with it! But tonight she had been bold with daddy and her growing bravery was due in no small part to Sandor's encouragement. It was high time she showed off some of that newfound confidence to her man...

"Tell me," his voice rumbled low, "I'm begging here, little bird." Sansa only shook her head, smiling while holding up another piece a cake to his mouth.

"Hurry and eat," she chided. "My parents left me in charge... Arya could be burning the apartment down as we speak!" Sandor laughed at her worry, little did he know how possible the scenario was. Despite her insistence, Sansa was in no hurry to chase him off because she would miss him while spending time with her family. And even though she would miss her family, when they went back up north, it felt comforting to have something to look forward to.

A life filled with love is a blessing beyond compare, giving her heart away as well as receiving the devotion of others. Yes, she could admit that sometimes she was spoiled by all this love. Still, no one could ever accuse her of being ungrateful... Sometimes the gratitude she felt was so heavy it made her want to cry. But she held it in with a stiff upper lip because she had nothing to cry about, happiness is meant to be celebrated with laughter.

Chapter End Notes

Listen up: I have something to say!

We are all fallible humans: make mistakes, scrape our knees, and sometimes utterly fail. I don't know why some people go out of their way to make life harder on others - wish I did. The only thing we can do is stop trying to understand 'why' or going all: 'the end is nigh and humans are horrible'. Nihilism is asinine and a waste of precious time. We
have to rise above the bullshit, find our own meaning (that allows us to move on after someone hurts us), and chin up!!!

You can't stop other people from hurting you but you can find a way to be better than whatever asshole is giving you a hard time. I believe you can because I can, and I'm no amazing person by any stretch of the imagination. Take heart, my dear readers, if you are struggling - Your Own Strength Is The Answer (and be brave: ask for help when you need it).

That is all.
Because she felt ashamed of her storm-out out last time, it came down to the last minute to decide if she'd attend this session with Dr. H'ghar. She had been dreading this day since last week, feeling more nauseated every day and it was getting harder to conceal. What if the doc decided to stop seeing her as a patient? It would hardly be a shock, for one more adult to give up on her. Well, there was no more time to regret. Arya heaved a sigh as she pushed open the office door.

"Sorry I'm late," she grumbled as she entered the office. Arya did not lift her head, slinking past H'ghar to her chair and sitting down before peeking up at him. "So, what now?"

"I am glad you decided to come back." The doc smiled and seemed perfectly willing to put her tantrum behind them. Arya would still rather be anywhere else on the planet, but here she was. "Did you think of a way to show appreciation to your boyfriend?" That question brought a little smile to her face because the surprise date went brilliantly. Gendry couldn't stop bragging to their friends about her being 'the best girlfriend ever'.

"Yep," she relaxed into her seat, relieved that Dr. H'ghar wasn't planning to hold a grudge. It still seemed like a waste of time to talk about her 'feelings' instead of focusing on meditation but she owed him this much. "Gendry totally freaked out, but like - in a good way. My sister even helped me, Sansa says that dressing up makes a person feel 'valued'. It's not the stupidest thing she's ever said and the outfit I got actually looked alright."

"I am glad you decided to come back." The doc smiled and seemed perfectly willing to put her tantrum behind them. Arya would still rather be anywhere else on the planet, but here she was. "Did you think of a way to show appreciation to your boyfriend?" That question brought a little smile to her face because the surprise date went brilliantly. Gendry couldn't stop bragging to their friends about her being 'the best girlfriend ever'.

"I'm not 'insecure',' she snorted. "I'm realistic." Arya pulled her legs up to sit crosslegged in the wide chair. "The shopping was torture but spending time with Sansa can be fun sometimes. She's the only one who supports my relationship with Gendry. I don't feel her 'watching' me like I do with my dad and other people."

"She acknowledges your right to make your own decisions." He put it differently than Arya would've but that sounded about right.

"We both do it for each other," she explained. "I'm the only one who doesn't think she's this impossible perfect girl. Maybe that's why she comes to me for help. Because she trusts me not to think any less of her - at least maybe that's it." Sansa had been having a hard time lately. Her sister might not be a perfect person but she is good and doesn't deserve all the shit going on in her relationship. Arya hoped, wherever her sister was right then, she wasn't too stressed out.

"You feel protective of your older sister," he didn't say it like a question but something about his tone made her feel defensive.

"Of course I do," she answered automatically - too quickly.

"Do you accept when she tries to protect you?" He set the trap and she fell for the bait far too easily.
"Of course I don't," she muttered. "Why do you keep trying to drag me down now that I'm finally doing better?!" The doc looked surprised by her sudden anger, regarding her with a faint expression of wariness. Even Arya didn't know why she was getting so mad but it felt like a comfortable familiar blanket that she wanted to wrap around herself.

"Are you truly better or just getting better at pretending?" His usually calm expression flickered with uncharacteristic concern but that only annoyed her more. "Can you say with certainty that you won't have those feelings of hopelessness again?"

"I'm controlling it," the words gritted between her teeth. "Which is why I keep coming back for meditation lessons and you keep wasting my time!" H'ghar didn't say anything, only looking at her for a long while as if considering what to say.

"Controlling something is not the same as defeating it," he finally said.

"I'm trying so fucking hard," she uncrossed her legs and slammed both boots against the ground. "And you - constantly - put me down!" He was just like every other adult in her life, thinking he knew everything about her! "Why do I even bother to come here?!"

"My job is not to make you feel better," a harder expression settled on his face, something like determination but strangely assured. "My job is to heal you."

"What the hells is the difference?!" Arya didn't wait for an answer, grabbing up her bag and standing to glare down at the doc. "You're a shitty shrink - you only help me when you feel like it and you're only helping me to feed your own ego."

"I will keep your hour open for next week," he spoke calmly as she stormed past.

"Don't bother!" She stopped just behind his chair, trembling with anger from head to toe. "I'm outta here, for good this time." These sessions had helped her enough and she didn't need any more head-shrinking! Life is shit and then we die - might as well do what makes us happy in the meantime.

"I will do it anyway," he spoke softly. "Remember that I am here for you Arya, when you are ready to stop running away." That's when she realized that she lied, not only to H'ghar but also to herself - which was way worse. The real reason she didn't want to come to this appointment wasn't because she embarrassed herself. He got too close last time, somewhere along the way the doc learned how to press her buttons and slip past her defenses.

"It doesn't matter," she murmured, more to herself than to him. Arya felt stuck, unsure if she should stay or go but her feet moved forward on their own. She walked away and didn't look back - this time, she couldn't return even if she wanted to. "You can't 'fix' me - no one can."

**Surprise Date**

**SHIREEN**

She couldn't shake the nervousness, no matter how much she reassured herself that she looked fine and everything was going to work out perfectly. Her hand reached up automatically to pull the cord as the bus passed the intersection she had been watching out the window for. Too soon, the bus rolled to a stop and the doors opened. A deep breath did nothing to calm her nerves but this was her stop and she had to get off the bus.

Underneath the covered bus stop, Bran waited with his gloved hands folded in his lap, a picture of confidence. Sheri froze, wanting to go forward but forgetting how to put one foot in front of the
other. He looked up, smiling before nodding in greeting and turning his chair towards her.

"I'm here," an amused grin stretched across his face as she approached him.

"You are," her face grew warm and his smile widened. How was it they spent the last two-and-a-half months talking on the phone but she still felt shy? No, 'shyness' could not begin to cover how she felt - it was more like some combination of elation and trepidation. All covered with a thin layer of shock at how strongly she felt those very emotions. Only Bran affected her like this, making her heart race in this wonderfully scary way, and she never wanted it to stop.

"I haven't said anything to make you blush yet," he complained with a crooked grin. "You're taking all the fun out of it." Sheri automatically lifted a hand to cover her good cheek.

"Sorry," she murmured, mortified that her face got even hotter. "I don't even know why I am so embarrassed." Bran only chuckled at her awkward behavior.

"How are you so cute?" He teased, patting his hand on the bus stop bench. "Have a seat: the bus should be here in a few minutes."

"Where we heading?" Sheri sat down, feeling a little more comfortable now that they were on the same level.

"The place you belong," he winked as he revealed the hint but she shook her head in confusion. "You'll see, I promise that you'll love it."

"I'm sure I will," she murmured before relaxing into silence, looking down at her shoes. When Bran did not say anything, she started to get nervous again. "So, how was the flight?"

"We can do better than small talk, Sheri." His gloved hand moved over hers and he laced their fingers together. The leather was soft and worn from the rubber of his tires. She looked up to see his intense gray eyes studying her carefully. "You look really beautiful."

"I had better," she grinned at him, "it took forever to pick out this outfit."

"I am honored to make you nervous," he smiled back at her. Before she could respond, another bus pulled up at the stop, hissing as it's settled on its hydraulics. "Time to go," he moved forward and the door opened before the driver lowered the wheelchair access. "Never done this before: it's pretty cool." Sheri climbed into the front door of the crowded bus, attentively paying the fare as she pretended not to notice the annoyance on some faces.

The driver made short work of securing Bran's wheelchair before returning to her seat to raise the platform. A few people had to get up to accommodate his wheelchair, leaving only standing room for Sheri. By the time they were settled onto the bus, she felt that familiar awkward feeling like everyone was staring at her. Finally, the driver moved back to her seat and the bus lurched forward.

She almost lost her balance and grasped for the bar overhead - at the same time, Bran's fingers wrapped around her wrist to tug her down onto his lap. Before she could react, he cupped her face with both hands and pulled her close to kiss her soundly. When she pulled back, unable to do anything but stare slack-jawed at him, he was grinning unapologetically.

"Everyone is looking," she whispered too loudly. Sheri glanced at the bus driver's mirror, seeing the woman shake her head while thankfully smiling indulgently. As often as people rejected and judged 'freaks' like her, sometimes being pitiable worked in her favor. He pulled her close and tingling warmth spread through her body as her pulse thudded under her skin.
"They were gonna stare anyway," his hot breath whispered across her neck, making her skin feel
-ingly and tight. He kissed her throat, moving his lips under her ear and causing a deep blush to color
her cheeks. "I don't care who is watching." Funny enough, she didn't care anymore either - so she
placed her hands on his shoulders and kissed him again, letting her lips linger on his a little longer.

AQUARIUM

BRAN

Outwardly, he tried to act cool and was achieving surprising success. Inside, he felt like a nervous
wreck. As the bus approached the destination for their surprise date, his stomach clenched
uncomfortably tight. This was their first date: his very first ever and hers too. It had to be a perfect
memory to see them through the upcoming months apart. Mom wasn't ready to move south yet but
this summer he would do everything in his handicappable power to convince her.

"This is us," he announced to Sheri as the bus pulled in under the structure's awning. She watched
the building curiously through the window as she reached up to pull the line for the bus to stop.

"The aquarium?" Her expression was a perfect mix of puzzlement and delight. Sheri stood up before
crouching to detach his wheels from the straps securing his chair to the bus floor. The driver assisted
with getting off the bus, which seem to take forever because he was so anxious. Finally, they were
heading inside and he purchased two tickets from the front desk. Oh gods: this is really it! Game face
time.

"Well," she breathed as she walked up to the first enormous aquarium. "This place is so beautiful - I
can't believe I never came here before." Bran rolled to her side, thinking that she was even more
beautiful silhouetted in the low blue light. "But I don't get it," she frowned at him. "Why do I belong
in the aquarium?"

"In there," he pointed at the towering circular tank and her eyes followed his finger.

"I am a fish?" Her brows wrinkled together, pursing her lips as she stared intently into the colossal
reservoir.

"You're a mermaid," he smiled at her rolling eyes, "luring men to their death with your beauty and
haunting voice." Sheri smiled and shook her head, laughing softly at him. "Do you know how
torturous it was, hearing your voice every day?" Bran gently grasped her hand. "I had to drag my
family across the country to see you."

"So," she reached down and linked her fingers between his, "you admit that you missed me."

"My sister taught me to never admit anything," he smirked up at her. "And always make
counteraccusations."

"She is my mentor as well," Sheri nodded, trying to keep her expression serious but a smile tugged
on the corner of her mouth. "So I will have to concede your point." While talking about Arya, Bran's
brain was unfortunately distracted by an underlying concern.

"Is she still with that blacksmith?" He really messed up that day, almost letting his sister's secret slip
to Robb. Arya would never forgive him if dad found out she were dating, especially since Bran was
breaking the exact same rule. It's not like 'love' has a reputation for obeying rules.

"Why don't you ask her yourself?" Sheri tilted her head to one side, her brow furrowed with
concern. Then she suddenly smiled and tapped her forehead with her fingertips. "Right, she's the last
"If you don't mind," he looked away sheepishly and rubbed a hand over his hair. "Remind her to be extra careful while Robb is in town. I think I might've got his suspicions up about Arya's boyfriend."

"How did you manage that?" Her playful admonishment made his heart skip a beat.

"I'll have you know that I do everything well," he joked, "including being completely stupid." Bran watched as she let her head fall back to let out a heartfelt laugh, enthralled by the way she glowed with happiness. Surrounded by the wall of aquatic life, it was all too easy to imagine Sheri as a mythical mermaid. "Gods, Sheri: you really are a siren."

"Then beware," she narrowed her eyes playfully and tilted her head forward so that her long hair cast shadows down the sides of her face. "I might tempt you straight into a watery grave."

"No risk is too great," he assured her, "for your kiss." A light pink blush graced her cheeks as a happy smile curled her lips, making him want to kiss her even more. Bran glanced around, seeing a few scattered groups moving about the aquarium before spotting a more private area. "Follow me," he led her to a roped off darkened hallway.

"We could get in trouble," she chided lightly as he ducked under the velvet rope and she followed without hesitation. Bran tucked his chair against the wall and held out his hand in invitation. "Let's play a game," Sheri smiled mischievously as she settled into his lap.

"I like it already." He wrapped his hands around her waist and hoped she couldn't tell how tense he was.

"Let's see how close we can get without actually kissing." She tilted her head to the side and watched his mouth as they slowly put their faces together. When they were only a hair's width apart, she lost her concentration and began to giggle. That sound had been driving Bran crazy for months. All conscious thought fled his mind as his fingers thrust into her thick hair and his lips found hers.

The kiss was communicating more than either of them could ever say. It was also a bit clumsy but neither of them seemed to mind the other's lack of skill. She wrapped her arms tight around his shoulders as the tiniest whimper escaped her lips: 'it hurts when you're far away'.

"I lose," he chuckled breathlessly as they pulled apart for air.

"Huh?" Her heavy lidded eyes were glazed and shining with some emotion that he assumed to be desire for him. It was every teenage boy's dream come true, and then some. This date was already going better than his wildest imaginings: well, not his 'wildest' fantasies. One can never discount alien abduction.

"The game," he reminded her, surprised to hear his own voice sounding so rough.

"Ah," the expression that came over her features could only be described as wicked. "I'm done playing." Her hands locked behind his neck before she pressed her soft but insistent lips against his. Bran nearly passed out from the hammering of his overworked heart. In that dark little corner of the
 aquarium, the whole universe faded away until they were the only living beings left in existence.

"No fair," she pulled away, a little unsteady. "I think you have been practicing without me." It was clearly meant as a compliment and not an accusation but Bran knew her too well already. The same secret fears worried him, thinking of all those able-bodied hot-blooded teens who got to attend the same school as Sheri. Good thing they all seemed to be complete morons, stupidly overlooking the most beautiful girl who ever lived.

"It's because I haven't stopped thinking about kissing you." Bran couldn't even imagine kissing anyone but Sheri: he could hardly think of anything else. "Seems visualization techniques really do work."

"We should get back to our date," she pouted adorably and reluctantly stood up. It physically hurt, like a sharp pang in his chest, when her waist slid out of his hold. "Or we will get stuck here and someone might actually stick me in one of those tanks."

"You're just afraid of being found out," he teased. "Mermaids are such a wily lot." They reemerged from the shadows and spent the rest of the day admiring various tanks filled with fascinating aquatic life. Sheri was enthralled by the jellyfish tank and amused by the brightly colored schools of fish. Through it all, Bran couldn't tear his eyes away from her brilliant smile. As far as first dates go, he really pulled this one off.

Chapter End Notes

A heartfelt thanks to everyone who is keeping up with this story despite the slow updates. It's tough not being able to post chapters as often as I'd like - but I'd like even more to avoid being stuck in a hand brace for several months... again. (Death first!)

End Notes

Based on the series by G.R.R.M, "A Song of Ice and Fire"

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!